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RETHINKING INVENTION

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The word *invention* was once reserved for discussions of Thomas Edison and Eli Whitney. Thirty some years ago, when I was an undergraduate, English teachers gave students topics on which to write but very little else – no discovery heuristics or inventions strategies, no opportunity to explore a topic – just the instruction to write, usually in a single class period.

Now we have not only topoi but tagmemics, not to mention freewriting, brainstorming, clustering, cubing, and mapping. Invention has once again, as in the times of Aristotle and Cicero, assumed a significant role in both rhetorical theory and practice. We have realized that having something useful or meaningful to say is at least as important as how it is said. In fact, James Berlin's discussion of the three major rhetorical theories of composition implies that the most significant difference among them is that each has a distinct view of how a writer makes meaning.

This question of how a writer (or speaker) generates content goes back at least to Plato and Aristotle, who conveniently represent the two most common theories on the subject. Plato believed that "truth" (he would not have put the word in quotes and would have almost surely capitalized it) was found through introspection – a searching of the self. Aristotle, in contrast, advocated the use of heuristics. He believed that finding the truth was probably rather ambitious for most writers and speakers and, therefore, settled for helping them find something sensible to say on a subject through the use of strategies such as the topoi and audience analysis.

These two, conflicting but not necessarily contradictory, views are still very much in evidence today. In his 1982 *College English* article, Berlin refers to two of the four pedagogical approaches that he identifies as Neo-Aristotelians (or Classicists) and Neo-Platonists (or Expressionists), describing the former as those who locate reality in the external world (767) and the latter as those who discover Truth "through an internal apprehension, a private vision of a world that transcends the physical" (771). More recently, other approaches have been identified, (see Lester Faigley's 1986 *College English* article and Berlin's book *Rhetoric and Reality*), but the basic dichotomy between the Aristotelian and Platonic views of invention remain.

Thus, many contemporary theorists (most notably, Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, William E. Coles, Jr., and Donald Stewart) believe that introspection is the primary means of making meaning. They would argue that we all have meaning (ideas, information, opinions, experiences) within us and that, as writers, we must somehow gain access to this source. These modern Platonists use some form of prewriting rather than dialectic to gain access to and release this store of meaning that resides within. As an impetus to introspection, they advocate such strategies as freewriting, brainstorming, meditation, metaphors and journals.

Those who align themselves primarily with Aristotle believe that invention primarily involves "attacking" a subject systematically. They may also advocate freewriting and brainstorming but add to these favorites more analytical and structured heuristics such as cubing, mapping, clustering, tagmemics, and, of course, the traditional Aristotelian topics. For them, the issue is not so much discovering truth as exploring a topic until a valid, or at least usable, perspective is gained – one that accomplishes the purposes of the writer and that suits the needs, limitations, and biases of the audience.

These two views, though not entirely inaccurate, are clearly limited. Although no one to my knowledge claims to understand how we think (and that is really the issue here), some useful theories are emerging. Researchers and theorists such as Linda Flowers and John Hayes have convinced us that writers can neither invent nor discover meaning – much less truth – unless the material from which meaning can be made is already there. Writers can retrieve information that exists, using some combination of heuristics and introspection. They can explore a subject, much as Aristotle suggested, using specific guidelines, or topics, to direct their exploration. Or they can research a topic, thereby adding new information to their existing store. But they must then make sense of the information they have collected – see patterns, make connections, put things together. So Plato and Aristotle were both right and wrong: Writers must look within to find meaning, but what they discover when they look within is not simple truth but bits and pieces of information and experience that can, with much hard work and maybe a little luck, eventually be fashioned into meaning.

As teachers of writing, we need to introduce students to both of these familiar models. Students need invention strategies as well as introspection to collect information and make sense of it. But they need much more if they are to understand and use invention to become skillful writers. In the remainder of this article, I would like to suggest some possible new directions for the teaching of invention.

ADAPTING STRATEGY TO TASK

First, I believe we must stop oversimplifying invention by implying that all strategies work equally well for all writing tasks. The temptation to oversimplify is strong because it is reinforced by most composition texts, which usually include a survey of various invention strategies but typically provide little or no direction to help students discriminate these strategies or any instruction about which strategy might best be employed for a given writing task. As a result, we tend to teach invention indiscriminately, suggesting to students that one strategy is as good as another as long as they do "something" to get the juices flowing before they begin to write.

The invention strategy that is used most frequently and most indiscriminately is prewriting. Predicated on the assumption that the act of writing stimulates the discovery of content, prewriting was initially advocated as a method of retrieving information about past experiences and sensory impressions. At present, however, it is used extensively and, in some instances, inappropriately for a wide variety of writing tasks. Prewriting assumes several forms but usually consists of journals or freewriting. And these two strategies, plus brainstorming, probably account for a vast majority of the experiences our students have with invention in both high school and college. Since much of the writing that we ask of our students is experience-based discourse, writing that focuses primarily on the writer's own experiences and sensory impressions, these strategies are frequently appropriate.

But in other instances, they are not. If we are asking students to write about subjects that are beyond their own immediate experiences, they do not need invention methods that enable them to retrieve information (the Platonic model) as much as they need methods that aid them in systematically exploring, analyzing, and structuring that information (Aristotle's model). In effect, the issue is the exploration of self versus the exploration of subject.

How then do we decide which strategy is appropriate for a given writing task? Obviously, no simple answer exists, and most writing tasks require both. But if we view discourse as basically one of two types, either experience-based or information-based, we can then generalize about which model, the Platonic or Aristotelian, is appropriate to each.

Experience-based discourse requires that a writer remember past experiences and sensations; therefore, the writer needs invention strategies to retrieve old information. Such methods as freewriting, brainstorming, imaging, visualizing, meditating, and journal writing work well for this type of writing task. For example, a student who is writing a personal essay describing a place that he visited in his childhood might successfully employ one or more of these techniques in order to recall vividly the details of the place and how he responded to it. Or a student asked to retell a story that is part of his family's tradition might need to visualize himself as a child listening to stories in order to remember the stories themselves.

In contrast, information-based discourse focuses primarily on information that is extraneous to the writer's own experiences. Thus the writer needs invention strategies that enable her to acquire new information and to analyze and structure that information. This writer needs heuristics such as generative forms and models, outlines, notes, and problem-solving strategies. For example, a student who is writing a report may need to research the question under consideration, discuss the project with a collaborator, take notes, and develop a working outline before actually composing a draft. Similarly, a student researching a local issue for an editorial or essay will need to observe, interview, and take notes and then, armed with this information, may need to compare her findings with those of another student or to consider the causes and effects of the observed phenomena before she has enough material to write an informed argument.

All invention strategies are potentially useful, depending on the writer and the writing task involved. But we do not want to oversimplify invention. No single invention strategy is appropriate for every student or every writing task. Ideally, we want our students to be both informed and flexible – informed about the strategies that exist and flexible about choosing one that serves their purposes.

EXPANDING OUR PERCEPTION OF INVENTION

Our perception of invention is not only oversimplified but also limited. We tend to restrict invention to a few familiar strategies rather than using other, equally effective, ways to help students generate content. For example, an obvious, but often overlooked, method of acquiring new information is research. By research, I do not mean just reading, although certainly reading can be a useful way of discovering new information. But in the composition class, reading is often used only to provide students with a model for their own writing or to encourage them to think about a certain topic.

For example, we ask students to read an essay such as Judy Syfers' "I Want a Wife," and then ask them to write an essay about sex roles. This approach to invention frequently results in a better essay than we would get if we merely asked students to write on this topic without giving them anything to read on the subject. But, in most cases, students really don't discover new information by reading this type of essay. Reading the essay may prompt them to think about a topic that they have previously not considered seriously. It may even cause them to examine and reevaluate their own assumptions on the subject. But it primarily aids them in retrieving past information and experiences. The resulting essay will be enriched by this retrieved information but will not reflect new information.

On the other hand, reading for research purposes enables a writer to acquire new information. For example, a student writing an essay or report on sex roles would not only read Syfers' familiar essay but would also research the subject by reading government reports on the growing number of women in the work force, psychological studies on changing behavioral patterns in males and females, and sociological profiles describing the contemporary as opposed to the traditional family in our society. Although reading is an important part of most research efforts, it is not the only form that research can take. Writers can also research a subject through observation, interviews, surveys, or case studies. Regardless of the type, whether it is reading or observing or interviewing, research increases a writer's store of information. Although it is not our primary purpose in a composition course to give our students new information, we should make them aware that many writing tasks require this type of preparation and that research, like freewriting and brainstorming, is another way of discovering and exploring a subject.

A second invention strategy that is frequently overlooked is collaboration. Student writers can effectively generate and structure ideas by working together rather than in isolation. In most other disciplines and in the professional and business world, writing tasks are often collaborative. In English departments, however, collaboration is frequently denigrated, perceived as less respectable than writing alone. Because of our close ties with literature and literary criticism, we have been influenced by the model of the lonely writer struggling alone, preferably in a garret, with his, and occasionally her, muse. Even though collaborative writing has become more respectable in composition studies in recent years as a result of theorists such as Kenneth Bruffee and Anne Ruggles Gere, and, even more recently, social constructionists such as Clifford Geertz, writing teachers remain rather skeptical of collaborative writing, especially when the writers are students. In the back of our minds, I suspect, we are still concerned about plagiarism and are probably still convinced that great writing is the result of inspiration rather than hard work. We, therefore, pay lip service to the idea of collaborative writing but hesitate to encourage our students to collaborate

other than at the end of the writing process when they may be asked to peer edit one another's papers.

Rather than tacking collaboration on to the end of the writing process, we should encourage our students to collaborate from the beginning–letting them discuss their ideas and share information before they begin to write and at any time during the process that they need a different perspective or an objective reader. It is not always desirable or practical for students to collaborate on an entire writing assignment, but they can certainly collaborate with a peer at some stage in the writing process. And that stage should not always be the final revising or editing stage.

The rationale for collaboration is usually that two writers working together are more efficient than a single writer, but I suspect that one reason why collaboration is both more effective and more efficient is that writers who work together talk with each other. This dialogue (back to Plato again) can be a powerful invention strategy. Having collaborated on two textbooks and a variety of other writing projects, I value this method of invention. I am convinced that I have more and better ideas – make more significant connections, remember more useful information, assume more varied perspectives, and generally make more sense of things – when I work with a collaborator.

A third method of invention that is often overlooked is form, the preconceived shape that a piece of discourse is constructed to fit. Forms and models have been widely used by writers and speakers since classical times. But form is seldom recognized, much less taught, as an invention heuristic. In spite of this lack of recognition, generations of students have come up with three points to satisfy the requirements of the five-paragraph theme when, without that particular model, they would have been satisfied with two or even one.

As early as 1963, Francis Christensen recognized the generative power of form when he outlined his method for producing cumulative sentences (CCC, Oct. 1963). According to Christensen, the cumulative sentence is "dynamic rather than static, . . . the mere form of the sentence generates ideas. It serves the needs of both writer and reader, the writer by compelling him to examine his thought, the reader by letting him into the writer's thought" (156). Richard Young, in his essay on invention in Gary Tate's first edition of *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays*, reinforces the idea that form can serve as an invention strategy, not only for sentences but also for larger pieces of discourse. He suggests that "grammatical patterns and patterns of arrangement . . . serve some of the same purposes as explicit methods of invention" (35).

More recently, and forcefully, Richard Coe, in an article appearing in the January 1987 issue of *College English*, argues that form is not just the shape of the product but also has a "function in a process of forming" (17). That is, form is generative as well as constraining. Faced with a structure, a writer generates content that will accommodate it. Coe points out that this idea of form is admittedly contrary to the Romantic view of the organic nature of form – the idea that form "grows organically to fit the shape of the subject matter" (16). And certainly, most "creative writing" is not generated by form, even though we might argue that the poet who writes a sonnet is using form as invention and that even the writer who chooses to write a short story rather than a novel or a play is using form to generate as well as structure his or her ideas. But even more clearly the writer of a report or proposal is using form in a generative sense.

As Coe observes, teachers of writing should not "ignore the impact of such structures on the creative process" (18). But we have biases to overcome on the issue of form as we do on the issue of collaboration. The five-paragraph theme is anathema to many composition teachers and theorists, and the paragraph itself is suspect. We have been told repeatedly that we should not restrict our students to certain forms and models, that this kind of limitation destroys their initiative and creativity. I believe, however, that Coe (and generations of rhetoricians before him) is right. Students can use forms effectively to generate as well as structure content. The result may not be brilliant or creative or original, but it may very well be more fully developed than it would be if the student were not given the form, the emptiness to fill. Using form as invention does not necessarily mean that we should all start assigning five-paragraph themes again (although I have never stopped using this form with my basic writing students). It does mean that we might share with our students generative forms and models for certain assignments. For example, reviews, proposals, and many reports have certain forms that help students to generate content. However, students should know that the forms are not sacred and that they can violate the constraints imposed by the forms if they have a valid reason for doing so. In general, they should be encouraged to use the forms initially to generate, develop, and structure content. Then, in the final stage, they should feel free to deviate from the form if they knowingly choose to do so.

RECOGNIZING INVENTION AS PART OF A RECURSIVE PROCESS

We know, of course, that writing is a recursive process, but we often teach as if it were not. Even if we conscientiously divide the requisite textbook chapter on invention into different strategies and use these appropriately with various assignments, we still tend to emphasize invention only at the beginning of the process. The linear model, however inaccurate, is convenient and even, to a certain extent, unavoidable in a classroom situation. But I believe this problem is compounded by the fact that invention is often equated with prewriting. Developed, or at least named, by D. Gordon Rohman in the 1960's, prewriting is often "used as a synonym for 'invention'" (Young 16-17). Since prewriting is also the form that invention takes in most writing courses, it is not difficult to see why invention is typically perceived as the first stage of a tripartite process.

Invention, like revision, cannot be limited to a single part of the enormously complex process of writing. Not only do writers return to invention repeatedly as they write, but they also vary widely, from writer to writer and from task to task, in how often and when they need to "invent." Clearly, most writers need to focus on invention primarily in an initial planning stage when they conceive of what they are going to write–creating, in many instances, an interior discourse in their minds before they begin to write. But few writers know exactly what they are going to say before they write. Britton, for example, stresses the importance of "shaping at the point of utterance," the realization of content that occurs only as writers begin to write. And, in a very real sense, revision, if it is more than mere editing, is also invention since it involves retrieving additional information, making further connections, recognizing emerging patterns, and even acquiring new information. Revision is, in fact, invention that has become more effective as a result of what the writer has already done. It builds on the information and insights that have gone into the writing previously, but it is essentially the same process.

Although we cannot always return to invention repeatedly in every writing assignment we make, we should certainly suggest

to students in every way possible that invention is recursive – that they will need to return to this generative phase of writing many times in the course of a single assignment. They need to know that invention is far more than "pre-writing." It is also writing and rewriting.

Above all, students need to realize that invention, like writing itself, is hard work. Invention is not a few tricks that writers use to gain access to a store of material that exists in their minds, simply waiting to be released. It is difficult, time-consuming mental exploration – more like mining than magic. Rather than a kindly muse that bestows the gift of content on the gratefully inspired writer, invention is an angel with whom the writer, like Jacob, must wrestle.

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IMITATIO REVIVED: A CURRICULUM BASED UPON MIMESIS

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Until quite recently, the classical principle of composition – *imitatio* – was essentially ignored in almost all the pedagogies for the teaching of writing.[1] The many reasons for the virtual disappearance of *imitatio* as a heuristic for the teaching of writing originate in either cultural Romanticism or Post-Romanticism. Living on the leeward side of the mountain of Romanticism, we find it hard to appreciate the creative winds blowing prior to the tempestuous early nineteenth century. In order to understand fully why pre-Romantic authors willingly acquiesced in a creative anonymity, we must realize that they assumed that only God can truly create – that only He can make the Word (that was the World), the word that authors rearrange, reorder, or reconstruct but that they never fabricate *ex nihilo*.[2] With the Romantic cultural revolution came the extraordinary idea that a poet, or dramatist, or novelist could invent great art from his own personality, entirely from imagined nothings. Accompanying this new view of the imaginative writer as a little god was an inspirationist theory of passive creativity – the wind through the Aeolian Harp.[3] The pure Romantic artist lit his midnight lamp, mended his quill, spread his paper before him, and waited, waited for those inner stirrings whose absence or sudden rush so preoccupied Coleridge and Wordsworth that this affective ebb and flow finally became the subject of verse.

In light of this nineteenth-century notion of literary creation, it is not surprising that the classical doctrine of *imitatio* figures so little in the twentieth-century textbooks for college writing courses. Essentially Romantic in their occasionally unexamined pedagogical assumptions, they omit systematic directions for imitation apparently in the belief that not only will an essay subject be spun out of the writer's innerds but also that an appropriate style and rhetorical structure will be mystically intuited and realized as well. Certainly the cavalier assumption, dominant until about fifteen years ago, that all a faculty need do was give bright graduate students good literature to teach, point them in the direction of their first classroom, and presume that good student writing would occur was based upon the unexamined bias that literary creativity was a Romantic phenomenon, mystical in its workings and damaged if overdiscussed or overly tampered with. While the current emphasis for the teaching of process in the writing classroom mainly reintroduces classical techniques into the creation of a composition, all too often it leaves the question of acceptable models for writing in limbo.

A brief consideration of the opinions of pre-1800 writers on writing reveals how prominently the doctrine of imitation figured in their thinking. For example, in the sixteenth-century milestone of Courtesy, *The Book of the Courtier*, Baldassare Castiglione counsels, "He therefore that will bee a good scholler, beside the practising of good thinges, must evermore set all his diligence to be like his maister, and (if it were possible) chaung himselfe into him."[4] In terms of writing, this means that the courtier must so get under the master's stylistic skin that the latter's very syntax, prose rhythms, and diction become second nature to the novice. For generations, different societies believed that such literary transference could take place through systematic instruction. For example, Edward P. J. Corbett, in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, identifies three traditional imitation exercises. (1) "Roman schoolboys . . . were regularly set the task of translating Greek passages into Latin and vice versa. In some of the Renaissance schools in England, schoolboys worked back and forth between Greek and Latin and English."[5] Corbett might have mentioned Roger Ascham's famous method of double translation, set forth in *The Schoolmaster* (1570), as an instance of the principle. After translating Cicero into English, the schoolboy waits an hour before translating the English back into Latin. By comparing the student's Latin with the Ciceronian original and noting the differences in prose rhythms, syntax, and diction, the schoolmaster recommends *imitatio* as a heuristic for learning a foreign language.[6] Corbett continues:

> (2) Another exercise imposed on schoolboys was the practice of paraphrasing poetry into prose. . . . (3) Another common practice was to set the students the task of saying something in a variety of ways. This process usually started out with a model sentence, which had to be con-