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Getting Centered: A Meditation on Creating Pottery and Teaching Writing

Rosanne Carlo

I sit at the wheel, stooped over, pushing the clay inward with my hands. The clay globbs between my thumb and my finger and I have to shake the excess off. I can feel the clay wobbling under my fingers and I can't seem to control its movements. I'm really working this clay; I'm sweating and I'm cursing and I'm tired. I attempted to center my clay for about an hour and a half—the instructor, in her brief demonstration, only took five minutes. This is merely the first step in a long process of throwing on the wheel, which actually leads to other steps, like trimming, glazing, and firing.

I skipped the next pottery class.

I quickly became “that student.” I would skip class, or I would show up late or leave early—apparently, my grandma died three times over the course of ten weeks. I was unprepared—sometimes, I showed up to class without my finishing tools. I was sometimes less than engaged—often, I employed the same tactic I use in committee meetings: silently singing show tunes.

Although I did see improvement, it was slow, and only with the most focused of efforts on the part of the instructor and myself.

But, pottery class wasn't the only site of frustration for me. In Spring 2016, my first year as a faculty member at College of Staten Island (CUNY), I taught one section of FYC off-sequence. The class was capped at twenty-five, and as the weeks of the semester advanced, five students stopped attending, receiving what our institution calls a WU (Withdraw Unattending); by the end of the semester, one student received a D, another an incomplete, and one failed the course. Eight people did not advance to their second semester of composition, and by extension, may not have made it to their second year of college.

These numbers are staggering. This semester, I referred to the syllabus and updated my Blackboard site with important due dates; I taught writing as a process and included many low-stakes and no-stakes writing; I included several opportunities for in-class peer review and writing workshops; and I held conferences for every paper. These are the best practices we all know as composition teachers. Our field's knowledges and practices aren't to be abandoned, of course; but I am still left with trying to figure out how to further connect with struggling and failing students, the ones who just can't seem to center their clay after hours of work.

To discuss struggling and failing students is difficult, especially when the dominant narrative in the field of composition, and academia at large, is predicated on student success. In scholarly journals, when we discuss pedagogy, we resort to vague success tropes. I am reminded of Craig Dworkin's “Mycopedagogy” where he talks about composition classroom narratives as psychedelic fictions: “Testimonials about classroom

successes always have the feeling of hearing someone tell about their experiences on drugs (you should have been there, we had these mushrooms and...)” (604). The reality of classroom teaching is not so cool; many of us experience a high rate of failure in our composition classrooms. We must then think about what we can do—individually, systemically—to improve our students’ class experiences. I imagine that my student losses in Spring 2016 reflect a larger picture of what is happening at the college, in the state system, and in public higher education as a whole. Critical populations—minority students, first-generation students, working students, and others—are reflected in these numbers, and they continue to be the casualties of our education system.

When we consider “success” in writing, I don’t wish to frame this concept solely around a student’s ability to compose really good “academic” discourse with error-free prose. Knowing where the comma goes does not a good writer make. Even clarity—that prized trait—can only offer so much satisfaction. I mean to align success with the idea of developing a capacity in composing for pleasure and play as students learn the power of language use. I mean to align success with the knowledge of composing styles that are appropriate for different genres, audiences, and purposes. I mean to align success with a desire to write to the course assignments—and beyond them, to see writing as a means of self-expression, identity formation, and intervention in our world. Struggling and failing student writers should be taught to see writing beyond the correction of error and toward a critical way of being. This description of success reflects what many have argued for in the several decades of scholarship produced by our field, from scholars such as Peter Elbow to Victor Vitanza to Geoffrey Sirc.

Student success, as I have described it here, is a lofty goal when we consider the material conditions of our schools and our students’ lives. Ira Shor’s *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* describes the environment of teaching in the CUNY system and working with its students and the challenges he faced as a composition teacher. This is a story of underprepared, first generation, and working class students entering college and the college having limited resources with which to educate them. We are 35 years removed from the world of Shor’s book, but I find that these descriptions of professorial life in the CUNY system still ring true. A recent *New York Times* article, “Dreams Stall as CUNY, New York City’s Engine of Mobility, Sputters,” further details the current conditions of professors and students at the wake of Michelle Obama’s commencement speech at City College, the system’s flagship campus. Chen, the author, exposes to readers crumbling infrastructures—one picture even shows a row of buckets in a hallway at City catching April rainwater from the leaking roof; the raising rates of tuition, \$300 per year over the last five years; the growing numbers of student enrollments, leading to increased class sizes; the stagnation of full-time faculty hires and an increase in adjunct labor; and, to top it off, more budget cuts presumably on the way from the New York State legislature. We also must remember the strain on students in terms of their finances, work, and family obligations; the academy contends with other worlds and responsibilities, especially for students at commuter schools and community colleges (Mauk). The picture I paint here is happening in colleges and universities across the country, and we all face this question: How do we continue to profess in a time of austerity?

Not one instructor, not one type of pedagogy will transcend the systemic, financial, and historical problems we see in our state schools. And yet, I still muster—like many

of us in the profession do—the belief that the next semester offers the promise of hope and renewal. I believe I have something to share about struggling students when I reflect on my own experience in learning pottery.

This essay, like a potter's wheel, circles around terms like invention, embodiment, and timing in order to try to explain the acts of creation that occur in writing and in pottery. Understanding the practice of doing and learning, I argue, will allow for a pedagogy that addresses the struggles of students who make things with words.

As I pursue my comparison between making pottery and making things with words, I will also recall the many composition theorists and writing scholars who have influenced what I've learned about teaching over the years, shaping me as I still struggle to shape my students. It's important to me and to the profession of teaching writing to revisit our historical influences, much as it is to the potter, who creates new objects by remembering the practices of her craft that have withstood the test of time.

Invention

David Bayles and Ted Orland observe that students in a pottery class who produced more eventually created better products. Repetition of practice is where learning occurs. Students play with words and play with clay. They take risks with every turn of the wheel and free-writing exercise. Many pottery classes I sat at the wheel, creating lop-sided clay mutations, squashing these creations back into clay mounds to be molded once more. I tried to remind myself that this was okay, though sometimes (like my students) I was frustrated. I wanted to give up, take my withdrawal. One thing, though, that comforted me in this process was that I felt myself learning through trial and error. This bowl didn't come to be because I didn't pull the clay up evenly—or because the pot was thrown off center by my hands that clutched for too long and with too much force; or because the wheel was moving too slowly, thus warping the clay; or because the opening I made on the initial pull was too narrow; or because the hole I dug made the bottom too thin, collapsing the clay as I trimmed. Through playing with the clay, through making mistakes, I learned strategies for invention. We can imagine our students undergoing a similar creation process with their writing as we ask them to draft and revise.

The art of composition and the art of pottery share a common root—both disciplines focus on a process of making, of inventing. Jim Corder discusses how composition is a discipline ever in renewal because it is founded on the dialectic of invention and structure; invention is openness to possibility in composing and structure is a choice of form. He explains that the two feed off each other:

Every choice, every decision, every structure has the potential of being another entry in the inventive world you live in, punching it in here, pooching it out there, giving color to it yonder. Invention precedes, structure follows, but invention does not cease thereby. The structure we make today may give grace to tomorrow's invention. (334)

I often have to remind myself that students are taught to focus too much on the structure of their papers and the final product, but doing so obscures the critical thinking they made to come to those choices. In the same vein, focusing on the final product

of a pottery project obscures all the steps taken in its production. I have to remember how invention constantly innovates and surprises. Invention is potential. A lump of clay can become a vase, a candleholder, a mug, a bowl; words on a page can become an essay, a blog post, a letter, a zine. Corder, in his discussion of first-year composition, enumerates propositions—tentative truths—that he has discovered through his experiment of writing all his students' assignments himself. These propositions are numbered, but have gaps; for example, the list starts at the “ninth law of composition” because “there are yet other propositions I have yet not found” (333). I don't think we will ever say all we can say about first-year composition, about struggling and failing students, and I want to put forward a few more propositions in this essay.

But above all, invention is the key term in the art of composition and of pottery. Students must continue to build upon the works they begin, for it is only in the repetition of movements that ideas and shapes emerge. The heuristics for invention, Young and Becker write, can be organized into two major types, the first being “a taxonomy of the sorts of solutions that have been found in the past,” and the second being epistemological, “a method of inquiry based on assumptions about how we come to know something” (89). In other words, invention is defined and applied in two ways: (1) as a way of discovering the means of persuasion through common culture beliefs, and (2) as epistemic, relating to discovery of new perspectives.

The first definition of invention originates through Aristotelian use of *topoi* (topics) where the speaker searches out the values of the audience and how to present his or her argument in meaningful ways. We communicate the proofs of our argument through the form of the syllogism in logic, the enthymeme in rhetoric. As Aristotle notes, to be enthymematic is “to see the true and [to see] what resembles the true . . . thus an ability to aim at commonly held opinions [*endoxa*] is a characteristic of one who also has a similar ability to regard the truth” (1355a, 33). Rhetoric's reliance on opinion to inspire belief is emphasized in the treatise. The topics are sometimes in opposition to each other (of course, there are several opinions on a given subject). Furthermore, the speaker must rely on knowledge of the situation, the subject, and the audience to guide her selection of topics. The topics a speaker chooses to present and the way she arranges the evidence communicates to the audience whether or not the speaker knows the feelings and values of the listeners. The topics remind us that rhetoric is for life, about communicating with people for certain ends. It is no wonder that the topics appeared useful to those rhetoricians in the 20th Century who revived their study (see, for example, Corbett).

The topics were a heuristic for invention in the 20th Century rhetorics that remained very close to the traditional rhetoric; however, other scholars were developing new heuristics for invention, heuristics that were based on the second understanding of invention, rooted in theories of epistemology. Invention, in this sense, is seen as an art of experimental inquiry—one that involves the posing of problems and processes of rhetoric as a way of coming to possible solutions. Some examples of these invention heuristics in the New Rhetoric are Burke's pentad, Becker and Pike's tagmemics, and Toulmin's reasoning. This second definition of invention is most relevant to my discussion of the art of composition as it related to pottery. It is the act of doing, of experiencing, that drives practice. As Janice Atwill describes, invention is a way of creating new norms and shifting perspectives through its practice. She writes: “Art intervenes when a boundary

or limitation is recognized, and it creates a path that both transgresses and redefines that boundary. Fate and necessity may set temporary limits for invention, but their boundaries are perpetually redrawn by *techné*" (48). Invention needs to be at the center of composing practices because it allows for moments of disruption from the normal flow of being and thinking. Invention creates cognitive dissonance—it allows for epiphany, for creation. It is the essential way to learn new things, even in the midst of struggle.

Invention, in fact, cannot happen without struggle: the competing of ideas and the wresting of clay. Invention is not stasis; it is not a period of waiting, but of doing. From my acts of writing and my experience of pottery-making, I see two other principles for doing, for invention, that can be further discussed and utilized in order to help struggling students. A writing classroom must become the space to practice embodiment and develop an awareness of time (and timing). In the two sections that follow, I show how these principles have been braided into composition practices, and I further intend to explain how knowledge of these can be used to improve student success.

Embodiment

I watch Susan, my instructor, demonstrate the process of centering clay. She is bent over, leaning forward, her chin looms right above the lump of clay she previously smacked onto the visible center of the wheel head. Her body is tight, her movements controlled; she tells us that centering is achieved from the effort of core muscles. I am reminded of my many years of vocal training—control is not solely about the movements of the mouth and throat. It also comes from steady breathing and the diaphragm—from the core. Susan's hands then meet the moist clay and she pushes inward; the clay readily responds to her, moving up, gaining in height as the wheel spins. She forms a cone. As she molds the clay, despite her efforts of strength, she is calm and steady, as if in repose. She then locks her hands together around the clay, pushing it in from the side with the heel of her left palm while holding the edge of her right hand over the top, flattening it to a hill with a small plateau. She takes her hands away, and I look at the clay. I can see how it spins with the wheel. It is even, smooth, steady. Susan puts her fingertips lightly over the top of her clay and closes her eyes, "If I can feel the clay moving with the wheel," she says, "then I know it's centered."

Novices must instantly understand that making pottery is an art that involves bodily movements and some degree of control on behalf of the artist. When I first started working with the wheel, I felt out of control as the clay spun in my hands, but I learned that I had to apply a certain amount of pressure to make the clay respond to me. This embodied knowing is integral to the art form. You cannot work from the wheel without a sense of your body and its strength and positioning.

Writing requires a type of embodiment as well. Writers are not just seated thinkers stooped over our compositions, and instructors have to create an environment where the practice of writing is a form of embodied ritual, like centering clay. With the development of the field of rhetoric and composition in the 1960s, the process movement taught us that writing is recursive, not linear. Sondra Perl's "Understanding Composing" reminds us that writers have something called felt sense when they compose—a return to experience where they are "waiting for an image, word, or phrase to emerge

that captures the sense they embody” (365). Students work recursively through an idea by oscillating between putting their thoughts on the page and framing those ideas as an argument; they also run through a catalogue of felt experiences—hearing dialogues, sensing, moving, and so forth. Students write as a process of coming into being, to bear witness to their knowledge through their own experience.

The writing process can be one of pain, of mania and depression, of fulfillment. These emotions are not something we merely “think,” but also feel through our bodies. The rhetorical tradition, from classical rhetoric to today, has accounted for embodied knowing through its understandings of ethos. As Michael Halloran writes, the orator in Aristotelian understanding “through the cogency of his logical and emotional appeals” becomes “a kind of living embodiment of that heritage, a voice of such apparent authority that the word spoken by this man was the word of communal wisdom, a word to be trusted for the weight of the man who spoke it and the tradition he spoke for” (332). The speaker invents herself through the use of appeals to the audience, and this process of invention is a kind of embodiment that relies on the speaker’s living space and time. Contemporary rhetoricians have also insisted that rhetoric is material, a physical act that moves others. As Thomas Rickert describes it, rhetoric “is an embodied and embedded practice. Rhetoric is an emergent result of environmentally situated and interactive engagements, redolent of a world that affects us, that persuades us prior to symbolicity” (34). Rhetoric is not only the spoken word, but it is environments and bodies and things interacting with each other. Students have to navigate the world they are situated in so that they can speak and write in credibly embodied ways.

Writing is a process of attuning yourself to the cues of your body and the world, just like pottery. Susan, when demonstrating centering, showed how she had a felt sense of the clay and its correct positioning. This sense is only achieved through repetition and ritual—I wonder how many times she had to sit at the wheel and work the clay before she could center with such facility? Stephanie Paterson discusses how writing is an embodied practice that requires repetition and ritual. She argues that to write we must have a bodily awareness, or *proprioception*. She develops this capacity in herself through a series of prompt writing exercises; she further describes these writing sessions:

The practice which includes lighting a candle, listening to myself, listening to Bach, and circling back to ask the important proprioceptive question has grounded me. I start to notice more of a balance between the believing and doubting games. I learn to listen as I write. I start to feel like a Writer who is writing. I start to breathe differently. I start to trust myself more. (70)

What Paterson describes here is the physical beginning to embodied practice. She is assured of her abilities, just like we want our struggling and failing students to be. We have to create space in our classrooms for embodied writing practices, to help students see that writing is a physical act that connects them materially with others—moving others to respond in like kind. I believe that this way of writing creates a space for new creations and ideas. This way of writing is also a strategy that may engage our students so that they can practice writing outside of our classrooms and see it as a part of their daily lives.

Time and Timing

I've heard potters at the studio talk about their practice as moments of insight. They will say thing like, "As I was pulling up the clay, I thought this could be a vase" or "The clay wobbled in this way, and I thought it would make a great pencil holder." Something about vision emerges in these acts of creation, and it relates to the potter's understanding and relation to time, or timing. Something about improvisation and an openness to being in the moment becomes crucial. Pottery is an art with linear steps, and at the same time, it is not. Allowing for the clay to intervene and take its own course is what separates a novice from an expert. Focusing too much on the steps, on the linear way of making a bowl, can lead a novice to a decent product but does not make a master potter, just as writing a five paragraph essay does not a writer make.

The practice of making things with clay or words relies on disengagement with linear steps and time. As Paterson notes, only when her students practiced the ritual of the Friday Writes did they get a "respite from *chronos* time (the linear school clock) and allowed us to enter into *kairos* or sacred time" (74). Unfortunately, Paterson does not unpack what she means by this orientation toward time, and I believe it is important to understand *kairos* more fully in order to meaningfully incorporate a sense of it in our pedagogical practice. I believe that *kairos* is essential to invention as it allows us to be open to the emergence of new forms in writing and clay.

Many scholars have written on the multiple meanings of *kairos* (See Hawhee; Kinneavy; Miller). In sum, *kairos* has been characterized as relating to timeliness, or seizing the opportune or critical moment; to practicing due measure, discretion, and appropriateness; to experiencing moments of insight or connection; to harmonizing opposite perspectives and select among alternatives; and finally, to knowing when to speak and when to be silent.

When I consider these definitions, and the ways they apply to how we relate to the world and each other, I see *kairos* as offering a framework for understanding ways of being, seeing, experiencing, knowing, and creating. *Kairos* is concerned with both ontology and epistemology because it orients us to our own being and reveals to us how we come to know the world and others. Being sensitive to timing allows us to move in the world in more meaningful, and hopefully, ethical ways. It is important to understand our existence as a part of temporality, or how our "existing orientations, as dispositions that have already been formed in us, . . . must always already be at work in our Being, in our potentiality for Being, and in such a way as to find their appropriate attunement, their fitting measure, in a particular system of action" (McNeil 90). Writing and making pottery are actions that require a sense of timing. In these moments, the inventor begins to trust her insights in creation.

Thus, *kairos* is largely—I think—a feeling. *Kairos* strikes us with force, it is a "transitory moment" that opens a passage for us beyond linear time, one where "the passage of this time of the present comes from the future to go toward the past" (Derrida 28) or where "Dasein's futural existence depends on its having been: the future is a carrying back to a time to which one has always already come" (Wyschogrod 158). However we describe the disruption of time, it has large implications for how we understand our existence in relation to each other in our environments and to how we make art.

Kairos further reminds us of how time flows through and around us—how the past, present, and future intersects to affect us. Additionally, there is a type of displacement we experience in *kairotic* moments, because we *feel* time as its own entity—both connected and yet separate from us. In other words, *kairos* is not just to be thought of as a moment that a person seizes, or an opportunity she takes; rather we should also see *kairos* as something at once connected to us and yet also beyond us and in our engagements with other people, places, and things (Rickert 83). *Kairos* is not necessarily an act of will—is time ever something we solely have control over? Surely, *kairos* is about attuning oneself to time, and there is an element within its meanings that speaks to a person's ability to respond and to act accordingly. Yet I can't also help but feel, as Rickert does, that *kairos* "does what it does to us, with us, and alongside us" (90). We can imagine a dialectical relationship here as we imagine *kairos* as both a part of the interior and exterior. *Kairos* is then to be thought of as a happening that leaves an impression upon us—a *feeling*, one that may be disorienting, one that may give us a new perspective, certainly one that prepares us to move forward and to take action. *Kairos*, as you can see, is closely related to embodiment and to play. It is a major principle in invention.

In terms of helping our student writers, we need to try to foster in them a sense of openness to creation and time. This is accomplished, in one way, through repetition and ritual. It is also accomplished through a sustained commitment to writing practice. As Hesse writes, it is "the increment of the slow" that allows students to find the right "pace and time" to transform their ideas into compositions (5). If we encourage students into lock-step measures for writing, a kind of check the boxes sort of process, then we leave the possibilities for invention out of that process. When we prescribe writing as neat steps, then we are somehow imagining time as linear, and we all know it is and yet we all know it isn't. We need to expand space and time in our classrooms, and this requires us moving from a chronological sense of time to a *kairotic* one.

Conclusion

I have learned some valuable things about the process of pottery and its similarities to writing. Making art was about taking risks and not letting myself be bogged down by the platonic ideal of, say, a bowl. Making art was about learning through doing. And learning through doing is about the practice of inventing, embodying, and timing. Learning through doing is not something to be taken lightly, but it is meaningful and encourages a spirit of getting back up again after a failure, or several failures.

Writing is hard. And as I can attest, so is pottery-making. A maker needs to learn and apply specific forms of knowledge and skills in these arts, and of course, she must develop a sense of the time it takes to create anything. Creation is not without struggle. As Doug Hesse reflects, "Writing is hard for a reason, in the same way that running a marathon or finding a spouse or attending your father's funeral is hard: it's a fundamental human act" (2).

The experience of the pottery class turned my thoughts more to the struggling and failing writers in my classroom. Like many writing teachers, I've had some bit of success; I forgot what it was like to be a novice. That night centering the clay for an hour brought me to that state of vulnerability, as I turned to my instructor, asking: "Is this right?" My

instructor taught me that learning to center clay, and mastering any skill in pottery for that matter, was a process of doing. She modeled to us her process of invention through her many demonstrations at the wheel.

From a ten-week pottery course, I created one bowl that someone could use. I experienced many starts and aberrations as I worked with the clay and the other tools. I experienced moments of real frustration and struggle and self-doubt. I also experienced moments of joy, such as when I discovered the right amount of pressure needed to pull up the clay. What the class inspired in me, most of all, was a desire to create—not just with clay, but in the medium with which I am most used to working, with words.

When I confided in a friend that I had signed up for a pottery class and that I had discovered I was quite terrible at it, he said: “Aww, Ro. I can’t wait to get a bowl from you someday. Of course, it’s questionable as to whether or not I should really eat my ice cream out of it.” His snark reminds me not to take everything I produce with the utmost seriousness. My friend would love that bowl I gave him, despite its questionable usage, because he understood the process I took to make it. In the same way, we should value student writers for who they are and for their efforts. We must ever work toward and hold onto the kinds of practices in teaching that remind us who is behind the work and what struggles she faces to get good at it.

I believe that centering a classroom on the principles of invention, embodiment, and timing allows for students to see the writing process as something that is not focused solely on a product arrived at by linear steps. Rather, writing becomes an activity that we do to express ourselves, clarify our thoughts, and work them out for others. Writing is not solely something to be done for a grade or for practical purposes but is a practice for living and being with others. We want students to gain a sense of authorial pleasure from our classrooms, for only then will the desire to create be instilled in them.



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