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Imitatio, Civic Education, and the Digital Temper

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Imitatio, Civic Education, and the Digital Temper

Jessy J. Ohl

Abstract

This essay advocates for the reinvigoration of imitatio pedagogy to reestablish disciplinary commitment to civic education in perilous democratic times. I argue that imitatio offers a needed response to several contemporary democratic challenges. After mapping out three theoretical relations of imitatio, I describe one approach for inculcating democratic citizenship via imitatio designed for undergraduate education. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the specific affordances of imitatio education in the digital age and call on educators of rhetoric and communication to once again perceive democratic well-being as a disciplinary responsibility.

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Keywords: imitatio; pedagogy; civic education, rhetoric; digital

The mythos surrounding rhetoric's origins in 5th century Syracuse following the overthrow of the tyrant Thrasybulus imparts a recurring lesson that rhetoric is simultaneously democracy's greatest hope and largest threat (Blankenship, 1966; Bryant & Wallace, 1953; Farenga, 1979; Gencarella, 2007). Scholars, practitioners, and teachers of rhetoric and communication regularly turn to public discourse as a thermometer to diagnose the health of the body politic, and in an era in which misogyny is defended as "locker room talk," and white supremacists are recast as "very fine people," it is difficult not to worry that the times are a changin' in the worst ways and for the most terrible reasons. Contesting these troubling trends requires a renewal of the historical foundation of our disciplinary pedagogy, developing students equipped to "the life of an active and responsible citizen" (Hauser, 2004, p. 40). Despite considerable theoretical and methodological differences, the pedagogical mission of engendering a citizenry capable of carefully and ethically addressing collective concerns remains a common, if overlooked, denominator in the field.

This essay responds to Craig R. Rood's (2016) call for "more scholarly attention to rhetorical education" (p. 137) by elevating *imitatio*, an ancient rhetorical exercise involving the rigorous and embodied study, repetition, and revision of exemplarily models of public discourse. *Imitatio* is uniquely attuned to civic education and offers a formidable defense against several contemporary democratic vulnerabilities (Erdmann, 1993; Ewalt, Ohl, & Pfister, 2016; Hariman, 2004; Sullivan, 1989; Terrill, 2011; Terrill, 2014). My intention with this essay is twofold: first, to provide a robust explication and defense of *imitatio*; and second, to advance *imitatio* pedagogy by proposing one specific method for its application in the classroom. Although *imitatio* was "the single most common instructional method in the West for well over two millennia" (Muckelbauer, 2008, p. 52), the goal of this essay is not to uncritically "Make Communication

Education Great Again” by blindly venerating ancient techniques, but instead to demonstrate that the inherent mutability of *imitatio* allows the exercise to be rearticulated for the needs of present. In the next section, I briefly describe three theoretical relations of *imitatio* in order to familiarize readers with the ancient pedagogical practice. Second, I outline one approach for inculcating democratic citizenship via *imitatio* designed for undergraduate education. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the specific affordances of *imitatio* education in the digital age.

Relations of *Imitatio*

Because *imitatio* purposefully blends theory and practice into a holistic civic education, it is necessary to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the pedagogical exercise. *Imitatio*'s rarefied status in the annals of rhetorical education in no way equates to universal agreement regarding the precise meaning or preferred process behind the exercise. McKeon (1936) identifies as many as five distinct attitudes in antiquity alone associated with this protean concept; and even within the same intellectual tradition, no two theorists or educators shared complete agreement on how best to conduct *imitatio*. Unpacking the nuanced and meandering conceptualizations of *imitatio* throughout the intellectual histories of philosophy, aesthetics, and rhetoric is beyond the scope of this essay, and is inappropriate in most educational settings (See Corbett, 1951). Rather than provide an exhaustive list of *imitatio*'s meanings, I turn to John Muckelbauer's (2008) generative heuristic that organizes the history of *imitatio* into three distinct but interconnected relations, or rhythms, between model, copy, and rhetor: “repetition-of-the-same,” “repetition-of-difference,” and “difference and repetition.” It is important to discuss each relation at length, because as I will advocate in the next section, the civic potential of *imitatio* is maximized when all three relations are unified in a single practice.

The first relation, “repetition-of-the-same,” is likely what first comes to mind when people think about imitation in an educational setting. It is not uncommon, especially in high school forensics curricula, for students to initiate their rhetorical training by delivering recitation speeches that closely mimic iconic public addresses to hone delivery and memory skills. Although Plato (1991) is generally allergic to the idea of creating replicas, he tolerates this mode of *imitatio* in his *Republic* because the aim is faithful replication of the exemplar. Creating an exact copy of any model is unachievable, and yet the reverence and labor involved in getting as close to the original as possible familiarizes the student with the agents, strategies, and constraints of “real-world models” of historical significance (Terrill, 2011, p. 301).

Faithful replication of a consummate model of rhetoric carries both technical and moral implications for student growth. Erasmus (Erdmann, 1993) would require pupils recite passages four separate times so that the technical and moral proficiencies embodied in the text would be imprinted for future use. Frederick Douglass (2016) recounts in his own education that copying speeches contained in *The Colombian Orator* “gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance” (p. 36). Imitating an impactful message, whether via speech, prose, music, or film, requires literacy

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in rudimentary elements of communication that can only be mastered through repetition, such as audience analysis, the deployment of tropes, and achievement of argumentative consistency. Repetition-of-the-same can manifest itself as mindless regurgitation of material; however, this bastardization overlooks the magnitude of critical thinking and critical listening involved in the process of unlocking the innerworkings of a text, and how with practice, repetitive exercise empowers students to “unconsciously and spontaneously reproduce” (Corbett, 1971, p. 247) the style of the model, as if by drawing from rhetorical muscle memory.

Embedded within the artifact worthy of imitation is not only the technical components of eloquence, but also the attitudes, virtues, and morals of a community. Kirt H. Wilson (2003) asserts that the “ultimate goal of pedagogical imitation is to instill moral values” (p. 91). By exposing students to a paragon of rhetorical excellence, and requiring sophisticated analysis and disciplined repetition, “repetition-of-the-same” is a “potent and persistent medium of indoctrination” (Haskins, 2000, p. 13) that initiates participation in a political culture with its own unique history and expectations of decorum. Assuming that moral character can “rub-off” on a student makes the selection of the model to emulate critical, as it could mean that imitation of an ethically corrupt model, say Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, would sabotage student development and threaten democracy.

A truly poignant representation of “repetition-of-the-same” can be found in Ken Burns’s (2014) documentary *The Address*. The film follows students of the Greenwood School, a small boarding school in Putney Vermont for students with learning disabilities, as they embark on their year-long tradition of reciting from memory Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Pasha, a 16-year-old student at Greenwood, reflects on the impact of the *imitatio* by stating:

Throughout my entire life, I actually really stuttered a lot. And I noticed that this speech will actually kind of improve my stuttering and my pronunciation in words, too, my articulation, in the t-h sounds. I actually wanted to actually recite the Gettysburg Address because [...] the address, was actually really inspiring to me. So if I recite this Address in front of people, I think it’ll make me feel like I could actually do anything I want and will eventually make me feel like a new man.

As these adolescents learn the words, phrases, organization, and historical context of the speech, the rigors of the activity nurture patience, resilience, social bonds, and personal confidence, valuable behaviors to maintain well after the exercise concludes. “Perfect” reproduction of Lincoln’s oratory is far less important than the process of personal discovery and collective identity formation that occurs as students strive to emulate a great American orator attempting to salvage a tattered union.

For proponents of “repetition-of-the-same,” the second relation of *imitatio*, “repetition-of-difference,” is typically viewed with hostility as it actively encourages modification of the exemplar “in the spirit of generous rivalry” (Fiske, 1971, p. 27). Whereas “repetition-of-the-same” tasks students with coming as close to the model of excellence as possible, “repetition-of-difference” implores students invent improvements to that which is already deemed exceptional. Quintilian (2001) championed this approach by noting that even with the most admirable performances, it is incorrect to assume that “everything which the best authors said is necessarily perfect. They do sometimes slip, stagger under the load, and indulge in the pleasures of their own ingenuity” (X. i. 25). Of course, complete and total revision of a model would no longer qualify as *imitatio*, and would in fact suggest the model was not deserving of emulation in the first place; however, methodical revision can augment understanding and appreciation of the original. Rob Pope (1995) explains, “the best way to understand how a text works is to change it: to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small), and then to try to account for the exact effect of what you have done” (p. 1). Thus, Quintilian (2001) instructed students in the art of paraphrasing with the aim to cultivate “the capacity to expand what is by nature brief, amplify the insignificant, vary the monotonous, lend charm to what has been already set out, and speak well and at length on a limited subject” (X.v.9-11). Although the distinction is not made in the previous literature as far as I can discern, I find it useful to conceptualize “repetition-of-difference” as advanced rhetorical training because instead of relying on sound habits instilled through “repetition-of-the-same,” students must utilize their critical faculties and creativity to locate openings for intervention. While students are allowed to make changes, modification does not automatically equate to an improved piece of rhetoric. I have witnessed multiple occasions in which students attempted to insert their own metaphors for the purposes of clarity only to discover the challenge of creating perspective by incongruity. Indeed, even in instances in which students struggle or “fail” to improve the original, the process evokes self-reflexivity on the complicated nature of rhetorical invention.

An added advantage of “repetition-of-difference” is its applicability to the particular needs of the burgeoning rhetor. Bowing at the feet of immortalized speakers and texts fossilizes rhetoric, in effect undermining the art’s connection to lived experience and responsiveness to

fluctuating conditions for political struggle (Chávez, 2011). “Repetition-of-the-same” assuages

Examples of Imitatio Projects

- *Adapting Pete Seeger’s anti-war anthem “Bring ‘em Home” to oppose the War on Terror*
- *Turning Dr. Seuss’s “Oh, the Places You’ll Go!” into an adult themed video game*
- *A photographic essay on gender transitioning evoking Sojourner Truth’s speech “Ain’t I a Woman?”*

the tension between blind dogma and historical amnesia by producing a “new text that stands alongside the original, shaped and informed by it [...] but not overlying or mimicking it” (Terrill, 2014, 167). *Imitatio* has at times been maligned as little more than inauthentic and impersonal forgery that suppresses the individuality of the rhetor.² However, rather than forcing strict conformity, Quintilian responds that the “perfect orator” in *imitatio* “adds his own good qualities” (X. ii, 28.), essentially imbuing the model with a rhetorical bravado reflecting the student’s unique voice and objectives.

The final relation of *imitatio*, “difference and repetition,” is by far the most elusive even though it is immanent to “repetition-of-the-same” and “repetition-of-difference.” “Difference and repetition” denotes a mysterious, almost otherworldly awakening in the rhetor that “transmits itself through a kind of infectious quality” (Muckelbauer, 2008, p. 74). In the process of becoming consubstantial with the model, it is not only the artifact that undergoes transformation, but the student as well. Longinus (1991) references the activity of the muses to describe this relation, writing that in *imitatio* the student, like the Pythian priestess of Delphi, inhales a “divine vapor; thus, at once she becomes impregnated with divine power, and suddenly inspired, she utters oracles” (XIII. ii). Daniel M. Hooley (1990) likewise describes *imitatio* in terms of inspiration “wherein the soul of the imitator becomes inflamed in the pursuit of its model” (p. 80). Inspiration is difficult to account for, much less predict and control, but if the encounter between student and model reaches the level of intimacy, a stimulation may occur propelling students forward. Notice in the preceding quotation from *The Address* that Pasha felt “inspired” by the Gettysburg Address to the point of becoming a “new man” in his *imitatio*.

As both students and educators seek ways of collapsing the distance between classroom exercises and the “outside world,” *imitatio* provides both the theoretical foundation and affective momentum to generate social change.

Inspiration may initially occur at the level of the individual, but what makes this relation so vital for civic education and democratic vitality is that students are propelled outward, into the community, armed with a newly found resolve that things *can* and *should* be different (See Ewalt, Ohl, & Pfister, 2016). It is here where the conservative underpinnings of “repetition-of-the-same” recede, where a student no longer uses rhetoric, but, in the

words of David Fleming (1998, p. 178-9) “becomes rhetorical.” Munsell’s (2006) pedagogical program combining the mission of social justice with the promotion of racial equality is one example among many of how *imitatio* invites learned and engaged activism. As both students and educators seek ways of collapsing the distance between classroom exercises and the “outside world,” *imitatio* provides both the theoretical foundation and affective momentum to generate social change.

Twenty-First-Century *Imitatio*

In the previous section, the three relations of *imitatio* were disentangled for the purposes of description; however, it is hopefully clear that the boundary between the rhythms is porous, and that “repetition-of-the-same,” “repetition-of-difference,” and “difference and repetition” each accentuate complementary skills and behaviors integral to robust civic education. Given the voluminous writing on *imitatio*, the relative lack of detailed instruction for its usage in the classroom is problematic. Even if educators are persuaded to include *imitatio* in their courses, knowing exactly *how* to teach *imitatio* is by no means obvious. In this section, I outline one method of *imitatio* pedagogy designed for undergraduate majors in communication that I refined over three years of teaching an introductory course in rhetoric and communication at a small liberal arts university. The approach offered in these pages should not be interpreted as the definitive method for teaching *imitatio*, indeed the very nature of *imitatio* itself dictates this assignment and all subsequent iterations remain open to revision, but what follows is one accessible means for incorporating *imitatio* into the classroom.

Given that *imitatio* brings theory and practice together (Sullivan, 1989), it is necessary for educators to first familiarize students with *imitatio* and rhetoric’s broader historical project of civic education. I recommend initiating this introduction by exposing students to Isocrates’s *Evagorus* (1894), a funeral oration recognizing the deceased Cyprian ruler Evagorus in which Isocrates attempts to convince the king’s son Nicocles to rule nobly as his father’s successor. The *Evagorus* serves as a touchstone for students to theorize how audience expectations inform the production of a satisfying funeral oration. Moreover, Isocrates’s *Evagorus* is both a sophisticated epideictic speech suitable for imitation, and an oration that voices the importance of *imitatio* by exhorting Nicocles to replicate, and exceed, the achievements of his father. After connecting Evagorus’s lineage to the god Zeus, and spinning captivating tales of the king’s violent overthrow of an illegitimate usurper, Isocrates’s ingratiating subtly shifts to challenge Nicocles: “Who would not prefer the perils of Evagoras to the lot of those who inherited kingdoms from the fathers?” (Isocrates, 35). The irony, of course, is that while Evagoras was purportedly a “self-made” ruler, Nicocles was just bequeathed a kingdom on birthright alone. Isocrates masterfully walks a delicate tightrope in the oration, juggling flattery and provocation while delicately warning Nicocles against complacency in favor of the honorable pursuit of education and “proving yourself inferior to none of the Hellenes either in word or deed” (p. 77). In doing so, Isocrates illustrates that the *telos* of *imitatio* resides not simply in the creation of a text, but in the formation of a person who, by “imitat[ing] the manners and ideas of others that are contained in spoken discourse” (p. 75) grows their talents and habits in the service of others. Connecting with ancient texts and authors helps students of rhetoric and communication position themselves in relation to a consequential, albeit flawed, intellectual tradition that is increasingly displaced (Jackson, 2007), and to identify morality and citizenship as valued educational outcomes.

With the ethical and pedagogical investments of *imitatio* crystalized, I teach students the three relations of *imitatio* outlined above by exploring the work Bob Ross, the famed American art instructor and perhaps the greatest twentieth-century practitioner of *imitatio* pedagogy. As students learn by watching select episodes of Ross’s beloved public television series *The Joy of*

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Painting, Ross blends “repetition-of-the-same,” “repetition-of-difference,” and “difference and repetition” to make the art of painting accessible, therapeutic, and titillating. In each episode, Ross calmly guides viewers both verbally and visually in the raw mechanics of painting, such as creating color, selecting proper materials, producing visual depth, and, his personal favorite, the cathartic labor of cleaning paint brushes. The viewer learns by observing and mimicking Ross’s precise gestures and placid demeanor; however, as the instructor is careful to point out, “don’t try to copy exactly what I am doing here, let your imagination go.” While “repetition-of-the-same” inculcates the requisite skills to create, Ross insists upon the imaginative force of “repetition-of-difference,” giving students license to invent on canvas their own “happy little world.” Finally, as teacher, pupil, model, and copy join in the choreographed dance of *imitatio*, “difference and repetition” spontaneously erupts to the surface, supplying inspiration even to those who never hold a paintbrush. In the middle of completing his work “Quiet Pond,” Ross is unexpectedly interrupted by memories of his mother: “These are the kind of paintings that my mother likes, so maybe I’ll just dedicate this one to my mommy [...] She’s my favorite lady in the whole world. So this is her painting” (Schenckm 1985). There is an innocence to Ross’s nostalgia, an infectious tenderness that manifests itself in audible “ahs” and subsequent promises of greater generosity. By studying *The Joy of Painting*, students witness the impactful synthesis of all three relations of *imitatio*, and learn that *imitatio* need not be confined to traditional public address to be rhetorical.

After students possess a satisfactory handle on the form and function of *imitatio*, it is time to transition to what Cicero (1970) determined to be the most consequential decision in the exercise—the selection of model. This decision was traditionally the responsibility of the instructor, who after assessing the particular strengths and weaknesses of the student, would carefully select a model suited to amplify their nascent talents and character (Fantham, 1978). *Imitatio* pedagogy tailored to individual students is impractical in most lecture settings, so I permit students to select their own models. The expansion of contemporary rhetorical theory beyond the traditional confines of public address affords students the freedom to select from a vast array of materials, including speeches, poetry, music, short stories, viral videos, photography, dance, among many others. Diversifying the range of *imitatio* allows students to appreciate the presence and power of rhetoric on their own terms, making the art relevant at the level of everyday life.

While students are provided the freedom to select their models, this affordance comes with a catch. Students are responsible for selecting artifacts *deserving* of *imitatio*, a somewhat fluid albeit essential requirement. It must be stressed that a high standard exists with *imitatio*, certainly not all artifacts carry technical and moral merits worthy of aspiration, and this expectation requires introspection and analysis on the part of students to produce a robust defense of their selection. Students are sometimes tempted to select deficient models, such as public gaffes or speeches immortalized online for embarrassing reasons, because they anticipate the comparative ease of making improvements to the original later on with “repetition-of-difference.” However, the ambition behind *imitatio* lies not in recuperating a poor example of

rhetoric, which may inadvertently lead to the assimilation of counterproductive habits, but in elevating an already esteemed and celebrated example of eloquence to greater heights. Judging rhetoric on the basis of “eloquence,” “effectiveness,” or “notoriety” is always already ideological, and for this reason, it is important that precepts for “deserving” models of *imitatio* do not drown-out subjugated voices or displace marginalized subjectivities. In rejecting the traditional association between *imitatio* and the discourse of the elite, Josh P. Ewalt, Jessy J. Ohl, and Damien S. Pfister (2016) advocate for a turn toward vernacular *imitatio*, a “‘bottom-up’ and polyvocal embodiment of live rhetorical activity” (p. 49). Vernacular *imitatio* democratizes the practice to the activities of everyday citizens as it maintains the rigorous stipulation that any model for *imitatio* must contain clear evidence of rhetorical ingenuity and ethical prowess.

With model in hand, students identify the internal and external dynamics of the exemplar for the purposes of maintaining fundamental features through “repetition-of-the-same.” Textual observations, including word choice, argumentative strategies, and organization, are added to contextual features such as authorial intent, public reception, and audiences. Taken together, this information directs students in the selection of essential features necessary to preserve the rhetorical integrity of the model (Corbett, 1951). For example, in an *imitatio* of Carl Sagan’s “Pale Blue Dot,” a student determined that the profound visual rhetoric of the Voyager 1 photograph needed to remain unchanged. Producing an entirely original text suggests that the model did not fulfill its role as exemplar; therefore, students must determine which indispensable aspects should be protected to maintain the artifact’s rhetoricity.

Changing the model for the purposes of improvement can occur through a variety of strategies, and typically requires experimentation on behalf of students to strike the appropriate balance between “repetition-of-the-same” and “repetition-of-difference.” A catalysis for “repetition-of-difference” is provided in the form of the ancient *quadripartia ratio*, four categories of qualitative change that can be applied to artifacts for rhetorical effect: addition, subtraction, transposition, and substitution (Lausberg, 1998; Pfister & Woods, 2016). As the name implies, with “addition” students can improve the existing model by inserting content, oftentimes by elaborating on latent themes, repeating key phrases, or inputting supplementary material. One of my favorite *imitatio* projects is of Jonathan Reed’s wonderful palindrome poem “Lost Generation” in which a student kept the poem intact, but produced an accompanying visual narrative capturing the physical and emotional movement of the poem’s multi-directionality. With subtraction, less is more. Prevailing digital sensibilities valuing efficiency and truncation make subtraction an attractive option for many younger students. Subtraction is also a method for modernizing a text or ameliorating problematic content, such as when students decide to excise derogatory references to women and racial groups. I once had an African American student conduct an *imitatio* of NWA’s song “Today Was A Good Day” for the purposes of motivating young black men, and as a result, he defended the strategic choice of removing the N-word. Transposing alters the structure and/or organization of the artifact. For instance, rearranging paragraphs can be used to build dramatic tensions. Finally, substituting content in the model can be a generative form of differentiation, especially when the switch cuts against

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prevailing expectations. I was particularly moved by the decision of a student in her *imitatio* of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream Speech" to periodically interchange "dream" with "nightmare" in order to puncture narratives of racial progress circulating after the police shooting of Eric Garner.

"Repetition-of-difference" frees students from slavish devotion to the past by permitting revision through the imagination of different audiences and connection to contemporary controversies in order for students to invent "discourse fitted to [their] purposes, abilities, and audience" (Terrill, 2011, p. 303). Under the best circumstances, *imitatio* should be "equipment for living" (Burke, 1973) that is relevant to the professional and personal aspirations of students. I am reminded of an *imitatio* involving a subversive reworking of the Book of Genesis. After encountering the anti-LGBTQ slogan "God Made Adam and Eve, Not Adam and Steve," a student authored an alternative creation narrative in which God actually did make Adam and Steve. The resulting myth was a hilarious and uplifting story that attempted to neutralize social prejudices by arguing that regardless of sexual orientation, acceptance is the most reasonable option given the humbling fact that everyone is apparently just "rib meat."

The final relation of *imitatio*, "difference and repetition," can bring confusion and anxiety, especially if students believe their grade depends on being inspired and inspirational. No roadmap exists to summon inspiration at will, but I can attest after observing hundreds of *imitatios* that this activity profoundly impacted myself and many students. Model selection is a contributing factor to "difference and repetition" because texts that resonate with students awaken hidden talents, arouse emotional commitment, and invite rigorous study that is sometimes rewarded with inspiration. If students are unable to dwell within the model and open themselves up to its influence, inspiration remains elusive. Memorization assists in triggering inspiration by bringing students in closer proximity to the model. When we take memorization seriously as a type of "learning by heart," Terrill (2011, p. 306) argues that the discourse "does not simply reside within the student as an inert or benign parasite, but instead actually exerts a transformative impact, altering the discourse produced by the student, much as the DNA of some viruses intermingles with their hosts." We each carry with us discursive fragments (aphorisms, song lyrics, movie quotations, etc.) that provide relief and guidance in turbulent times. In his Pulitzer Prize winning memoir, Hisham Matar (2016) recounts that his father, a political prisoner who recited poetry from memory in his Libyan jail cell to sooth fellow dissidents of the Gadhafi regime, taught him that "knowing a book by heart is like carrying a house inside your chest." I ask that students memorize and recite portions of their *imitatio* in the hopes of erecting similar structures providing sanctuary.

For this assignment, *imitatio* is not completed until students compose a detailed account of the process and deliver a public performance. Rhetorical self-consciousness is an indispensable component of *imitatio* because, instead of acting randomly, students acquire the rhetorical capacity to make strategic decisions. As Plato (1998) instructs in the *Gorgias*, the art of rhetoric must be able to account for itself, offering a systematic explanation for its practices,

achievements, and limitations. Likewise, in a relatively short essay, I require students justify their model selection, identify which material was repeated and changed, and defend these important choices. Producing robust reasons for deciding what to keep and what to change is beneficial even in situations where the *imitatio* falls short of the original. Rhetoric is by nature wild, and even the most carefully laid plans do not always come to fruition. “Perfect” models will remain elusive, but it is within our agency to make theoretically informed decisions, and reflect on the symbolic and material consequences of our choices in preparation for future rhetorical situations.

Orality remains a foundation of communication proficiency and civic action, and although many past educators did not make oral performance an indivisible part of *imitatio* pedagogy, encouraging students to present their process and perform selections of their *imitatio* is highly recommend for two reasons. First, delivering a short presentation/performance renews commitment to the voice as a materiality of the discipline (See Gunn, 2007). At the same time that rhetoric and communication have gained by expanding beyond the classical confines of public speaking, Hauser (2004) contends “[w]e must reassert the importance of capacitating students by focusing on their powers of performance (*dunamis*) rather than focusing exclusively on their service to discovering knowledge” (p. 41). Second, performance attracts “difference and repetition” because students physically embody the model. Reading *imitatio* essays is certainly edifying, but nothing is more moving than seeing and hearing students perform their creations.

Before concluding this essay by discussing several specific affordances of *imitatio* pedagogy in the digital age, I wish to close this section by presenting with permission a laudable example of *imitatio* amenable to this format that symbolizes the exercise. For his *imitatio*, Ryan Hastings, a non-traditional student and Army veteran, selected Dylan Thomas’s villanelle poem “Do not go gentle into that good night.” Ryan recounts in his essay a kinship with the poem dating back to intermediate school that matured into adulthood: “I loved its meter and rhythm and the visions that it invoked in my young mind. However, it was not until later when I grasped its true message, and I embraced it to make it a part of me.” Of its multiple interpretations, Thomas’s poem is viewed by many as an adult son’s plea to his dying father to face the inevitability of death with bravery and defiance, a message that resonated with Ryan given his experience of performing at multiple funeral services as an Army bugler. Ryan strived to remain faithful to the original meter, rhyme and tempo, yet whereas Thomas’s poem is concerned with how we exit life, Ryan’s *imitatio* centers on a father’s request that his children, in Ryan’s words, “live a life worth living.”

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Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on that sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.

Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas

Do not sit idle on this good day,
Your chores await, as they will not do themselves;
Rage, rage against the urge to do nothing.

Your rooms must be cleaned and your clothes put
away,
And, please for the love of God, someone change the
cat's litter box
Do not sit idle on this good day.

Good children, that sit before me, crying "not now!"
I say, these meager tasks that you shun, do give light
to what you possibly might become
Rage, rage against the urge to do nothing.

Shiftless children, whose apathy for all deeds as you
walk through life,
Do learn, often too late, to be contented is not the
way
Do not sit idle on this good day.

Grave parents, near wits end, who sees the mess all
around
Blind eyes do blaze with fire at the idleness before
them
Rage, rage against the urge to do nothing.

And here, your father, standing on this sad thought,
Curse, swear at me now with your fierce tears, I
beseech.
But do not sit idle on this good day.
Rage, rage against the urge to do nothing.

Ryan Hastings

In comparison to Thomas's rebuke of fear and cowardice at the end of life, Ryan's *imitatio* confronts the role of complacency in robbing everyday life of its potential. With regard to the relationship between model and copy, Ryan humbly defers to the brilliance of the original but contends that Thomas's work motivated him to craft his own unique message. For Ryan, *imitatio* agitated a response to a disconcerting scene in the form of a text equipped to solidify a parental lesson to his young audience that menial tasks can be dignifying, and that each day is an opportunity to grow that should not be squandered. "In this capacity," Ryan writes channeling Isocrates, "life itself becomes an *imitatio*, as we must all set an example for our children to emulate, where they can hopefully grow, to live rich, full, and happy lives."

***Imitatio* and the Digital Mood**

Once a staple of rhetorical pedagogy, *imitatio* has undoubtedly fallen on hard times, a decline attributed to the emergence of romanticism, which valued creativity, originality, and

authenticity over the creation of copies (Duhamel, 1973). Sullivan (1989) persuasively argues that *imitatio* as it was classically understood was simply at odds with the “modern temper” (p. 15) defined as a cultural belief in progress, individual genius, and scientific approaches to communication. My objective with this essay has been to bolster disciplinary commitment to civic education by outlining the history of *imitatio* pedagogy and offering a method for its application in the classroom. I conclude this essay by returning to the matter of social temperament, because I believe that the forces alienating *imitatio* from the modern temper rearticulate the practice to our increasingly “digital temper.” My position is not that *imitatio* is exclusively relevant to discourse on digital platforms, but rather that *imitatio* inculcates attitudes and practices aligned with many ambient conditions of digitality that structure everyday rhetorical operations (Boyle, Brown Jr, & Ceraso, 2018). In what follows, I turn to the potential of *imitatio* to develop three sensibilities of particular relevance for civic education in the digital age.

First, in contrast to the modern presumption that invention is an isolated process marked by originality, *imitatio* is ideally suited for the digital approach to invention as intertextual and collaborative remix. Scott H. Church (2017) defines remix as “the process of creating a new work by taking existing content from various places and combing it” (p. 161), a method that has greatly accelerated in usage and sophistication thanks to advances in digital technologies and the proliferation of retrievable content. Despite the recent cache of remix as a mode of cultural appropriation and political resistance (Dubisar & Palmeri, 2010), *imitatio* suggests that remix is in fact ancient in origins. Indeed, perhaps no better metaphor for remix exists than that which is given by Seneca (1925) in his description of *imitatio* as analogous to the activity of a bee “darting from one source to another, ingesting, digesting, recasting influences in novel and individual configurations” (84.5). In Quintilian’s (2001) *imitatio* pedagogy, students would draw from multiple models “so that one thing stays in our minds from one of them, and another from another, and we can use each in the appropriate place.” Likewise, Terrill (2011) states that in dividing the attention of students between the exemplar and their own rhetorical production, *imitatio* encourages students to “appreciate the inherent intertextuality of rhetorical texts, and to engage in a transformative discourse of duality” (p. 297). To the extent that civic participation involves the creation and circulation of influential discourse, *imitatio* teaches students to draw from multiple rhetorical registers to gain and maintain the attention of contemporary audiences. *Imitatio* as remix also brings to the forefront a number of pertinent questions for digital invention concerning the line between ethical appropriation and plagiarism. I once worked with a student inspired to do an *imitatio* of Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” in which the iconic rap anthem was refashioned into a slam poem commenting on the Black Lives Matter Movement that she supported. As a white woman, the student was especially sensitive to the ethical implications of such a project, but rather than asking “can I do this,” a more nuanced and difficult set of questions arose, such as “how might I do this *imitatio* in a way that honors the original” and “how can reimagining ‘Fight the Power’ unite people across racial differences in the fight against injustice.” Her strategy was to play recordings of the chorus “Fight the Power,” emphasize

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contemporary issues of racial inequality mentioned at local protests, and lambast white apathy and hypocrisy that she witnessed. *Imitatio* challenges the integrity of the “original” model while simultaneously paying homage to noteworthy rhetorical antecedents. Ethical *imitatio* must strike a careful balance between repetition and difference resulting in a novel iteration that does not compromise morality by neglecting to acknowledge the existence and influence of preceding models, or by drawing from the exemplar in ways that are antithetical to its core purpose.

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Second, *imitatio* substitutes romantic notions of identity as inherently unified and unitary with a view of identity as an amalgamation of multiple perspectives that come into focus through play, experimentation, and practice. Whereas romanticism sought the discovery of one’s “true self,” *imitatio* pedagogy anticipates the post-modern position that identity is constantly negotiated and discursively produced. The assumption that identity is always already fragmented places the onus on the selection of pieces and their creative assemblage, which is precisely the function of *imitatio* in guiding students to “keep trying on the language, again and again, listening, until some parts of it begin to fit your tongue” (Madison, 1999, p. 109). In taking on the style of the exemplar, if only momentarily, students “play with roles, with ways of thinking, and, thus, with ways of being” (Lanham, 1974, p. 124). *Imitatio*’s approach to identity formation is critical in the digital age because it takes full advantage of digital platforms, which Sherry Turkle (1995) describe as “laboratories for experimenting with one’s identity” (p. 12). It is certainly correct that digital technologies exacerbate cultural anxieties surrounding deception and authenticity; however, as most twenty-first-century students realize, the strict division between real/fake, offline/online, is archaic and restrictive in the digital age. It follows that in crafting and refining multiple identities over time, “nimble rhetors” (Rood, 2016, p. 140) are empowered through *imitatio* to select the approach most appropriate for the foreseen and unforeseen situations they encounter.

Finally, in addition to advancing several prevailing aspects of the “digital mood,” *imitatio* provides a needed corrective for behaviors threatening democracy in the digital age, especially at the level of analysis and critique. The long-established investment of rhetorical pedagogy in argumentation and forensics is based on the conviction that civil society and democratic institutions are best equipped to address social challenges when the subtleties, ambiguities, and of implications of public controversies are taken seriously (Eberly, 2002; McGeough & Rudick, 2018; Rief, 2018; Rood 2014). Unfortunately, many digital platforms eschew nuanced discussion and provoke political polarization by enabling users to easily falsify information (Cook et al., 2014), filter content for confirmation of previously held opinions (Lewandowsky et al., 2012), and misrepresent divergent positions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). This is not to say that edifying conversations don’t take place online, but that many digital infrastructures as currently configured privilege knee-jerk reactions and hyperbole over painstaking research, introspection, and listening. When perusing through social media feeds, it appears digital culture is marked by an ever accelerating oscillation between hype and backlash. Be it a film, meme, or social campaign, whatever ascends to the status of “mattering” online is quickly debased as hopelessly naïve, endlessly hypocritical, and ideologically predatory. The result of this “all-or-nothing”

ricochet is myopia that drastically collapses the range of possible responses by underestimating the complexity of human relations. Through the exercise of identifying which material should be repeated, and concomitantly which material should be changed, *imitatio* instructs students to resist immediate, univocal conclusions, and instead conduct analysis and criticism reflecting that communication is composed of enabling and constraining features. Democracy is underserved by an impoverished view of analysis and criticism as completely affirmative or negative. What is needed now more than ever is a broader notion of analysis and criticism as “taking thought as to what is better and worse in any field at any time, with some conscious awareness of *why* the better is better and *why* the worse is worse” (Dewey, 1930, p. 12). Unlike weaponized calls for political civility, such a perspective reinforces opposition to social injustice by generating more savvy and justifiable forms of outrage (Desilet & Appel, 2011).

Reinvigorating *imitatio* pedagogy addresses two interconnected phenomenon, a purported decline in democratic survivability, and a move in rhetoric and communication away from the mission of developing citizens. Stitching theory and teaching together is in the best interest of the field, and the public at large, given the potential of rhetoric and communication to explain, and potentially improve, societal conditions. Scholars and teachers of rhetoric and communication alike have long perceived themselves as responsible for securing democratic well-being. By reviewing three relations of *imitatio*, outlining a specific classroom assignment, and unpacking the relevance of the practice in the digital age, I hope this essay contributes to the renewal of that commitment. The discipline’s role in civic education has long served as a defining characteristic, but it might now serve a larger more fundamental function with stakes that couldn’t be higher for our democracy.

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Notes

- [1] The historical narrative tying rhetoric and communication to citizenship is not without detractors. Chávez (2015) argues that basing rhetorical studies on citizenship serves the interests of the nation-state and excludes research and subjectivities that operate outside of non-Western perspectives. I concur with Chávez that citizenship has been deployed conceptually to force consent and homogeneity; however, when citizenship is conceptualized as a verb, as a way of being and doing in relation to others, rather than a judicial/bureaucratic status bequeathed for the purposes of control, then citizenship need not serve the interests of

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the sovereign, and may in fact contribute to the formation of global, democratic subjectivities resistant to the forces of empire (See Hardt & Negri, 2005).

[2] Concerns regarding authenticity and originality in nineteenth-century America embroiled *imitatio* in racial controversy that continues to this day. Wilson (2003) argues that especially following the Emancipation Proclamation, the embrace of *imitatio* by some African American intellectuals as a strategy to threaten the dominant signs of white power had the reverse effect, solidifying racial inequality by framing African Americans as primitive imitators. Drawing from the work of Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha, and Giles Deleuze, Wilson maintains that imitation is a careful balancing act, and a tool for the disenfranchised that “does not require that one abandon blackness for whiteness” (p.105). I agree with Munsell (2006) that *imitatio* is a project in critical thinking, and not a method for teaching “White students how to co-opt African American discourse, nor Black students how to be more African American” (p. 31). While educators must be on guard so as to not encourage *imitatio* from resulting in the next Rachel Dolezal, *imitatio* allows students to see beyond their particular subject position and invites ethical conversations regarding representation and the problem of speaking for others (Alcoff, 1991-1992).



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