Comparing Alternative Metaphors:

Finding Common Conceptual Themes to Better Understand Writing

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When it comes to how we become better at writing, we must first become better at *discussing* writing. Usually, this means breaking down writing either rhetorically or metaphorically; we might, for example, discuss the identity behind writing or its intended audience. More often than not, however, writing is difficult to improve simply by conversation, which makes it all the more important to ground theory in our personal experiences with writing. I have found that this extends to our experience *of theory*; one benefits from experiencing several kinds of theory or several metaphors all aimed at explaining the same thing from multiple perspectives, each with their own set of meaningful connotations. Specifically, I had always found voice to be a rather vague concept—primarily due to the connotations implicit when I first heard it mentioned as an aspect of writing—and favored an alternative metaphor, footing. However, when I returned to the concept of voice in this class, I discovered their complementary nature. By comparing and contrasting footing and voice, I saw how they each implied the importance in thinking of writing as performance, as a navigation of social privilege, and as political; in short, my writing and theory of it benefited from thinking of writing from multiple perspectives, in the process discovering common hidden focuses.

I was first introduced to the concept of voice in my first creative writing course in high school; the teacher framed it in an incredibly vague way, as simply a measure of "uniqueness" or stylistic distinction, something immeasurable and unteachable. When I took my first course on style and editing in undergrad, my professor introduced us to a reframing of the concept, "footing." Like voice, footing phrases writing as a performance, but with an acknowledgement of audience, wherein the writer finds their "footing" with their readers. Footing solves many of the issues of voice; grounded in audience and social cues, it emphasizes very specific parts of writing that impact how an audience will perceive it, like how pronouns are used or how

sentences are structured. For example, footing pays special attention to how the writer addresses the audience and emphasizes the rhetorical nature of writing. However, after taking this course, I rediscovered the value in voice, not only in our course reading on the topic but also due to reading Peter Elbow when writing my theorist profile paper on him. From here, I reexamined my understanding and valuing of voice.

Our course reading on voice, by Darsie Bowden, provides historical and theoretical context to an understanding of voice. Bowden notes that "as valuable and necessary as metaphors are in enabling us to understand phenomena, they also lead us down certain conceptual pathways that severely limit our perceptions" (227). Voice especially demonstrates this, as it comes with many shortcomings, which Bowden describes later on. Despite this, voice remains historically important within the compositional studies field, since "the voice movement paralleled the process movement" (Bowden 228). Voice does bring with it concrete elements, namely, a focus on speech and intonation units and on freewriting. None were more vocal in this than Elbow, a prominent process theorist who "portrayed his concept of voice as 'what most people have in their speech but lack in their writing—namely, a sound or texture—the sound of 'them' " (Bowden 229). Elbow's theory still brought with it vague elements. Bowden writes, "Readers know that they have encountered the writer's real voice, Elbow continued, when they feel a 'resonance' not necessarily with the writer, but with 'the words and themselves' " (229). Under this conception, "[g]ood writers are authentic because they tap into their inner selves" (Bowden 230). Furthermore, because "the spoken voice has the rhythm, tone, and intonations of the individual speaker, so can writing—and this, for Elbow, represents rhetorical power" (231). Voice continued to be developed by other theorists, such as Gibson, where "in the service of conveying a message to an audience, voice—or persona—is created for specific rhetorical

occasions, a concept stemming from the notion of *ethos* in classical rhetoric" (Bowden 231). Bowden notes how voice, over time, changed to how it's conceived today, where "writers may not have one true voice, but, rather, many voices, each used for particular occasions and with particular audiences" (233). Meaningfully, voice changed the field by introducing the politics and society of the 1970s and 1980s: it brought to the classroom "mistrust of the status quo; attention to the individual writer, especially those traditionally in marginalized social groups; and, in some sense, a politicization of the composition classroom" (Bowden 232).

Bowden's history continues by chronicling how voice would eventually become questioned. Critiques of Elbow argued that voice:

> promoted a kind of anti-intellectualism, particularly in the way voice proponents urged students to tap into their emotional selves for their writing, often consciously ignoring—even if temporarily—the intellectual and discursive values of the community within which they were writing. (Bowden 232)

Others questioned "whether it is possible to have one 'true' voice, and if this, indeed, leads to power in writing" (Bowden 232), something definitely reflected in more postmodernist conceptions of voice. The postmodernist *deconstruction* movement, led by Derrida's theory of language, questioned this further. According to Bowden, Derrida contended that "language is merely a set of symbols or signs that only vaguely (and inadequately) represents reality" (233), and Derrida went as far to "argue that language (spoken or written) cannot express consciousness" (233). Deconstruction theory, then, "tends to move us in the other direction, toward plurality, instability, and disintegration, which comes from understanding writing from perspectives other than the author's" (Bowden 233). That is, "writing does not originate and end with the author, but is subject to multiple forces that motivate the act of writing" (Bowden 233), such as context, purpose, and audience. Furthermore, flaws in voice emerged in feminist studies and technology. If voice is associated with rhetorical power, then female writers run the risk of

reenacting patriarchal forces; specifically, Bowden writes, “In other words, using voice plays into the hands of dominant voices because it configures power in terms that insist on silence and then devalue it” (234). Due to this, the alternative metaphors *web* and *network* appear, “because both focus more attention on interdependency, celebrating rather than debasing it” (Bowden 234). This fights patriarchal forces in that “a network assumes that there is not necessarily one individual holding sway over another or others, but a web of interconnected strands—wherein much of the power lies in the connectedness and solidarity” (Bowden 235). Similarly, writing in technological context also relies upon networks and deconstruction; writing in the form of social media posts or other online group writing “often ravages the integrity of the authorial voice” (Bowden 235), since every reader can interconnectedly comment, each becoming a partial author and together potentially derailing a writing’s focus—blurring the line with regards voice.

Footing reflects these historical trends, mirroring the alternative metaphor of network, while similarly improving on the concept of voice. According to Holcomb and Killingsworth, footing “better communicates the idea that style is always a matter of agreement (or disagreement) between an author and audience, two social entities that stand in some relationship to each other” (56). Networks, similarly, “attend to the weave of interrelationships between authorial stance, impact or effect on listeners and readers, the text itself, and the context within which the act takes place” (Bowden 235); thus, like networks, footing emphasizes connections between writers and readers. Holcomb and Killingsworth introduce this concept when discussing distinction in writing, and they bring along theory on why voice—and its rephrasing as footing—matters to writing. They write how voice conceptualizes style, writing, “As physical voice is literally an expression of an individual body—so distinctive that…it can be used to identify the speaker—so style, the concept implies, is an outgrowth of the author’s character”

(57); they further qualify that voice "in writing sometimes refers to the actual intersection of writing and speaking, between literacy and orality" (57), and they go on to describe how encouraging a student to write as they spoke improved their writing. Yet, they recognized "references to voice can be a cop-out on the part of the teacher" (57) as something that 'can't be taught' and sought a concept that came with more concrete implications. In this, they also questioned the idea of a single 'true' voice, commenting that their student Vicky "learned not so much to capture her truest character in written prose but rather to listen to her own writing … to capture the fluency of conversation in the black and white of writing" (58). They came up with footing from expressions like " 'getting off on the right foot,' 'meeting on equal footing,' and 'putting your best foot forward' " (61) because of the emphasis on social interaction and on performance behind reading. Voice also implies performance, but footing "always puts the performer in relation to something else—or somebody else: the audience" (Holcomb & Killingsworth 61). They outline how, as "a metaphor derived from the physical act of gaining a stable placement of the feet" (61), footing also describes social behaviors "from the actual physical stance speakers take with respect to listeners, to the emotions and attitudes they express, to the social roles, languages, and dialects they adopt" (61). From this, they deduce three elements of footing: "[t]he social standing between writer and reader" (64), "[t]he various social roles taken up by writers and assigned to readers" (64), and "[t]he different social languages, dialects, or registers" (64). In establishing footing, they also establish extremely concrete ways of realizing this metaphor; social standing (e.g. the formality between reader and writer) and social languages or dialects both emphasize the choices and consistencies in writer's diction—especially connotatively—and social roles emphasize pronoun usage and references to the audience.

Within this context, one might very well consider voice an outdated concept. Indeed, Bowden herself, in her discussion, implies voice might be interesting in conception but not as meaningful as alternative metaphors. Bowden writes about an imaginary John's prospective essay on college campus cafeterias, noting that that "[o]ne could argue that it is possible to hear his voice as one reads the essay" (236) and thus "then the essay should be powerful" (236). She then continues, "However John's essay is not necessarily powerful writing" (236) and writes furthers:

> Powerful discourse is discourse that makes a difference…More often, powerful writing also has a transactional purpose: to inform, persuade, or move readers from their present state of mind to a new one. To do that, one needs to enter the game, to participate in the discursive network. (236)

As she outlines, "If a metaphor is too familiar and has, hence, lost its explanatory power, it is considered a 'dead' metaphor. Powerful metaphors have the potential to shape understanding and meaning" (238). She does qualify that it "becomes clear…that the effectiveness of metaphors is dependent upon the rhetorical situation" (238).

In reading Elbow for my theorist profile paper, however, I saw the other side of the coin. I read for that paper his essays "The Democratization of Writing and the Role of Cheating," "The Music of Form: Rethinking Organization in Writing," and "The Uses of Binary Thinking." "Democratization" and "Music" focused on nontraditional ways of creating or conceptualizing writing, with voice as a latent theme. In "Democratization" he encouraged freewriting via text-to-speech as a way of 'cheating' in achieving better writing, echoing his earlier writings on voice and writing that words taken from speech "are experienced by readers as alive, and *voiced*; they *resonate* with more of the writer's self" (Elbow 69; emphasis added). Importantly, "Democratization" also discusses "the impulse to exclude or preserve privilege" (Elbow 68), although in the context that "[l]iteracy has tended to function as a way to exclude" (Elbow 68)

rather than an aspect of voice itself. “Music” focuses on thinking of writing as connected to melody and temporal experience, rather than just spatially organized—simply words on a page—echoing the sound which voice emphasizes. “Uses” then brings what I find most meaningful to my contention with regards to considering voice as complementary to footing; while not discussing voice explicitly, “Uses” focuses on avoiding isolated metaphors and rather on thinking pluralistically, in terms of multiple, blurred and related concepts. That is, I think Elbow would agree that other ways of thinking, about the things voice focuses on, is helpful; analysis, theory, and practice all benefit from thinking about more than one conceptualization of an idea. Not only should we think of voice, but we should also think about footing and network as connected articulations; the questions should not be framed in terms of *which* concept we choose, but rather *how* we think about and connect them.

Indeed, once we compare and contrast voice and footing, we begin to see meaningful insights that wouldn’t be obvious from just looking at one or the other. For example, the *performance* quality of writing becomes even more clear; footing especially emphasizes this, and in contrast points out this element underlying voice. Likewise, once we think of the performance aspect of voice, the sound and speech element are all the more implied and understood, in a way not captured by footing. Both also relate to identity and privilege; voice especially emphasizes distinct identity, which reframes for footing how identity *does* factor in the reader-writer relationship—even if framed differently, with identity not only an explication of self but also a relation to others. In turn, this shows how voice factors privilege: identity, as thought of through footing and in being related to others, necessarily involves social dynamics and thus questions of power and privilege. Thinking about the two together then benefits from how we conceptualize related writing practices. For example, footing helps us formulate specific standings, like

choosing when to address the audience as "you" versus "us," while voice helps place these expressions by pointing out to the writer the need to navigate the privileges inherent in writing and literacy. Likewise, anytime a writer might desire to express their voice, they benefit from footing's understanding that voices are made up of social registers; that is, expressing themselves means to express their understandings and relations to social communities, either explicitly or, more often, in choices of diction and punctuation. Elbow, in his book *Vernacular Eloquence*, also connects voice to the more specific aspects of choices in diction and style; he describes, "Proper literacy [of writing in privileged or expected registers] is linked with deep power—even with magic" (345), giving the example of how in the Middle Age, one could escape hanging by reciting the Lord's Prayer in Latin. He starts a conversation on "mere" or vernacular (e.g. spoken) literacy versus "proper" (e.g. following expectations of writing) literacy, making the point that "[i]f we look at how readers actually read, we'll see that the surface of language is often *more* important than substance" (345). That is, he connects the "surface of language" that we find obvious in footing to voice, in that voice represents the element behind "vernacular" literacy; footing and voice connect, then, in that footing assumes or doesn't account at first for the privileged or assumed aspects of writing, while voice disrupts these assumed elements by encouraging vernacular literacies, that is, literacies which disrupt the status quo.

Thus, voice is not a "dead" metaphor, so long that we connect it by comparison to metaphors like footing and network. Even if we were to consider voice "dead," writing theory still benefits from discussion of the history, of how we came from voice to formulate footing and network. Such history not only explains the parts of these newer metaphors we value, but also the political aspects of the classroom's metaphors. More specifically, footing and voice taken together emphasize values of writing that wouldn't otherwise be apparent—even from looking at

the history. For example, we can understand from the history of voice and from Holcomb and Killingsworth's reasoning behind footing that we value performance and the ability to navigate multiple registers or voices, but what is less clear are secondary understandings in comparison, such as the value in identity as socially constructed or in writing as performing a series of sounds and intonation units. In other words, we can become better writers not only by studying metaphors such as these, but by trying to see how each developed and how they either interrelate or comment upon the same or similar things.

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