A Response to Back to the Future?

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A Response to Back to the Future?
Deanne S. Gute

In “Back to the Future? Writing Instruction in the 21st Century Liberal Arts,” David Grant advocates a “return to the classical arrangement of the liberal arts” and rhetoric-centered writing instruction. As a writing center coordinator dealing with students’ everyday rhetorical challenges, I hear in this proposal the sound of sweet music.

At times, those who theorize about composition can sound more like Cotton Mather than Marty McFly. Students are essentialized as Remedials; as Victims; as Millennials. Sometimes, with the zealousness of religion, composition theorists proscribe what students can’t do or should not be expected to do while they’re erasing native dialects and remediating deficiencies; resisting dominant discourses; or multitasking with text messaging and MP3s. Here lies the most attractive part of the argument for rhetorical progymnasmata: “As a mainstay of liberal education, progymnasmata is aimed at producing a rhetor, an individual citizen whose becoming cannot be pre-ordained” (Grant, p. 12).

As Marty finds in Back to the Future, the movie, time travelling in a DeLorean powered by a Flux Capacitor can have unpredictable results. So can organizing education around the trivium, the “fundamental arts” of logic, grammar, and rhetoric. Once students own this equipment, there’s no telling how they may use it. Grammatical correctness may be deployed in the interest of radical political change. Instructor-endorsed ideology may be abandoned for other ideas. Technological skill may be subordinated to artistic passion. Students who can read, write, and think well can allocate their attention mindfully and choose.

Perhaps this is the reason we haven’t gone back before now. To ground our pedagogy in the trivium, we have to expand our curriculum, not contract it. We can’t spend all our time playing God throwing thunderbolts at ideological/theoretical adversaries we fear will taint our students. We can’t propagate curricular blandness or triviality and claim we have to due to Millennials’ innate inattention and their electronic devices.

Nor can we in good conscience teach our students about sentences without teaching about ideas and audiences—or teach about ideas and audiences without teaching sentence-craft. The constant iteration of the sins of correctness-focused teaching has forged the rationale for some instructors to lop the grammar leg off the trivium table. As Grant reminds us, “Effective use varies from audience to audience, situation to situation, purpose to purpose, and from time to time. Correct use does not” (p. 8). Exactly for that reason, awareness of what constitutes correctness helps enable communication from audience to audience, time to time. Over-concern for Correctness in the past should not preclude our teaching about sentence Care in the future.
The truth is, it’s much easier to keep the Flux clean than to teach a student how to operate it. Yet, at the core of Grant’s proposal is the idea that the trivium is not just for students to learn and apply, but also for teachers. Moreover, it’s not just for teachers of composition and rhetoric, but a “critical endeavor for all teachers at all levels of education” (p. 13). Some will inevitably challenge the proposal’s what and why; others’ support will understandably hinge on the question how. The full answer requires a much longer, more complex conversation than can be offered here. Essential topics for starters would include a simple definition: *progymnasmata* are like a music student’s efforts to practice an instrument. The instrument will never be mastered if the practice is always a recital. The craft of written language, let alone disciplinary discourse, can’t be mastered through formal papers alone. Elbow (1991) argued that ultimately, “the best test of whether a student understands something is if she can translate it out of the discourse of the textbook . . . into everyday, experiential, anecdotal terms” (as cited in Granville and Dison, 2005). *Progymnasmata* means at least sometimes writing to learn.

The conversation within each institution would have to define composition and rhetoric professionals’ leadership role in infusing this liberal arts ideal throughout all programs. It would also specify the necessity and type of support that can only come from Administration.

Ironically, words alone won’t power the Flux. Instructors across the disciplines must see why they should fuel the effort. Someone will have to demonstrate that, as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) tells us, writing is a “high-impact practice” for engaging students (Kuh, 2007); that, as Hobson and Schafermeyer (1994) noted, when few engaging activities are manageable in large classes, writing to learn “gets everyone in the class to engage their brains at the same time without creating anarchy” (p. 424). Skeptical instructors will need assurance that they have the preparation and time for writing to learn, which can take the form of mini essays, question writing, blogging, journaling, and other activities as numerous as stretches and calisthenics for the human body—all relatively brief and none requiring a marathon of assessment.

What should be the result? At times, to teach students to “make use of the feelings evoked by a learning situation” (Granville & Dison, 2005, emphasis added); at other times, to engage deeply in a topical “problem, issue, or perspective” (Grant, p. 12). Other activities might develop students’ awareness of their own degree of engagement (Granville & Dison, 2005; Lockhart, 2002); show them how to evaluate the effectiveness of their learning strategies (Tishman, Perkins, & Jay, 1995); or facilitate their becoming something other than a passive passenger in the instructor’s back seat. A group of graduate students in a journaling study describes it better: “Without journals, learning . . . was often a passing notion, a flicker of thought. . . . [W]hen our past graduate courses included assigned readings but no written assignments to accompany those readings, we may have read the article or chapter, but we seldom struggled to understand confusing
points. We assumed that confusing points would be addressed during class lecture” (Knowlton et al., 2004).

Granville & Dison (2005) suggested that students internalize writing to learn because it personalizes academic experience as the students build new academic vocabularies and identities. If we help students accomplish that, we are not driving them along narrowly-circumscribed routes; we are teaching them to navigate the complexities of their academic present and to look ahead to their professional futures.
References


