# "CONNECTED" WRITING INSTRUCTION: ADAPTING QUINTILIAN'S PEDAGOGY TO THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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"In grave Quintilian's copious work, we find the justest rules, and clearest method joined."

Alexander Pope, An Essay on Criticism

The "copious work" which Pope alludes to is the Institutio oratoria, the most comprehensive resource from antiquity for teaching students the literacy skills necessary to be effective citizens. Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, better known as Quintilian, wrote this twelve-volume rhetoric text at the end of his twentyyear career as a teacher, drawing on his rich experience in the The first educator to establish a public school in Western civilization and the first to become a principal paid annually from the state treasury, Quintilian received an extraordinary amount of money for instructing his students how to read, write, speak, and listen—the approximate equivalent of a quarter-million dollars today (Quintilian xi-xii). This fact proves to be amazing, considering that Quintilian assumed his post during the reign of the Emperor Vespasian, who, unlike his predecessors, was despised for his tight-fisted fiscal policies (Lissner 159-160). How did this Roman teacher of writing and other language skills attain such a high level of educational responsibility and professional success? Those of us who teach writing todaynearly twenty centuries after Quintilian—may particularly benefit from considering this question. Let me suggest that the answer, in large part, lies in his humane goals and effective pedagogy, which his "connected" writing instruction exemplifies.

As a college composition teacher, I have been putting Quintilian's ideas into practice for years at the small liberal arts institution where I work. "Connected" writing instruction, as adapted from Quintilian's pedagogical theory in the *Institutio oratoria*, not only links one language art to another for the enhancement of them all; it also promotes interpersonal ties among language users and stimulates personal development. Such instruction warrants new consideration and application at all educational levels. His approach is especially relevant, I think, to post-secondary teachers of writing who are committed to the belief that working with words shapes personal identity—a strong tenet of liberal education.

What follows is a select consideration of Quintilian's pedagogic convictions regarding language skills. In addition, I offer a brief description of how I conduct my introductory composition course, inspired by the ancient language arts teacher and his challenge to see the various aspects of what I do and what my students do as vitally interrelated.

## Ability, Knowledge and Practice for the Attainment of *Facilitas*

For Quintilian, writing does not simply function as a useful skill to be used across the disciplines; it serves a greater purpose. In the spirit of Cicero, Quintilian advocates a comprehensive education that encourages *person formation*, a kind of transformative learning that prepares students to participate fully in society as ethics-grounded, civic-minded people who know how to use words well for all sorts of purposes and occasions. "It is the pen," declares Quintilian, "which brings at once the most labor and the most profit" (X.3.1). Undoubtedly, rigorous work in writing represents a major component of Quintilian's

curriculum. As James J. Murphy notes, in the ancient schools rhetorical success was the primary aim: "Quintilian's term for this is Facility (*facilitas*), or the capacity to produce appropriate and effective language in any situation. This result was to be achieved by a carefully coordinated program of reading, writing, speaking and listening" ("Roman" 19). Quintilian's students knew that learning to write well was one of four language skills necessary to achieve a greater goal: literacy, for a qualitatively rich life.

But can students really be taught to use words well, especially in writing?"2 To this age-old and controversial question, Quintilian answers "Yes!" with his educational tome. Still, at the outset of the Institutio oratoria he carefully makes the following qualification regarding student talent and gifts: "They are of no profit in themselves unless cultivated by skillful teaching, persistent study and continuous and extensive practice in writing, reading and speaking" (I.Pr.27). Without question, Quintilian believes that most students, to a greater or lesser degree, can attain facilitas through his educational program.3 Yet, theoretical knowledge and textbook precepts cannot compensate for a lack of ability or the required effort to exercise that ability.<sup>4</sup> The degree to which nature has granted a student the capacity to excel, along with the degree to which a student receives a solid systematic training in theoretical knowledge and an opportunity to regularly apply that knowledge through classroom practice, will determine the extent to which the student will be able to fulfill Quintilian's aim of facilitas.

### **Quintilian's Understanding of Three, Interrelated Student Capacities**

Crucial for the teacher's consideration is each student's capacity to learn; for Quintilian, it remains primary in the pedagogic equation. The *Institutio* clearly suggests a "psychology," according to Kingsley Price, in which "Every human being harbors three kinds of capacity: that for impulsive behavior, that for passive cognition, and that for reasoning" (84).

These capacities, explains Price, correspond with three stages of character development (85). During the earliest stage, which lasts for several years after birth, the capacity for impulsive behavior is exhibited: "Quintilian's work suggests that, initially, the human being is a reservoir of energy capable of being channeled in any direction whatever" (Price 84-85). During the second stage, which begins sometime before age seven:

The activation of the power of passive cognition determines the direction that impulsive energy assumes. Through the senses, various objects and actions are brought into awareness. They are retained there by memory, repeated in imitation, and mixed and elaborated by imagination. (Price 85)

Price makes it clear that impulse is not abandoned at this stage; it still functions to direct the student in the process of valuing certain observed actions and objects versus others, and reproducing them via imitation, which may afford genuine learning (86). During the final stage, the critical capacity to reason operates as a guide for the other two capacities:

Reason is the power to discover what is true and good, and its office is actively to govern the desires that result from a cooperation between the passive power and the impulsive energy of human nature. The result is a character or personality, i.e., a certain pattern of impulses, enduring through life. (Price 85)

By Quintilian's design, instruction at each stage of a student's development should enlarge and enhance the corresponding capacity or capacities, especially as the teaching involves the practices of writing, reading, speaking and listening. Through the combined exercise of these linked language skills, students gain facilitas. "Linguistic ability (facilitas is Quintilian's term) is a single, unitary human capacity," emphasizes Murphy, "regardless

of whether it is employed in reading or speaking or hearing or writing. Like a muscle, linguistic ability can be strengthened by purposefully stretching it into new uses" ("Rhetorical" 6).

# The Connected Language Skills of Receptivity and Creativity

Given Quintilian's commitment to facilitas, he does not present the teaching of writing apart from the teaching of reading and speaking, at the early childhood level or any other developmental stage. In the beginning of Book X, the most detailed section on writing theory and pedagogy, Quintilian ponders which practice contributes most to facilitas—writing, reading, or speaking. "They are so intimately and inseparably connected," he concludes, "that if one of them be neglected, we shall but waste the labor which we have devoted to the others. For eloquence will never attain to its full development or robust health, unless it acquires strength by frequent practice in writing" (X.1.2). All three language skills are, as Quintilian theorizes, "connected." Therefore, they should be taught in a coordinated manner, operating with and reinforcing each other. The exercise of one strengthens the student's competence with the others. For that matter, as Frederick Mayer affirms, "Quintilian held that all parts of knowledge were interrelated" (88). His belief that the branches of knowledge are interdependent represents one of several reasons why Quintilian has been lauded as a chief proponent of liberal arts education, which historically has emphasized the importance of teachers and students recognizing, understanding, and appreciating trans-disciplinary learning links.

Listening, a classroom skill often ignored, also factors into Quintilian's educational equation toward the development of a literate child. Affording the attentive student insight into effective expressions of speech, listening demands the careful exercise of a crucial sense—hearing. What is noted through auditory scrutiny can be conceptualized, retained in the memory, and replicated later. Quintilian explains that this is how the art of rhetoric

emerged: "The power of speech is the first essential, since therein lies the primary task of the orator, and it is obvious that it was with this that the art of oratory began" (X.1.3). Quintilian goes on to suggest that individuals—early rhetoricians—paid careful attention to the acts of speech for which they were the audience. These founders of rhetoric, who were essentially students of language, engaged in attentive listening, imitated the best of what they heard, and wrote down their speeches and precepts for others to read. They were the first to connect the four language skills and articulate an approach to composition. They knew that facility with speech largely depends upon the combined skills of listening and imitating, just as facility with writing depends upon the combined skills of reading and imitating.

Building upon Quintilian's observations, let me suggest that listening, in some respects like reading, is a language skill of receptivity; it involves the process of decoding information and intentions. In contrast to this, I deem speaking and writing to be language skills of creativity, involving the process of encoding information and intentions. These categorical distinctions must be qualified, of course, for listening and reading do involve generative aspects: as we listen and read we create interpretations of meaning. And similarly, as we speak and write, we draw upon received patterns of meaning, stored in our memory, and we replicate and reconfigure these patterns as we work to communicate.

Given the interplay between language skills of receptivity and creativity, students who actively pay attention to effective word use during times of listening or reading promote the future use of such words in their own speech or writing. Quintilian confirms this truth:

Discrimination is necessary in the acquisition of our stock of words. . . and we shall attain our aim by reading and listening to the best writers and orators, since we shall thus learn not merely the words by which things are to be called, but when each particular word is most appropriate. (X.1.8)

Clearly, then, the language skills of receptivity and creativity are best understood, practiced, and developed in association with each other. This proves to be a crucial composing conviction from Quintilian, one that can greatly enhance writing instruction, first, by providing teachers with an integrated pedagogic approach, and second, by offering students a coherent orientation that informs their practice.

## **Making Connections in the College Composition Classroom**

Enthused by Quintilian's ideas on language, learning, and personal development, I have adapted his notion of connected writing instruction to fit the context of my own college composition course. Although not a purist in my application, I have aspired to maintain a consistent instructional approach, providing my students with a clear rationale for their labor in writing. Usually invoking Quintilian's name, I regularly emphasize the logic of making connections. What follows are three ways in which I intentionally promote "connected" writing instruction in my classroom.

#### The Teacher Connecting With the Students

Quintilian asserts that the good instructor is one who is skilled in teaching, who possesses a kind demeanor, and whose teaching is not merely a duty but the result of affection for the subject and the students (Book I). It makes sense, therefore, that a writing teacher who cultivates these attributes will strive to understand her students—just as a good rhetorician knows her audience—in an attempt to connect with them at a meaningful level.

What sorts of preconceived ideas do students bring with them when they enter a writing course? Based upon student journal responses to a prompt on the first day of class—"What are your honest concerns about taking this course in English?"—I have discovered that many students fear writing due to negative

experiences from the past: the fear of not knowing what the teacher expects; the fear of not knowing what to write about; the fear of being graded, fairly or unfairly; and the most common of all, the fear of grammar and punctuation rules. A surprising number of students believe that the key to becoming an effective writer is a knowledge of "the rules." Consequently, inspired by Quintilian, I focus on a fundamental task: to encourage my students in their *capacity to reason* as they face their fears concerning writing, challenging them to let go of counterproductive notions of writing and to embrace a holistic perspective and approach to composing.

What do I try to persuade my students to accept as a worthy purpose for a writing course? The answer resonates with the Institutio oratoria: the development of one's self via words person formation.<sup>5</sup> Students need a larger vision for a writing course than rules and correctness, a vision that connects students to words, right where they find themselves, within their bodies and within the world in which they live. Matters of the heart and mind and pressing ethical issues concerning local and global life are the issues for students to encounter, to evaluate, to debate, and to write about.6 Knowing who they are, individually and in relation to other people and things is the focus of this academic course. Although they may think they know themselves already, I respectfully remind them that there remains parts of themselves and their cultures that they probably do not fully understand. The process of exploration, discovery, and demonstration is the very process of writing; thus, writing functions as a skill to develop oneself. Like Quintilian, I teach writing with a clear rhetorical purpose.

To get students to embrace this notion of a writing course I try to encourage them to take risks at channeling their *impulsive* energy into writing. I tell them: "Your primary task as a writing student is to connect your words with your passions—those things that evoke positive and negative responses within you." An approach to writing based upon students' passions may sound like something akin to the "expressionist" philosophy of composition,

which, as Richard Fulkerson describes, developed in the sixties and seventies and includes "totally accepting and non-directive teachers, some of whom insist that one neither can nor should evaluate writing" (4-5). However, my pedagogy is not synonymous with expressionism. Connected writing instruction, as inspired by Quintilian, encourages personal exploration, but does not end there; it also promotes citizenship—a genuine participation with people and perspectives different from those that are familiar, as will be shown.

A central theoretical point is this: When we choose to write about something for which we possess passion, we will devote time to it because we care about it; and when we devote time to it, we will work hard at it; and when we work hard at it, our capability in writing and other language arts—facilitas—will increase. Students who know that their passions—not just their ideas—matter feel validated when they realize the relationship between what they write and how they think and feel about what they write. Most students remember tortuous moments spent at a computer keyboard the night before a paper was due, when they hoped they would never have to consider the chosen topic again. "What you lack passion for," I tell them, "becomes tedious and frustrating, but if you care about something, more often than not, you will want to see it through because it reflects a part of who you are; it represents an aspect of your self."

This notion of placing the self at the center of the writing course has a less than perfect track record, according to Lester Faigley in his article "Judging Writing, Judging Selves." He notes that "If we look at the history of writing instruction in America, we find that writing teachers have been as much or more interested in who they want their students to be as in what they want their students to write" (396). Faigley reveals that students have not always benefited from the emphasis upon self; and he suggests that teachers have tended to exhibit evaluative biases in favor of student writing that chimes with their own cultural resonance of self (410). Nonetheless, Faigley concludes that a writing course with an emphasis on the self can be good,

particularly when writing teachers teach "students to analyze cultural definitions of the self, to understand how historically these definitions are created in discourse, and to recognize how definitions of self are involved in the configuration of relations of power" (411). These sorts of activities seem especially appropriate when writing teachers also intend for their students to make connections with various aspects of themselves.

#### The Students Connecting With Themselves

To help students access and express their own passionate ideas, I provide them with a daily regimen of *facilitas* activities, as Quintilian did, though different from his.<sup>7</sup> These activities exercise and promote their competence in writing and other language skills.

At the beginning of each class, my students become accustomed to the "Tidbit of Lit," a selected reading that offers them a model of passionate writing. As Quintilian asserts, "We must familiarize ourselves with the best writers" (X.1.59), and the tidbits of lit are chosen with this in mind. They come from a number of sources: a newspaper editorial, a lyric poem, a classic essay, a short story, a magazine article, a speech, an excerpt from a novel. Whatever proves to be pertinent to what we are addressing for that day—such as description, narration, or argument—gets read out loud. But the bottom line is this: the piece must be provocative in content or form—ideally both.

After several initial runs, when I test my students' comprehension immediately after a reading, I challenge them to recognize a difference between hearing and listening: hearing involves sensory reception of sounds, whereas listening involves thoughtful attention to the sounds and their meaning. Often, before I read a piece, I suggest, "Pay attention to the author's conclusion" or "Notice the ironic tone." These sorts of directives give the students mental tools for analyzing the model reading.

Once the piece has been read, students write a response according to four guidelines. First, how does this piece connect with your passions? In other words, does it move you, either positively or negatively, and why? Describe that connection, responding to it with equal passion. Second, do you notice anything about the reading sample that you might want to emulate in your own writing? If so, state what it is and then imitate that sort of writing. Third, analyze whether the tidbit is effective or not, explaining how the writing works or doesn't work. And fourth, let some part of the tidbit prompt you to bounce onto a tangent, freeing you to move in a direction that matters to you. As a final challenge, I ask students not to gravitate toward the same option two days in a row, which stimulates variety in their content and style.

Typically after several minutes of response writing, I abruptly say "STOP," at which time the students must quit writing, even if they are mid-stream in a sentence. Often, they become frustrated and verbally express their irritation. Some even disobey and keep writing, which pleases me, though I try not to show it. "My aim is to frustrate you intentionally by stopping you in the middle of a sentence," I tell them. "Maybe then a voice inside you will say, 'I can't stop now . . . I've got to finish my response . . . I've got to get my words down!" If this occurs, the tidbit of lit—actually a sample of another person's passionate writing—has prompted their passions to the degree that they feel invested. Students want to connect their words with the words of the writer whose work was just read out loud.

Listening to the tidbit of lit and writing a quick, passionate response produces what Lucille Parkinson McCarthy and Stephen M. Fishman refer to as "boundary conversations." The authors clarify the meaning of the term:

In boundary conversations we envision ourselves and our students encountering unfamiliar languages or opposing approaches to the world. These engage our attention and, at first, invite our scrutiny from across the border. We may, however, at some point, decide to step gradually into the unfamiliar neighborhood, at first listening closely, then perhaps deciding to try some phrases of the new language,

first mimicking them, then examining them critically. As we open ourselves more fully to the strange neighborhood, holding longer conversations and trying out new roles, we learn more about how people in this neighborhood think. But it is not in abandoning our old ways of knowing and points of view that learning occurs. Rather it is in preserving and contrasting our various discourses, moving back and forth among them, clarifying and repositioning them, that we create conflict and force reconstruction of ourselves. (421-22)

This passage vividly portrays an experience that, sadly, does not occur enough in the composition classroom. Yet, this is precisely what transpires when a lively sample of writing is read orally each day—students are confronted by alien voices, and in the process of hearing and interpreting these voices, the students hear their own voices with greater clarity and force. Students connect with their own thoughts and passions, adapting voices which they may be borrowing and attempting to own at the same time. In a Bakhtinian way, 8 they discover who they are as they discover who they are not, as well as who they might become.

## The Students Connecting With Each Other

"Boundary conversations" do not end when the pen is laid to rest on the notebook page. As soon as students have finished writing their responses, a few students read what they wrote in class, and then other students respond orally. By calling on students to read their responses out loud, I promote several self-affirming truths: 1) that people will listen carefully to what writers think and feel in words; 2) that the words writers write may, in fact, become more meaningful and powerful to them as they voice them out loud; 3) that the writers' responses, provoked by a passionate voice in the tidbit, may also provoke other voices in the classroom to respond with equally intense, though dissimilar, passions. Additionally, students' reading their responses and then other students responding, avoid an all-too-

common and deplorable pedagogical sequence, what I call I-R-E: the teacher *initiates* a question, the student *replies* to it, and then teacher *evaluates* the response, moving on to repeat the same sequence. Instead of slavish teacher-dependence, student-interdependence in learning is fostered, which Quintilian wholeheartedly supports (Book I, Chapter 2). And with this mode of classroom interaction, students speak directly to each other about their words and their convictions, enacting democratic discourse.

To illustrate, I typically might say, "Jill, what do you think about Nat's response? Talk with him about it . . . have a serious discussion." Although at first it takes some time for students to feel comfortable engaging each other, eventually, with some coaching, they learn to ask each other questions. Sometimes they affirm each other's perspective; at other times they differ in their stance. Always, as established by the initial ground rules and my occasional intervention, mutual respect and professional courtesy are maintained. And often, in the course of dialog or debate, writers discover that their own words misrepresent what they actually intend to convey; reading their own work sharpens their sense of intention and audience. Students indulge themselves in invigorating, sometimes discussion. messy, In inexperienced writers take their words more themselves more seriously, and their passions more seriously. They become more seasoned, and their facilitas naturally grows.

The educational benefits of students interacting with each other about their writing in this manner are many. Students learn a basic skill they rarely get to practice in college: reading out loud. By reading their own writing in class, they hear their voices falter and pause at points where written syntax breaks down; in other words, it enhances their sense of intuitive grammar, as well as their critical judgment in connection with revision and editing. What's more, student writers develop a real sense of something that often remains an imaginary construct—an actual, living, responding listener/reader. Not having to depend solely upon the silent marginal comments of their teacher, scrawled on a

paper that often gets read weeks after it is written, students gain the immediate and regular presence of a group of eager and attentive peers—a true audience. By reading their responses to such an audience, writers become more conscious of the language they use as they try to engage their peers, not simply their professor. This enlivens the act of writing. The work of writing moves out of the realm of being merely "academic," in the pejorative sense, and into the realm of being personal and formative.

## Some Final Thoughts On "Connected" Writing Instruction

"Connected" writing instruction links composition teachers with a historical/rhetorical basis for what they do in the classroom. This context directs both theory and practice. Susan Miller reminds us in "Classical Practice and Contemporary Basics," "Without a historical and conceptual basis for teaching, it is difficult to be confident that what is being taught just now is appropriate or necessary to learn before moving on" (56). Furthermore, by orienting students toward a passionate and personal purpose, by reading model texts and having students listen and respond to them regularly, and by encouraging students to thoughtfully interact with each other about their own texts, writing teachers follow the path (if not the exact steps) of an ancient master-teacher of facilitas and person formation: Quintilian. Students learn how to listen intently, write steadily, read editorially, and speak confidently, in the process of exercising all of these language skills in unison, they discover more about themselves and others.

#### **END NOTES**

- 1 All quotations from Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* represent H. E. Butler's English translation.
- 2 Donald Lemen Clark explains that among the ancients, "No one denied that nurture of some sort was needed to make the most of nature's gifts. But educational philosophers and critics did debate whether nature or nurture contributed more to success, and they did debate whether the traditional system of the schools afforded the best training for making the most of natural aptitudes" (3).
- 3 James J. Murphy notes, "Quintilian declares Habit (hexis) to be the ultimate goal of the program. What he means is something a bit different from the modern idea of habit as something fixed and somewhat out of our control; his 'habit' means a deep-rooted capacity (his word is *facilitas*) to employ language wherever needed, on whatever subject, in whatever circumstances." ("Roman" 68).
- 4 It is important to point out here that Quintilian does not ignore or denounce language rules; he sees them as vital, though secondary, in the creation of an effective speaker, reader and writer. "The best of rules, therefore, are to be laid down; and if any one shall refuse to observe them, the fault will lie, not in the method, but in the man" (I.1.11).
- 5 Quintilian uses the word "form" in I.PR.9 to describe the method of his educational process.
- 6 In "Roman Writing Instruction as Described by Quintilian," James J. Murphy lists the sorts of writing exercises that Quintilian would have taught, many of which require ethical deliberation.
- 7 In Book II of the *Institutio oratoria*, Quintilian describes several of the daily writing and speaking exercises he required his students to complete, which combined to form the *progymnasmata*.
- 8 Thomas E. Recchio, citing a passage from "Discourse in the Novel," appropriates the theoretical ideas of M. M. Bakhtin in the analysis of a student's composing process: "Following Bakhtin's lead, we can equate voice with discourse and discourse with ideology, an implicitly systematic orientation towards the world which can be recognized synecdochically in particular discursive moments. In order to manage those voices, the student must recognize them; she must engage in a 'kind of subjective struggle with internally persuasive, alien discourse[s]' and liberate herself from those discourses by turning them into objects " (450).

9 Linda Flower writes that "Good writers know how to transform writer-based prose (which works well for them) into reader-based prose (which works for their readers as well). Writing is inevitably a somewhat egocentric enterprise. We naturally tend to talk to ourselves when composing. As a result, we often need self-conscious strategies for trying to talk to our reader" (224). Reading out loud to a listener/reader is one strategy that enhances "reader-based" prose.

10 Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford acknowledge that the question of audience remains controversial, and they identify two common understandings of the concept in composition theory and pedagogy: "audience addressed," "the concrete reality of the writer's audience" (244); and "audience invoked," "a construction of the writer, a "created fiction" (248). As helpful as this distinction is, the inexperienced writer, as Linda Flower observes, tends to be "writer-based." Therefore, I assert that the physical presence of attentive listeners/readers before a "writer-based" writer, who is reading out loud, promotes a healthy shift of perspective that encourages the move toward "reader-based" prose. Ede and Lunsford support the rhetorically determined synthesis of the two views of audience, and so do I. Even a listener/reader who is physically present before a writer is, nevertheless, mediated by the interpretive matrix of the writer. In other words, audience is always, to some degree, a creation or construct. But physical presence helps the inexperienced writer realize the importance of someone else out there with whom the writer needs to "connect."

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