

The Very Idea of a *Progymnasmata*

Progymnasmata are collections of speaking and writing exercises for students of rhetoric. As historians have shown, they played an extremely important role in European education from Antiquity to the beginnings of the Modern Era. Unfortunately, they are treated today, if at all, as an historical curiosity, a relic of the old “school rhetoric.” Occasionally, there are attempts to revive the traditional sequence. Both approaches miss what I believe is most valuable about the progymnasmata, the very idea of a unified pedagogical program in the language arts, spanning primary, secondary, and higher education, oriented toward the shaping of rhetorical character, and organized around a sequence of well-defined exercises in verbal analysis and composition.

Introduction

For many writing teachers and researchers, the thirty-year-old love affair with the process paradigm has finally begun to cool (see, for example, recent collections by Kent and Petraglia).¹ Frustration has focused on a number of problems: the way writing has been turned into a largely interior phenomenon; the way it has been reduced to a more-or-less uniform sequence of stages (thinking, writing, revision); the way it has been modeled on a single kind of text, the school essay; and the way it has been conceived as the outcome of a general skill that transcends both content and context and is capable of being learned in a short period of time by young people in formal educational settings. At its worst, critics have contended, the process paradigm has left our students without a precise language to talk about rhetorical products, without substantive knowledge concerning rhetorical practices and their effects, and without the deep-seated rhetorical habits and dispositions needed for effective and responsible participation in genuinely deliberative democracies.

There appears to be little interest, however, in returning to a product-based pedagogy that attends mainly to grammar and form. Perhaps the leading alternative in recent years to both process- and product-based pedagogies, at least in the

United States, has been the writing-across-the-curriculum movement (WAC). In this approach writing is no longer thought of as a single skill, general and portable, transcending occasion, but is instead a potentially infinite number of situated practices, each embedded in a particular community and serving particular purposes. With WAC students no longer take classes in “writing with no content in particular” (Kaufer and Young); they learn about and employ writing in *all* of their courses, *throughout* their school careers, in an education that, ideally, situates reflection about language, discourse, and communication in the context of authentic disciplinary content.

But if writing is dispersed “across the curriculum,” theoretically making all teachers responsible for it, there’s always the risk that ultimately *no one* will be responsible for it, and discourse will become, once again, transparent to both teacher and student. Further, a fully realized WAC approach to writing instruction could leave students without autonomous curricular space for practicing civic discourse, something unrepresented at present by a traditional content area.

An alternative to all three of these paradigms—process, product, and WAC—is an *ethical* approach to the teaching of writing, one in which the target of instruction is neither a general skill of writing nor a diverse repertoire of situated writing practices but rather the student’s very character (Gk. *êthos*) as a writer, that collection of traits, derived in part from “nature” but developed mainly through training and habit, which makes someone the sort of discursive agent he or she is. From this point of view, the goal of the writing class is not the papers that students produce or the skills they master or even the knowledge they gain but the deep-seated, intellectually powerful, and socially valuable habits of discourse that they acquire.

The best model for such an approach, I believe, is still classical rhetoric, an umbrella term for various pedagogical programs focused on spoken and written eloquence that dominated secondary education in Classical Greece and Republican and Imperial Rome. For the Greeks and Romans, the point of studying rhetoric was to develop what Quintilian called “*facilitas*” (X.i.1): “the capacity to produce appropriate and effective language in any situation” (Murphy 19), a power “resident” in the individual (44), permanently available and usable (Lausberg 4). The word *rhetoric* discloses this focus on character in its very etymology, derived as it is from a Greek word meaning neither the art of speech nor speech itself (nor the art of persuasion nor persuasion itself) but rather the art or skill of the rhetor (in fifth century BCE Athens, a quasi-technical term applied to politicians, those who spoke frequently in the assembly and law courts). From this point of view, rhetoric is an ability associated with a certain kind of person and the goal of studying it is to actually become like such persons, that is, to “become rhetorical” (Murphy 68).

Now, this connection between writing instruction and character makes us uneasy and for the same two reasons that it made the Athenians uneasy when the sophists began advertising a kind of “rhetorical” training in the fifth century BCE. First, we wonder whether the person adept at speaking and writing well (that is, the rhetor) is really the sort of person we want to be producing in our classrooms. The ancient rhetoricians had no such qualms. Teachers such as Isocrates were adamant about the social value of a rhetorical education, the characteristics of the good speaker or writer—inventiveness, resourcefulness, many-sidedness, civility, and so forth—being, from their point of view, precisely “the attribute[s] of the free citizen in a civilized society” (Clark, *Rhetoric* 25).

Second, we wonder whether students can really acquire such habits in formal educational settings. For their part the ancient rhetoricians were convinced that they could, as long as that training possessed the depth, complexity, and humility appropriate to the skills and dispositions desired. What evolved from such beliefs, and what played such a central role in European education from antiquity to the Renaissance, was a curriculum in reading, writing, listening, and speaking that required an enormous amount of time and effort—as much as six to eight hours a day of intense study and practice for as long as three to four years, not including prior work in “grammar” and subsequent work in philosophy—and was insistently multiform in design, a “total learning process” that could not be reduced to any one of its parts (Murphy 33).

And what were those parts? To acquire rhetorical power, the ancients believed, a student needed, first, nature, that is, native talent (or at least a fervent desire to improve); second, art, that is, a precise but flexible theory of civic discourse that could be learned in formal settings; and, third, practice, that is, a rigorous program of drill and exercise meant to internalize the art and make it part of the student’s very ethos. It is the last of these parts, practice, that I believe modern rhetoric has most neglected and that I will be concerned with in this paper. The table below summarizes the framework underlying ancient rhetorical education.

Becoming Rhetorical:

1. Nature
2. Art
3. Practice
 - a. imitation
 - b. exercise
 - c. composition

For the ancient, “practice” in rhetoric included several interrelated elements. First, students learned to write and speak by reading and listening to model texts, using the art of rhetoric to isolate, analyze, and emulate desirable features found therein.² Imitation involved multiple activities: reading the original text aloud; explication, analysis, and judgment of that text; memorization and recitation; and various kinds of “paraphrase” (Roberts), including translation from one language to another, transliteration from one literary mode (that is, prose or verse) to another, abbreviation, and amplification. Though imitation has lost its primacy in educational *theory*, in tacit form it probably remains the single most important way in which students acquire rhetorical abilities. From Steve Krashen’s hypothesis about the relationship of reading experience to the development of writing abilities to Aviva Freedman’s more recent claim about the highly effective “implicit” learning of discourse moves that takes place in well-taught content-based courses, we have accumulated much evidence on the educational power of rich rhetorical input. As A. L. Becker has argued in the terms of children’s language development:

[A]ssume that there is no such thing as Language, only continual languaging, an activity of human beings in the world. Children hear particular bits of languaging. Having robust (if as yet unplanted) memories, they mimic and repeat the particular bits, and they gradually learn to reshape these particular little texts into new contexts. They learn text-building. They develop a repertoire of imperfectly remembered prior texts and acquire more and more skill at recontextualizing them in new situations. It is a skill learned over a lifetime, not a system of systems perfected in infancy. (34)

Imitatio could be seen, then, as the way ancient rhetoric educators brought this natural imitative impulse (see Aristotle, *Poetics* 4) into focal attention, essentially giving students permission to mimic well-regarded others, the course in production being also a site for consumption: reading, analysis, memorization, paraphrase, and modeling. Unfortunately, the triple onslaught of print, capitalism, and romanticism has made us moderns deeply suspicious of imitation; and, in our teaching, we stress nothing so much as the writer’s exclusive rights to his or her own language.

The second component of “practice” in the classical system of rhetoric education was exercise: the working through by students of a program of well-defined and minutely focused drills and activities, repeated almost ad nauseum and sequenced so that new skills built on already acquired ones. It is not by accident that the language used to describe this part of the curriculum (Gk. *progymnasmata*, L. *praeexercitamenta*) betrays its origins in the realm of *physi-*

cal education (Bonner 250). For both Isocrates and Quintilian, learning to be a good rhetor/orator was like learning to be a gymnast or dancer—theory wasn't enough: "[T]he body must be assisted by continual practice, self control, diet and above all by nature" (Quintilian V.x.121; cf. Isocrates, *Antidosis* 181ff). Similarly, Lanham has described ancient rhetorical education as an "intense training in the word," incorporating endless and minute exercises in memorization, improvisation, translation, variation, antilogy, declamation, and so forth (*Motives* 2ff; emphasis added). (These two parts of the educational program, *imitatio* and *exercitatio*, were closely interwoven, of course, the reading of others' texts usually a prequel for some kind of writing of one's own [as in, for example, paraphrase], writing in turn almost always guided by a preexisting model text or texts.)

In the third and final component of rhetorical "practice," students further developed their discursive habits and dispositions by composing, on their own, full-scale speeches and themes on mock judicial cases and political questions. The Romans called this part of rhetorical training *declamatio*. Though still an academic activity, involving as much artificiality as the exercises of the *progymnasmata*, declamation—what we might call "composition" proper—served as the capstone of classical rhetorical education, helping students make a smooth transition from the "play" of the classroom to the "business" of real-world civic action.

Of the three components of rhetorical "practice," the one I will be focusing on here is *exercise*. There were many types of exercise in classical rhetorical education, but the most characteristic and influential was the cycle of "preliminary exercises" known as the *progymnasmata* (the word in Greek is plural, but it is often used in English to refer to a singular grouping of such exercises). In the remainder of this paper, I will, first, summarize the tradition associated with the *progymnasmata* and, second, inquire into the relevance of that tradition for the modern teaching of writing. Those already familiar with the tradition may want to skip ahead to "The Very Idea."

The Old *Progymnasmata*

Standard exercises in rhetorical production can be traced back to the fifth-century BCE Greek sophists and the textbooks of their and the subsequent century; but the key development in the *progymnasmata* tradition probably occurred during the Hellenistic era (third to first centuries BCE), when a sequence of a dozen or so exercises emerged as a standard curriculum in writing and speaking instruction, occupying that vital middle ground between the young child's grammatical work and the older student's themes and declamations. By the beginnings of the first century BCE, virtually all Greek and

Roman rhetoric students were working their way through this more-or-less standard cycle of exercises.

Four progymnasmatic handbooks survive from Antiquity, all in Greek and all from the common era. Their authors were Theon of Alexandria (late first century), Hermogenes of Tarsus (second century), Aphthonius of Antioch (late fourth century), and Nicolaus of Constantinople (late fifth century). A Latin translation of Hermogenes' *Progymnasmata*, written by Priscian in the early sixth century, has also survived.³

These handbooks share a core set of exercises, though there are minor variations among them. The sequence below is that of Aphthonius (see Nadeau for an English translation), whose handbook exerted the greatest influence on later European education.

1. fable (*mythos*)
2. tale (*diêgêma*)
3. saying (*chreia*)
4. proverb (*gnômê*)
5. refutation (*anaskeuê*)
6. confirmation (*kataskeuê*)
7. commonplace (*koinos topos*)
8. encomium (*enkômion*)
9. invective (*psogos*)
10. comparison (*synkrisis*)
11. characterization (*êthopoeia*)
12. description (*ekphrasis*)
13. thesis (*thesis*)
14. law (*nomou eisphora*)

As can be seen from this list, the *progymnasmata* practiced students in a wide variety of writing activities, from the retelling of simple folk tales to the invention of arguments for and against laws. It is likely that the sequence took several years to complete and that the responsibility for teaching it was shared across what we would call primary, secondary, and tertiary schooling. No doubt, an uninterrupted and complete education in the *progymnasmata* presented above was rare, but the *idea* of such a pedagogy was enormously influential, long-lasting, and pervasive.

For example, most exercises in most versions of the *progymnasmata* contained the same pedagogical machinery. First, the student was presented with the target rhetorical production, what we might call a genre, text or speech type, or part thereof. This was named, defined, and, sometimes, divided into subtypes

(for example, in Aphthonius' *Progymnasmata*, a *diêgêma* or "tale" was defined as "the exposition of a thing done, or imagined as done," its subtypes being the dramatic, historical, and civil [266–67]). Second, the student was provided with an "art" for inventing and arranging words and thoughts in that text-type—usually a structural formula or set of argumentative-literary topics (for example, a tale consists of six things: an agent, a thing done, and the time, place, manner, and cause of its doing). Third, the student learned criteria for evaluating sample productions of that type (for example, a tale should be clear, brief, credible, and pure of expression). Fourth, the student read through or listened to a model text in the relevant genre (for example, in Aphthonius, we read a sample narrative about Aphrodite and Adonis). Finally, the student was invited by the author or teacher to write such a text on his own.

Each exercise was thus worked through with extraordinary attention to detail and form, a process that probably took weeks or even months to complete and must have made a lasting impression on the student's discursive sensibilities. The whole idea of the *progymnasmata*, in fact, was

to produce a total routineness of imaginative writing by reducing its variety systematically to a sequence (graded according to difficulty) of specified (and supposedly key) types of verbal composition. [. . .] Each type [was] expected to become second nature to the student, so that his public utterances [would] be pre-shaped to the requirements of public debate—the lynch-pin skill for social and political life. (Grafton and Jardine 131–32)

As an example of how all this might have worked, let's look more closely at one of the exercises in the standard sequence. In the *chreia*, the "theme par excellence" of classical education (Clark, *Rhetoric* 233), the student expanded on a saying or anecdote attributed to a famous person (for example, "When Diogenes saw a young boy misbehaving, he struck the boy's tutor"). He did this by amplifying the saying or action through eight topics or heads (*L. modi tractandi*): First, he wrote a panegyric on the person involved (in this case, Diogenes); second, he paraphrased the relevant saying or action; third, he defended the saying (proof by cause); fourth, he refuted its opposite (proof by contrast); fifth, he supported it by analogy (proof by illustration); sixth, by anecdote or example; seventh, by testimony (with a quotation from an authority); and, finally, he exhorted his readers and listeners to emulate the person involved (epilogue).

Bonner's summary of a fifteen-page *chreia* by the fourth-century CE author Libanius illustrates well the kind of text that such an exercise could produce.

The saying amplified here is a common one from the progymnasmatic literature: “Isocrates said, ‘the root of learning is bitter but sweet are its fruits.’”

The method was to begin with a few words in praise of the author—for example, Isocrates said many wise things, but nothing wiser than this. Then the saying must be paraphrased—Isocrates meant that the early stages of learning were full of trouble, but the results later on were well worth it. Next, we must have an explanation, to show how true this was. Here we have an account of the trials and tribulations of schoolboys (which, incidentally, throw a vivid light on ancient discipline), the tyrannous demands of teachers, reproof, abuse, threats and blows if a boy gets things wrong, and the prospect of something more difficult if he gets them right; the harassing pressure of the ubiquitous pedagogue, always breathing down a boy’s neck and keeping his nose to the grindstone; the unreasonableness of parents, always eager to test progress; nothing but work, work, from early morning till late at night. But the rewards, ah!, the rewards—to be respected as an educated man, to be introduced to the council and the assembly, to be heard by the people with attention, to represent one’s city as an ambassador, to win fame as an advocate, and perhaps even, in old age, to be publicly honored with a statue! As if the point of the saying were not yet clear enough, the writer must now proceed to argue it from contraries—those who have an easy start never get anywhere—and then he must give a parallel from a quite different sphere—the farmer, for instance, and the merchant in his ship, have a hard time at first, but they live to reap their rewards. Next, a specific example that clinches the argument—and what better example than the great Demosthenes himself? Finally, to cap it all, a quotation from the poets, those much-respected purveyors of succinct wisdom. Did not Hesiod say that the gods made sweat the precursor of Virtue, and that though the road was long and steep, and rough at first, it was nice and easy when you reached the top? Of course, even a very promising young pupil could hardly have written as artfully and persuasively as a professional rhetorician; but these were the lines along which boys were encouraged to think and compose. (259–60)

Though Bonner describes Libanius’ *chreia* as “lucid and natural” (259), there’s no question that these exercises—so many in all and each one so meticulously prescribed—must have been overwhelming from the point of view of the student. Here are the words used by Marrou to describe the pedagogical program of

classical rhetoric and the *progymnasmata* that stood at its center: *technical, exacting, meticulous, elementary, finicky, insignificant, tentative, strict, legalistic, dogmatic, complicated, exhausting, detailed, stupefying, artificial, burdensome, monotonous, conventional, decadent, insincere, rigid, hollow, frivolous, and arbitrary* (238–42, 267–81). Clark writes that the *progymnasmata* were probably a “torment” to schoolboys (*Rhetoric* 179); and Murphy refers to them as a “grueling sequence of sometimes petty and dull exercises” (68).

It is perhaps for this reason that the *progymnasmata* are often discussed now as little more than an historical curiosity, another relic of an old culture that we are well rid of. They have become, in other words, part and parcel of “school rhetoric,” that easily denigrated result of the historical “slippage” of rhetoric from its “primary” manifestations in the virile and outdoorsy life of Athens to the pedantry and busy work of later “secondary rhetoric” (Kennedy, *Classical* 2–3). And if school rhetoric offended an older generation’s preference for rhetorical practice, it has also offended recent celebrants of rhetorical theory, whose overriding desire has been to make of rhetoric a master-key to interpretation itself, the discipline’s pedagogical and institutional tradition swept under the rug. Note, for example, the neglect of the *progymnasmata* in Thomas Sloane’s recent *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*, where they do not even merit their own entry, apparently because they do not fit into the magisterial (and largely synchronic) system of rhetoric presented there, with its focus on the means and ends (but not the development) of rhetorical art. (The *progymnasmata* fare only marginally better in Theresa Enos’s *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition* and Heinrich Lausberg’s *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric*.)

And yet it could be argued that classical rhetoric was above all else an educational program (“the basis of rhetoric has always been the pedagogical tradition” [Woods 93]), a project devoted to the development in students of a particular set of verbal habits and dispositions. *This* was the rhetoric that was so extraordinarily long-lived and influential. According to Murphy, there is “massive and pervasive evidence” for the continuity of rhetorical teaching across the Roman period (69ff); Woods and Abbott find similar situations for the Middle Ages and Renaissance. At the very center of that tradition was the *progymnasmata*, this cycle of exercises, described by Corbett and Connors as the very basis of rhetorical education from the patristic age up through the Renaissance (484). If true, this means that the standard sequence of exercises, essentially fixed by the time of Quintilian if not before, was still being used in European schools more than a millennium and a half after its emergence. According to Abbott (113), Reinhard Lorich’s Latin translation of Aphthonius’s fourth-century *Progymnasmata* went through twenty-eight editions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries alone. All in all, says Bonner, the *progymnasmata* exerted an “extraordinarily protracted influence” on European education. A twentieth-

century German reference work has gone so far as to describe them as the “*Lehrplan*” (that is, curriculum or syllabus) of Europe (qtd. in Eriksson). Nor was their impact felt only in the schools: Russell writes that the exercises exerted “a very great and very long-lasting” influence on European literature.

For some scholars this illustrious history is proof of the inherent worth of the program. “It seems inconceivable,” writes Murphy, “that any human enterprise of such longevity could be valueless” (74). And D’Angelo argues for the superiority of the progymnasmatic handbooks over other kinds of rhetorical manuals “because they persisted for so many centuries” (xiii). Given the general conservatism of educational practice, however, longevity doesn’t seem sufficient, in and of itself, to warrant our commendation. So, the question remains, is there something about the exercises worthy of our continued attention today, something at least theoretically independent of their extraordinary historical significance?

The Very Idea

Contemporary advocates for the ancient *progymnasmata* have tended to focus on the actual exercises themselves and the sequence in which they were presented. For example, Frank D’Angelo’s recent undergraduate textbook, the first full-scale, English-language revival of the old cycle in several centuries, sees in the various tasks of the ancient system (proverb, anecdote, commonplace, speech-in-character, and so forth) a vastly more comprehensive set of rhetorical genres than the four-mode “EDNA” (exposition, description, narration, and argument) tradition of current-traditional rhetoric. The point is well-taken: The old exercises are both more “typical” (the student writes a “eulogy” rather than an “expository or persuasive essay about a person”) and more varied (fourteen types versus, say, the two or three that our students usually encounter) than the tasks of contemporary writing instruction. And surely, a focus on text-types is enormously suggestive, consonant with the heightened interest of recent years in genre theory.

But I fear that this revival of the *progymnasmata* may be missing the point. The relevance of the classical program resides, I believe, not in the actual exercises themselves (those fourteen assignments in rhetorical form) but in the very idea behind this cycle of exercises, the attempt to make of rhetoric not just a theory or art or an historical and cultural artifact or a sociocognitive process but rather a complete and developmentally attuned curriculum in written and spoken discourse, a multicourse program of language instruction whose end product is neither a text nor a skill nor some body of knowledge but a set of deep-seated verbal habits and dispositions oriented to public effectiveness and virtue.

If we look at the *progymnasmata* that way, I believe there are at least five features of the curriculum, independent of the actual exercises that make it up, worthy of our continued consideration. It is not my intention here to argue on this basis for a wholesale revival of the old system, though my goal *is* to suggest how the contemporary teaching of writing might learn from some of its past mistakes and successes. What I hope to accomplish is a review of the ancient system with special attention to what I believe it did well, my sense of *that* biased, no doubt, by what I see as the current failures of rhetoric education.

First, the *progymnasmata* were designed to focus student work on the elements of rhetorical skill, the preliminaries to full-scale text-making. As Herbert A. Simon might have put it, rhetoric is a “nearly decomposable system,” the components of which “perform particular subfunctions that contribute to the overall function” of the system and can thus be designed “with some degree of independence of the design of others” (197, 128). Our general aversion to such building-block pedagogies has probably been influenced by the now decades-old debate between advocates of phonics and whole-language reading instruction, but we should probably not too quickly dismiss well-designed pedagogies that focus our students’ energies on the subcomponents of expert rhetorical performance (see, for example, the late Robert Connors’ positive reassessment of sentence-combining exercises). With this in mind, it is probably best, for example, to see the second exercise of the *progymnasmata*, the tale or narrative, not so much as a self-contained text in its own right but as a subcomponent of full rhetorical competence, narrative being for the adult practitioner only one of several parts in, say, a complete forensic speech. The central idea of the *progymnasmata*, in other words, was that one learned to write and speak effectively by acquiring the various skills of effective writing and speaking. As the fifth-century CE scholar Nicolaus wrote in the preface to his handbook:

A *progymnasma* is in general a practice of moderate matters toward a strengthening of greater ones, and a rhetorical *progymnasma* is an introductory study through compositions of the parts and types of rhetoric, a useful preliminary training [. . .] since by means of the *progymnasmata* we practice with each of the parts or types singly, not with all parts or types of rhetoric at once. (264)

Theon makes the same point in the preface to his handbook: “[N]ow I shall attempt to transmit those things that it is necessary to know and to be reasonably trained in *before* one makes a speech” (254; emphasis added).

Second, each of these building blocks contained a well-defined formal structure that was easy to learn, giving the student “pegs” on which to hang his

or her verbal and ideational material. Clark, in fact, believes that this was the key to the historical success of the *progymnasmata*, that they provided students with patterns to follow (*Rhetoric*). Of course, the heavy-handed prescriptiveness of the exercises could be stultifying, evident in Marrou's summary of the thirty-six topics of praise used in the encomium exercise. Grafton and Jardine argue, in fact, that the main reason for the success of Renaissance rhetorical education in general, and the *progymnasmata* in particular, was that it so effectively trained students for lives of obedience and docility (24). But this argument neglects the astounding positive effects possible from such a curriculum, something apparent in the careers of both Shakespeare (see, for example, Joseph) and Milton (see, for example, Clark). Bonner, Murphy, and Kennedy (*Greek*) all address this paradox of the *progymnasmata*, that such astounding creativity could come from such a rigid educational system. As Marrou puts it:

[O]nce [these rigid conventions] had been recognized and assimilated, the artist had complete freedom within the system, and when he had mastered the various processes he could use them to express his own feelings and ideas without any loss of sincerity. Far from hindering originality or talent, the restrictions enabled very subtle, polished effects to be produced. (280)

The third virtue of the *progymnasmata*, I believe, is something we have already touched on: that they presented students with such a wide variety of rhetorical elements to work on. There is an impressive breadth of compositional activity contained in the fourteen exercises of the standard sequence: Some are narrative, others argumentative; some are deliberative, others forensic or epideictic; some practice the student in introductions and epilogues, others in proof and refutation; some develop basic copying skills, others psychological insight and emotional sophistication (cf. Nicolaus; Bonner). D'Angelo even sees in the diverse exercises potential for a kind of "multicultural" pedagogy that would be less confined than most curricula to dominant text-types.

Fourth, the exercises of the standard *progymnasmata* are thoughtfully ordered, the sequence of tasks within the cycle being perhaps the most important part of its pedagogical design. Most obvious to commentators has been the way the exercises proceed from relatively simple rhetorical tasks (like storytelling) to relatively complex ones (like arguing for and against a thesis or law). But there are other ways in which they can be seen as rationally ordered: For example, they proceed from short to long texts, from poetic to civic modes of discourse, from narrative to argumentative activities, from concrete to abstract subject matter, from relatively closed (or monologic) to relatively open (or dialogic) discourse schemata, from irrefutable to more controvertible topics, from basic to

sophisticated cultural demands on the student, and from more to less teacher assistance. Writing researchers have confirmed that these kinds of sequencing plans generally correspond to how students best learn (see, for example, Bereiter and Scardamalia).

Finally, the *progymnasmata* represent an extraordinarily integrated pedagogy in the language arts. This is true in multiple ways. The exercises combine work in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. They unite rhetorical and literary training (perhaps better than any educational system has ever done). They practice students in both the invention of ideas and the manipulation of words. They connect intellectual and moral training, attending to both the methods of public discourse and the beliefs and values expressed therein (as Theon puts it, “training through the *chreia* not only produces a certain power of speech but also a good and useful character since we are being trained in the aphorisms of wise men” [254]). They span primary, secondary, and higher education, bridging the academic experience of younger and older students and connecting the ages in a way that our educational system usually does not. Finally, they balance attention to the gifts and needs of individual students (some are good at description, others at personification) with a common education in “approved” ways of narrating, describing, comparing, and so forth.

In other words, the virtue of the ancient system of rhetorical “practice,” centered as it was on the *progymnasmatic* exercise cycle, was not the specific tasks assigned but the way that program provided students with the subcomponents of expert rhetorical performance, broke each component down into teachable patterns or topics, made ample room in the curriculum for a wide variety of such components, ordered them into a thoughtful developmental sequence, and attempted both within each exercise and in the program as a whole to give students practice in the full range of rhetorical activities. It has not been my purpose here to propose a new *progymnasmata* for our time but rather to try to see through the history of the exercise-cycle to an educational idea that we might appropriate for ourselves in designing such programs.

The modern era has not been kind to the *progymnasmata* and perhaps for good reason: The program was clearly too rigid, too conservative, and too time consuming. And we do well, as Grafton and Jardine remind us, to always cast a wary eye on revivals of humanist educational projects because there is typically such a huge gap between the ideals promoted and the low-level scholarly work that takes place, between the cultivated citizen and an educational program focused almost exclusively on literary and linguistic drill.

And yet thoughtful versions of such projects can work. The studio education of creative writers, for example, often incorporates *progymnasmata*-like exercises (see, for example, Novakovitch, who includes in his textbook an “art” of fiction including theories of setting, character, plot, point of view, and so forth),

passages from famous writers for imitation, and more than 120 writing exercises, most producing texts of just a page or two long. In North American rhetoric and composition studies, meanwhile, there has been a modest revival of the *progymnasmata* in recent years. I have already mentioned D'Angelo's recent book. In addition, Matsen, Rollinson, and Sousa was the first anthology of readings in classical rhetoric to provide substantial attention to the progymnasmatic tradition, and Corbett and Connors was the first edition in the nearly thirty-five-year history of that textbook to provide a chapter (albeit only five pages long) on the *progymnasmata*. And yet, as I argued above, there has been a general failure to separate the *idea* of the *progymnasmata* from the actual exercises themselves. This is a mistake, because what that idea represented might still be an inspiration for us: a unified program in the language arts, spanning primary, secondary, and higher education, oriented toward the shaping of rhetorical character in our students, and organized around a thoughtful sequence of well-defined exercises in verbal composition. Isn't *that* an idea whose time has come (again)?

Notes

¹Thanks to *Rhetoric Review* reviewers Richard Leo Enos and Janice Lauer for their helpful suggestions on earlier versions of this article.

²The literature on rhetorical *imitatio* is huge; for a sampling, see Abbott; Bender; Corbett and Connors 411–83; Marrou 126, 229ff; and Murphy.

³My treatment of the *progymnasmata* is indebted to Bonner; Clark, *Rhetoric*; Kennedy, *Greek*; Marrou; Murphy; O'Rourke; Robert; and Russell.

Works Cited

- Abbott, Don Paul. "Rhetoric and Writing in Renaissance Europe and England." *A Short History of Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Twentieth-Century America*. Ed. James J. Murphy. Davis, CA: Hermagoras P, 1990. 95–120.
- Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Trans. Stephen Halliwell. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1987.
- Becker, A. L. "Language and Linguaging." *Language & Communication* 11 (1991): 33–35.
- Bender, Daniel. "Imitation." *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*. Ed. Theresa Enos. New York: Garland, 1996. 343–46.
- Bereiter, Carl, and Marlene Scardamalia. *The Psychology of Written Composition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1987.
- Bonner, S. F. *Education in Ancient Rome: From the Elder Cato to the Younger Pliny*. London: Methuen, 1977.
- Clark, Donald L. *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education*. Morningside Heights, NY: Columbia UP, 1957.
- . *John Milton at St. Paul's School: A Study of Ancient Rhetoric in English Renaissance Education*. Hamden, CT: Archon, 1964.

- Connors, Robert J. "The Erasure of the Sentence." *College Composition and Communication* 52 (Sept. 2000): 96–128.
- Corbett, Edward P. J., and Robert J. Connors. *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. 4th ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- D'Angelo, Frank J. *Composition in the Classical Tradition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.
- Enos, Theresa, ed. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*. New York: Garland, 1996.
- Eriksson, Anders. "Progymnasmata Project." Post to H-Rhetor Electronic Discussion List. <H-RHETOR@H-NET.MSU.EDU>. 18 May 2000. Archived at <<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~rhetor/>>.
- Freedman, Aviva. "Show and Tell? The Role of Explicit Teaching in the Learning of New Genres." *Research in the Teaching of English* 27 (1993): 222–51.
- Grafton, Anthony, and Lisa Jardine. *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986.
- Hagaman, John. "Modern Use of the Progymnasmata in Teaching Rhetorical Invention." *Rhetoric Review* 5 (Fall 1986): 22–29.
- Isocrates. *Against the Sophists and Antidosis*. Trans. George Norlin. London: William Heinemann, 1962.
- Joseph, Miriam. *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*. New York: Hafner, 1966.
- Kaufert, David, and Richard E. Young. "Writing in the Content Areas: Some Theoretical Complexities." *Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Writing: Rethinking the Discipline*. Ed. Lee Odell. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1993. 71–104.
- Kennedy, George. A. *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Traditions*. 2nd ed. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999.
- . *Greek Rhetoric under the Christian Emperors*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.
- Kent, Thomas, ed. *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing Process Paradigm*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1999.
- Krashen, Steven. *Writing Research, Theory, and Application*. New York: Pergamon, 1985.
- Lanham, Richard A. *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1976.
- . "The 'Q' Question." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 87 (1988): 653–700.
- Lausberg, Heinrich. *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric: A Foundation for Literary Study*. Trans. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen, and David E. Orton. Ed. David E. Orton and R. Dean Anderson. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1998.
- Marrou, Henri I. A *History of Education in Antiquity*. 3rd ed. Trans. G. Lamb. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956.
- Matsen, Patricia P., Philip Rollinson, and Marion Sousa, eds. *Readings from Classical Rhetoric*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.
- Murphy, James J. "Roman Writing Instruction as Described by Quintilian." *A Short History of Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Twentieth-Century America*. Ed. James J. Murphy. Davis, CA: Hermagoras P, 1990. 19–76.
- Nadeau, Ray. "The Progymnasmata of Aphthonius in Translation." *Speech Monographs* 19 (1952): 264–85.
- Nicolaus. *Progymnasmata*. Trans. Patricia P. Matsen. *Readings from Classical Rhetoric*. Ed. Patricia P. Matsen, Philip Rollinson, and Marion Sousa. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990. 263–65.
- Novakovitch, Josip. *Fiction Writer's Workshop*. Cincinnati: Story P, 1995.
- O'Rourke, Sean Patrick. "Progymnasmata." *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient times to the Information Age*. Ed. Theresa Enos. New York: Garland, 1996. 562–63.

- Petraglia, Joseph, ed. *Reconceiving Writing, Rethinking Writing Instruction*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1995.
- Quintilian. *Institutio Oratoria*. Trans. H. E. Butler. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP (Loeb Classical Library), 1968.
- Roberts, Michael. *Biblical Epic and Rhetorical Paraphrase in Late Antiquity*. Liverpool, England: Francis Cairns, 1985.
- Russell, Donald Andrew. "Progymnasmata." *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. 3rd ed. Ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. 1253.
- Simon, Herbert A. *The Sciences of the Artificial*. 3rd ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996.
- Sloane, Thomas O., ed. *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Theon. *Progymnasmata*. Trans. Patricia P. Matsen. *Readings from Classical Rhetoric*. Ed. Patricia P. Matsen, Philip Rollinson, and Marion Sousa. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990. 253–62.
- Woods, Marjorie C. "The Teaching of Writing in Medieval Europe." *A Short History of Writing Instruction from Ancient Greece to Twentieth-Century America*. Ed. James J. Murphy. Davis, CA: Hermagoras P, 1990. 77–94.



J. David Fleming (PhD in Rhetoric, Carnegie Mellon University) is an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin–Madison where he teaches undergraduate courses in writing and graduate courses in the history and theory of rhetoric and directs the Intermediate Composition program. He is currently completing a book manuscript on the place of the city in rhetorical theory, practice, and education, titled *City of Rhetoric: Designing Spaces for Genuinely Civic Discourse*.

Call for Papers for an Essay Collection on the Art of Medieval Rhetoric

Papers are invited on any aspect of medieval rhetoric as it relates to the theory and practice of writing and oratory from 400 to 1400 AD. Papers may address the following topics: the place of rhetoric in both university and non-university educational curriculums; discoveries of unfamiliar rhetoricians or new perspectives on known figures; contemporary educational methods and composition techniques seen through the lens of medieval education and rhetoric; the application of medieval rhetoric as a method for understanding literature, politics, and theology; definition and scope of medieval rhetoric, including the relation between rhetoric and grammar (*ars poetriae*), rhetoric and preaching (*ars praedicandi*), and rhetoric and letter-writing (*ars dictaminis*); and the preservation, transformation, and use of Greek and Roman rhetorics and their texts during the Middle Ages.

Please send queries to Richard McNabb <rmcnabb@liu.edu> or Clyde Moneyhun <moneyhun@odin.english.udel.edu> and submit two copies of an abstract by 1 May 2003 to Richard McNabb, Dept. of English, LIU, C. W. Post Campus, Brookville, NY 11548.