

Aphthonius' Progymnasmata as a Means to Preparing Innovative Communicators

by

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Common sense would say that to train innovative, creative writers one needs individualized curriculum. Won't proscribed exercises result in proscribed writers? How could the Progymnasmata, a series of set exercises foster the ability to think creatively and communicate in an interesting and engaging manner? Rhetoric teaches the art of communicating in ways that engage the imagination of audiences and foster belief or disbelief. How could a vertically integrated curriculum with a proscribed set of tasks equip future students of Rhetoric to become flexible in their thinking and adaptable in their message? This paper will seek to demonstrate through an examination of the first four exercises of Aphthonius' Progymnasmata—Fable, Narrative, Chreia and Maxim—that these pedagogical forms did equip students with a foundation of invention, arrangement and style through explicit instruction, variable contexts, and deep cognitive processing.¹ Students trained with the Progymnasmata have been educated in eras of stability as well as through eras of radical change and in the vastly different cultures experienced in the West from classical to medieval to renaissance to enlightenment and, yes, even our own twenty-first century. These students have mastered the fundamental skills needed to become good Rhetoric students and ultimately intensely creative and innovative.

Aphthonius begins with narrative instruction which I would maintain aligns with Aristotle's emphasis on the modes of persuasion, enthymemes and examples: that is, general and particular demonstrations,² with enthymemes holding the rather exalted position of "the substance of rhetorical persuasion..."³ By

align I refer to the manner in which enthymemes and examples engage an audience's imagination in

¹Stahl, Steven A. and Fairbanks, Marilyn M., "The Effects of Vocabulary Instruction: A Model-Based Meta-Analysis," Reading Research at Work: Foundations of Effective Practice; ed. Katherine A. Dougherty Stahl, Michael C. McKenna; The Guilford Press; 1 edition (April 20, 2006).

²Aristotle, Rhetoric, Translated by W. Rhys Roberts, McGraw Hill, inc., New York, 1984, 1.1 p.19-20

³ibid, 1.2 p.26

their respectively unique ways and the similar engagement caused by general and particular narratives. When the Progymnasmata equips students with the ability to create general and particular narratives akin to enthymemes and examples, then these students are equipped with basic skills of persuasion and they are well on their way to creative and innovative writing. The place of narrative in persuasion is both fundamental and foundational. Augustine, speaking of an effective teacher states, “But once that his hearers are friendly, attentive, and ready to learn, whether he has found them so, or has himself made them so, the remaining objects are to be carried out in whatever way the case requires. If the hearers need teaching, the matter treated of must be made fully known by means of narrative...”⁴ By equipping students with the skill to effectively and efficiently invent narratives the Progymnasmata develops creative composers. In examining how these first four stages impart the skill of narration I have relied on Aristotle’s *Poetics*—Plot consists of three components: Recognition, Reversal, and Suffering; and Plot structure of six: Agent, Action, Time, Place, Manner, and Cause. It should be noted that any narrative theory could be used either in analyzing these stages or as a framework for instruction. Because the curriculum uses real stories, that is, primary texts, however the beauty and effectiveness of narrative is understood those skills of narrative invention are being imparted.

One of the initial imaginative barriers to understanding how creative writers can be trained with the Progymnasmata lies in the initial pedagogy of imitation. Students are not asked to create their own stories at these early stages. The “rub” lies in the apparently rote nature of varying someone else’s creativity. As we asked earlier, how can imitation and repetition foster creativity? However, reflecting on the subtlety and complexity of the multiple sub skills of Plot creation one may begin to understand why some mediated scaffolding is called for. The ability to invent is the most difficult aspect of the

4 On Christian Doctrine, book 4, Chpt. 4. He goes on to mention two other situations requiring different strategies, both of which, by the way, are taught in the later stages of Aphthonius’ exercises.

writer's task.⁵ To ask grammar students, that is novice or unskilled youngsters, to invent effective narratives is akin to giving a novice bricklayer a bag of cement, some bricks, and a trowel and telling him to build a wall. Granted some naturally gifted individuals through trial and error might construct a passable wall but the vast majority of apprentices would fail miserably and far from a creative and attractive structure would end up with a mess; so too with ten year olds and story writing. Far better for the novice to work alongside a master bricklayer learning the skills through explicit instruction, imitation, and repetition. In these first two stages the use of Aesop's Fables or other well chosen narratives serve as the master bricklayer. A short fable or narrative, like a single brick wall may look simple but, again, a careful analysis of skills needed to invent a story that "works" reveals that complex set of sub skills carefully woven to engage the imagination of readers—to carry the weight of rhetorical persuasion. No, student mastery requires the imitation of excellence at this stage of their learning. Such a strategy is supported both by contemporary educational theories and historical educational theories as Augustine himself states when he argues that Rhetoric is most effectively learned through imitation.⁶

In the Fable and Narrative stages students are required to rewrite or paraphrase simple stories in specific ways and both stages aim at mastery of the same specific skill sets—the invention of narratives, facility with language, and flexibility in perspective. The skill set of narrative invention includes the three components of plot and the six categories of plot structure. The students master these skills by imitating excellent models. This imitation does not stifle creativity but builds a foundation for creativity by requiring deep cognitive processing as students must invent or generate their own words as they craft the basic matter of the narrative in various new ways. They may expand the story—the use of figures of description or figures of speech is particularly helpful here. The story

⁵Rhetorica Ad Herennium, II, i, I, trans. Harry Caplan; Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1958.

⁶Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, book 4, Chapter 3, trans. J. F. Shaw, Encyclopedia Britannica, Chicago, 1952, p. 676

may be condensed. A third paraphrase might consist of inverting the sequence of events starting from the end and working backward or starting from the middle. Viewpoint might be changed moving to the perspective of one of the agents, or changing to first person. Finally, a student might imitate the narrative by converting the prose to poetry or vice versa.

Additionally, students are becoming facile with language as they work through these multiple paraphrases. Facility with medium is a common characteristic of creativity. By removing the difficult task of Invention students are able to successfully concentrate on the narrative, language, and perspective skills. Again, contemporary and historical pedagogies align. Aquinas points out that learning occurs from the known to the unknown, “Now the master leads the disciple from things known to knowledge of the unknown...”⁷ The pupil’s focus is not distracted by having to generate a plot and its structure at this point—a skill unknown to most students. With those aspects of Invention already in place, or “known,” students are able to deal intensively with the language, the components of storytelling, and perspective. The frustration of failure is eliminated optimizing the learning experience. Though the exercises use a consistent, one might even say inflexible, strategy in each lesson these stages teach students flexibility in handling a narrative. The ability to understand that something may be seen from multiple perspectives and that facts may be presented in different ways is fundamental to creativity let alone critical thinking. Expanding, condensing, resequencing, and poetic conversion all change the way a story may be expressed and experienced yet the why or truth of the narrative remains constant. By increasing their skill in presenting narrative students are expanding their options, their ability to choose. If students possess the ability to tell a particular story in multiple ways their creativity is enhanced, limited only by their desire and, of course, their audience.

Further analysis may also suggest additional reasons why these remarkable exercises were and continue

⁷Aquinas, Summa, Part 1, Q. 117, Art. 1

to be used so successfully for over two millennia. Students develop uniquely. A writing teacher would inevitably have found a wide range of language abilities among a group of ten and eleven year olds. Students this age, particularly boys, in fact any individual in the roughly 80+% of a population who is not a naturally gifted writer, would rather do almost anything than take up a pencil and begin writing lessons. However, with the plot already established students are directed to the far easier and less complex skills of paraphrasing with the mental scaffolding possible with figures of description and figures of speech. The use of figures allow students to invent words (far less difficult than ideas) as they are required to describe in vivid detail particular elements of a story. The genius of the exercises is that learning revolves around effort and not natural or special ability. In other words by limiting the lesson to language manipulation rather than idea invention the frustration of failure is removed. Even students who struggle with composition may be taken outside to experience the sensation of rubbing a hand over the coarse bark of an oak tree or the smooth bark of a birch, to listen to the breeze in the leaves, or note the height of the tree, allowing them to put words to concrete experience in order to complete a figure of dendographia. With success such as this students lose their fear of failure. And the fear of failure more than any other factor inhibits, even crushes creativity. Aphthonius' exercises set up both teachers and students for success. Teachers could identify manageable sub skills in a story. Then by changing stories regularly, provide new contexts in which the same sub skills are identified and exercised. Finally, students write and if necessary re-write using these skills requiring the deep cognitive processing necessary to attain mastery. These exercises provide for explicit instruction around the skill being taught, supply multiple contexts in which the skill must be used, and through paraphrase allow deep mental cognition around the skill.

In addition to this foundational instruction in invention, students also begin foundational skills in style. These skills would include working with detail (using more or less through expanding and

condensing), vocabulary building through both word selection and diction, sentence structure, and when converting to poetry, the subtle skill of pace and rhythm.

Turning attention to the subsequent stages of Chreia and Maxim students learn several new skills but perhaps most significantly the exercises require the use of the narrative sub skills previous learned to truly begin the difficult task of invention. These sub skills are required to create four of the heads of development identified by Aphthonius: cause, converse, analogy and example. These four heads (being specific, focused narratives) require the creation of Plot using Recognition, Reversal, and Suffering, as well as the invention of plot structure using Agents, Action, Time, Place, and Manner to demonstrate the Chreia or Maxim. Additionally, the heads of paraphrase and testimony continue to exercise the skill of variation the students used in the Fable and Narrative exercises with the twist that testimony is not the student's paraphrase but rather the budding rhetor must "discover" a paraphrase by a famous or well known person. The wholly new skills lie in the heads of encomium and brief epilogue and begin to introduce the skill of arrangement. The four narrative heads of development (cause, converse, analogy and example) additionally allow for the continued exercise of sequencing and point of view (developing flexibility) as well as style (developing adaptability) through as mentioned above the use of detail (more or less), vocabulary: word selection and diction, sentence structure, and pace. Instructional effectiveness continues by providing explicit instruction around the skill being taught, supplying multiple contexts in which the skill must be used as maxims are varied from lesson to lesson, and requiring activities through use of the heads (invention of narratives demonstrating an argument) that require deep cognitive processing of the skill. Innovation and creativity are fostered and nurtured through such sound pedagogy.

Instructional efficiency is achieved at multiple levels. Within the context of language mastery the Progymnasmata or "before exercises" serve as a foundation and preparation for instruction in the

art of Rhetoric providing for the learners a meaningful purpose or “Big Idea” for their labors. The structures inherent in the stages—the plot and its structure in Fable and Narrative, and the heads of development in Chreia and Maxim—provides a “conspicuous strategy” necessary for students to learn quickly and efficiently, and “mediated scaffolding” for the teacher to use in relation to individual students through explicit instruction; class, group or paired exercises; or independent, autonomous work for skilled students. The practical nature of these four initial stages (and arguably in all fourteen stages) allow for “strategic integration” throughout the curriculum including math and science instruction. Because the skills are explicit in each stage the efficiencies of “Primed Background Knowledge” are easily incorporated and the vertical integration of the stages themselves inherently provides “Judicious Review.”⁸

In conclusion a careful analysis of the pedagogy in the first four stages of Aphthonius’ Progymnasmata suggest several reasons the exercises would foster the ability to think creatively and communicate in interesting and engaging manners. Students would have been immersed in an environment requiring flexibility in their thinking and adaptability in their writing. This environment along with the remaining stages preparing them for Rhetoric equips the students with a foundation of invention, arrangement and style through explicit instruction, variable contexts, and deep cognitive processing. This sound method of instruction allows for mastery of the fundamental skills needed to become good Rhetoric students and ultimately intensely creative and innovative communicators.

⁸Michael D. Coyne, Edward J. Kame'enui, Douglas W. Carnine, Effective Teaching Strategies that Accommodate Diverse Learners; Prentice Hall; 3 edition (July 20, 2006).