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The Ages of Imitation, Authenticity and Originality

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Joan Digby has offered us a wonderful opportunity to think about our students and ourselves in constructing an education for them. Her essay took me back to my own freshman year when I read Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "The Birthmark." I think it might have been the first formal paper that I wrote in college, and it left an indelible imprint on my mind: The only truth is paradox. It seems to fit this case. Our students are and are not different than those in the past, and we, their instructors, are neither more nor less than our predecessors. If the classics teach us anything, it is that humans have not changed much over the last few thousand years. Who are we to think that in our present age (a decade?), we have changed when all the others haven't?

That said, Dr. Digby has a point. Our current college students do seem enamored of imitation, and honors students are by no means immune. I would like to further explore *why* that might be so. Some of our students might be lazy. Others are probably busier than young people in the past. They begin lessons in everything from gymnastics to social graces from pre-kindergarten days through high school peppered with community service, a varsity letter in some sport, an instrument, a handful or two of AP classes, and a Kaplan course to prepare for the SAT examination. Every evening is "booked." This is not to excuse the *pastiche* of sentences and paragraphs that Digby describes, but our students may have lives too full to devote much time to the habits of mind or creative production. Another explanation alluded to by Digby is that imitation is easier now than before because of the Internet. Certainly, the popular and professional literature abounds with stories of plagiarism (the purest form of imitation?), and many of us, unfortunately, have had personal experiences confronting it. Some students who 'imitate' in this fashion plead ignorance. Perhaps so. Yet, it is possible that some of Dr. Digby's students may be using imitation as a time-worn method of learning, practiced intensively today in music and art but also more broadly in every society known to human history.

The human development literature amply describes the role of imitation in learning and maturation in both the cognitive and social realms. Adolescents are especially active imitators, beyond their immediate family circle, as they begin to form their own individual identities, transferring an isomorphic identity from family to peer group before evolving into a separately defined, individual entity. Our first-year college students are still in the grip of those transitions. Imitation from that perspective, then, is a stage that is normative, important, and valued. In other words, imitation is a normal learning behavior, but the imitator needs to be encouraged to move past mere imitation into a more authentic, individual, and adult role. Out of authenticity, originality *might* emerge (without it, originality is unlikely ever to emerge).

Yet, there are a few (new?) developments to wonder about, specifically the ubiquity of professional performance (due to the commonplace of mass media) and a unique peer influence created by the effects of mass day care. Of course, this is utter speculation, but consider these ideas for a moment. The ready accessibility of "first rate" performance, whether it be dancing, singing, writing, acting, etc., sets a bar so high that no one wants to see, hear, indulge or tolerate anything less. As Dr. Digby noted, "People want what is safe, what they already know and therefore are able to judge against a reliable yardstick." For one filled with the insecurity of adolescence and the yearning to prove oneself, the risk of performing at any lower level is more embarrassing and perhaps less well accepted than in the past. In the second case, many, if not most, of our students have had prolonged experiences in the day care environment where the primary reference points tend to be individuals within their own age group. Of course, school environments do this as well. In other words, the current generation of students have had pushed upon them horizontal reference points more often than the vertical reference points that exist between people of different ages. If younger, an individual can look up to someone with more experience, perspective, and history who might share or model behaviors, values, expectations and a realistic learning trajectory from poor to good to excellent. If older, the individual can, in effect, teach as well as learn something (hopefully through reflection) from that teaching. Without the balancing exposure to vertical reference points, our students might be 'super-saturated' with horizontal references and an expert-oriented performance culture. In combination these strong social forces may cultivate or reinforce more pronounced habits of imitation that, in turn, are exacerbated further by a market economy catering to a social (horizontal) niche! Hence, *Shrek 2, Kill Bill 2, Matrix 3*, etc.

None of this speculation relieves us of the problem, however. From an educator's perspective, it is incumbent upon us to assist these students as they climb out of "the age of imitation" and into the age of originality or maturity, evolving from passive recipients of knowledge to active meaning makers. This is central to the purpose of higher education. We would hope that honors students would go one step further and ultimately become scholars themselves, generating new knowledge that contributes not just to themselves but beyond, perhaps even to all of humanity.

There is the old saying, "If we do what we have always done, we will get what we have always got." The implication is that we need to change if we are not satisfied with our results. Ironically, I think the discomfort expressed by Dr. Digby is that she is *not* getting what she has always gotten in the past. If our students have changed, then I think we must ask ourselves if we do not also have to change. I think there are two choices. We may continue to teach and act as before and change the goals or outcomes of our efforts—a solution I find unpalatable. Or, as Joan Digby also suggests, we must change what we do if we are determined to stay constant with our goals. Changing what we do may require different texts and different pedagogies, as well as different ways to frame our teaching "problems" and "solutions." What better place to conduct the experiment than in honors?

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