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“The most peaceful I ever felt writing”: A Contemplative Approach to Essay Revision

Grace Wetzel

“Revision is not the end of the writing process but the beginning.”

— Donald Murray, *The Craft of Revision*

“My first draft usually has only a few elements worth keeping. I have to find what those are and build from them and throw out what doesn’t work, or what simply is not alive.”

— Susan Sontag, *Conversations with American Writers* by Charles Ruas

Revision is central to writing. Yet it remains a persistently challenging process to teach. Particularly in first-year writing courses, students often see revision as tedious, onerous, or even overwhelming. Final drafts do not therefore always reflect “deep revision” but oftentimes “surface editing” instead (Breidenbach 202). This is not especially surprising. In our hyper-digital world of constant distraction, it can be difficult enough summoning the motivation to begin revision—let alone cultivating the type of focused attention and patient re-seeing required for doing it well. This essay proposes that contemplative practices including yoga, freewriting, and meditation can not only enhance student motivation to revise, but more important, foster specific habits of mind beneficial to revision.¹

Today in higher education, contemplative pedagogy is blossoming across an array of disciplines. Affording benefits such as sharpened focus, stress reduction, and newfound insight, contemplative practices encourage students to pay close attention and “live fully into the content at hand” (Gunnlaugson et al. 1-2; Barbezat and Bush 206). This pedagogy provides a valuable frame of mind for conducting acts of revision. To begin to explore the links between contemplative practices and revision, I share a qualitative analysis of student writing and oral reflections from two First-Year English classes² to

1. My own contemplative practices include regular Vinyasa yoga and (more recently) meditation. I presented a poster session of this project at the 2015 Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education Conference.

2. I draw from one composition course and one literature-based writing course—both required components of the First-Year sequence at my university. Although my data derives from two different courses, I focus on students’ revision of the same type of assignment: rhetorical analysis. The literature-based writing class conducted a rhetorical analysis of a nineteenth-century woman’s rights text. In this course, I assigned both literary and rhetorical analyses. The composition class conducted a rhetorical analysis of a recent op-ed and an intertextual rhetorical analysis of a written and audio-visual text.

illustrate how contemplative exercises yield motivated, meaningful essay revision. Specifically, meditation-based contemplative pedagogy: (1) improves students' attitudes toward revision; and (2) generates important habits of mind useful to strong revision, such as openness; focused attention; visualization of rhetorical context; and invention of vivid, sensory detail.

First, contemplative methods offer a powerful means of investing students in revision. Since "attitude motivates the learning of skills," it is worth attending to ways of alleviating student resistance to revision—that is, ways of helping students approach this stage of the writing process with invigorated minds (Murray xiv). Contemplative practices enhance student motivation to revise by enabling a powerful "re-seeing" of revision itself. Second, these methods foster several valuable habits of mind for revision:

- *Openness*: Openness—"the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking"—is central to success in college writing and a byproduct of mindfulness ("Framework" 1). Because "[m]indfulness opens the mind and gives space for new understanding," it can facilitate essay revision (Barbezat and Bush 98). Specifically, an orientation to the unfinished nature of writing yields receptivity to "deep revision" and fresh perspectives on course texts.
- *Focused Attention*: Contemplative practices strip away internal and external clutter (including stress, preoccupation, and distraction)—cultivating powerful presence. With a deeply focused mind, students can conduct more sophisticated close readings through "deep listening" to key words and mindful attention to visual details (Barbezat and Bush 137).
- *Visualization of Rhetorical Context*: Visualization of rhetorical context aids students in both analyzing and revising texts. This entails using the mind's eye to picture rhetors deeply engaged in the act of speaking, performing, or composing—driven by a clear purpose for a particular audience. Such attention also helps students better imagine their own rhetorical contexts, yielding enhanced style and development.
- *Invention of Vivid, Sensory Detail*: Contemplative practices build focused and creative attention to the power of language. Students not only notice compelling words in course texts; they also learn to breathe life into their own writing through the invention of vivid, sensory detail able to engage readers.

As these descriptions suggest, the four habits of mind identified here are not discrete. Rather, when cultivated together, these capacities interweave and strengthen one another. The remainder of this essay will examine in greater detail how contemplative practices can powerfully animate essay revision through these important habits of mind.

I begin by situating this study within relevant scholarship on student motivation and engagement, contemplative pedagogy, and revision. The second section explores my implementation of contemplative methods in the first-year literature-based writing class following a student's suggestion that we meditate. In response, I planned a contempla-

tive writing workshop targeting students' revision needs that incorporated yoga, meditation, and freewriting. The results were encouraging—paving the way for a second and more systematically designed workshop held in a first-year composition class the following semester. After analyzing student writing and testimonials from this second contemplative revision workshop, I conclude by addressing future possibilities for this approach to revision. Ultimately, I hope to show that contemplative pedagogy not only enlivens student attitudes toward revision, but also yields more sophisticated close reading, vivid writing, and attentive rhetorical analysis.

Student Motivation and Engagement, Contemplative Pedagogy, and Revision

In their preface to *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education* (2014), Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush describe an industrial educational climate in our universities and colleges, giving rise to student indifference. If courses are merely commodities," they ask, "then why should students hold them as special?" (xv). Others have also made relevant observations about student motivation and engagement today. Thomas Deans, summarizing work by Tim Clydesdale and Rebekah Nathan on the subject, observes that "[f]reshman year is, for most, not a season of intellectual awakening" (Clydesdale W493). Many first-year students are instead becoming "practical credentialists" who "focus on what counts toward the grade and what will serve their careers. Not many come to value the liberal arts...and few expand their political consciousness" (Clydesdale 166; Deans W493). At the private liberal arts university where I teach, these patterns tend to hold true. While there are certainly exceptions, many students quickly gravitate toward seemingly practical majors, balk at grades lower than Bs, and approach general education courses as boxes to check.

This pragmatic orientation often extends to first-year writing. As Michael Bunn notes, "[M]any college students see writing courses as a chore—a hurdle on the track toward graduation. At the same time, many of these students recognize the value of writing and learning to write" (496). The challenge, then, is to invest students in their own development as writers not solely as a pragmatic, marketable skill set, but as a meaningful process of discovery. This can prove difficult in our hyper-technological, media-saturated world. Jessica Jones describes it well when she notes that contemporary educators "are forced to grapple with a clamorous, headlong world. The nightly news parades through our living rooms with the echo of bombs and one-dollar cheeseburgers. Our students come to class with smartphones and iPods. Words flood onto their papers without much thought" (87). Contemplative pedagogy offers one important remedy for this problem.

Barbezat and Bush have to this end shown how a wide range of contemplative practices—including stillness (e.g., meditation; silence), creative exercises (e.g., freewriting; journaling), and movement (e.g., yoga, aikido)—can deepen student engagement and learning (10). When approached with a contemplative mind, course material ceases to be "a set of intellectual hoops...to jump through" but rather "an active opportunity for [students] to find meaning and develop intellectually" (Barbezat and Bush 3). This type of transformation can be powerful for student writers. Composition scholars such as James Moffett, Barry M. Kroll, Christy I. Wenger, Ryan Crawford and Andreas Willhoff have accordingly highlighted a link between contemplative pedagogy and meaningful student

writing—revealing how meditation (among other contemplative practices) fosters more insightful, creative, and focused writing. Building on this work, I propose that meditation-based contemplative pedagogy cultivates transformations of mind capable of inspiring purposeful, attentive, and creative essay revision.

Meditation undoubtedly supports learning in compelling ways. As Tobin Hart summarizes, meditation triggers immediate “physiological relaxation and slowed metabolism, a heightened self-awareness, and feelings of calm” (31). Over time, it enables “improved concentration, empathy, perceptual acuity, a drop in anxiety and stress symptoms, and more effective performance in a broad range of domains” (31). Crawford and Willhoff similarly affirm in the pages of this journal that “Meditation has been proven useful not only in increasing the overall well-being of participants but also in leading to greater insight” (80). My students’ receptiveness to meditation preceding revision is not then surprising. Indeed, students may be yearning for opportunities to embrace revision as a contemplative process.

A contemplative approach to revision is therefore valuable because revision is often perceived as an onerous task. As Catherine Haar acknowledges in *Revision: History, Theory, and Practice*, “There’s perhaps no natural appetite for acts of revision in writing . . . Even at the college level, students may resist revising, dislike it, or do it in perfunctory or desultory ways” (24). This can often entail a focus on error correction rather than “deep revision”—which requires students to “rethink their essay” (Binkley 238). Contemplative pedagogy can open up students to the prospect of “deep revision” because it breathes new and vibrant life into the process. “If more writers regarded revision as creative work,” Cathleen Breidenbach maintains, “they’d approach revision with less dread and more anticipation. To be creative, however, revision needs time and freedom from excessive constraint and regimentation. It needs to remain open and loose and walk on the edge of possibilities” (200).³ Instructors can thus mitigate resistant or mechanical attitudes toward revision by presenting it as an “open,” “loose,” and peacefully reinvigorating process. Doing so will help teach students “that good writing does not need to be the product of stress and duress” (Wilson 176). Yoga, meditation, and freewriting instead relieve stress and afford freedom from “excessive constraint” by cultivating openness of body, mind, and pen.

For these reasons, revision and contemplative pedagogy are natural allies—a pairing that harmonizes with several key concepts in revision scholarship: movement, openness, and depth. “Revision means movement,” Haar underscores in her survey of scholarly definitions of revision. It entails “drafting both up and down, out and in; heeding interior and exterior voices. These images of movement witness to the active, fluid thinking of revision” (Haar 14). This summary recalls Breidenbach’s claim that revision must “remain open and loose” and further echoes Murray’s *Craft of Revision*, which encourages writers to “revise to discover new meanings” and strive for “depth that goes below the surface” (Breidenbach 200; Murray xiv, 168). Yoga and freewriting promote the type of deep, open, and “fluid thinking” that yields effective revision. In cultivating attention and insight, meditation meanwhile teaches students that there is movement in stillness and active intellectual engagement in moments of peace.

3. Breidenbach here builds on work by Donald Murray. See her chapter “Practical Guidelines for Writers and Teachers” in *Revision: History, Theory, and Practice*.

Contemplative Revision: Re-Seeing Nineteenth-Century Woman's Rights Texts

The idea for a contemplative revision workshop emerged in a first-year literature-based writing class shortly after spring break, when my students appeared drained of energy. I asked how they were doing. One student replied in a surprising way: he shared the story of a Friday high school meditation practice and asked if we, too, could integrate meditation into our classroom. Sensing an opportunity to merge contemplative practices with class writing needs, I planned a workshop integrating yoga, meditation, freewriting, and revision. We focused on students' rhetorical analyses of texts from the nineteenth-century woman's rights movement, including Sarah Grimké's "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes" (1837), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "We Are All Bound Up Together" (1866), *The U.S.A. v. Susan B. Anthony* (1873), and a selection from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* (1898). The workshop assumed this sequence: (1) an opening series of yoga postures and movements; (2) a personal meditation; (3) a freewrite; (4) a second, essay-related meditation; and (5) essay revision.

To begin, we pushed the desks to the side and covered the floor in blankets.⁴ We lit candles, played relaxing music, and then joined together in a series of gentle yoga postures and movements beginning with the "mountain pose." I invited my students to stand solidly but calmly on the blankets—feeling their feet grounding into the earth and the earth rising to meet them. I encouraged them to detach from the strain of the day and embrace a moment of peace within their busy, academic lives. With a focus on the breath, we then joined together in several half-sun salutations, followed by seated twists. These practices were chosen to both open the body and mind and also put students at ease with the writing process. Wenger has appropriately characterized student writers "as body-heart-minds who use their physical beings as writing laboratories" (29). Cultivating both "openness (being unfinished)" and "flexibility (in mind and body)" through yoga preserves this characterization while reinforcing core aspects of the writing process (qtd. in Hyde 115).

Afterwards, students sat comfortably on the blankets. At this point, I asked them to meditate on a personal moment when they felt truly happy and peaceful: a moment from a vacation, for instance (such as sitting on the beach); a big moment (e.g., graduating high school); a small but memorable one (e.g., playing with a sibling in the backyard). "Envision it as vividly and intimately as possible," I said. "What do you see? What smells are in the air? How do you feel? Are you touching anything or is anything touching you? What do you hear? Can you taste anything?" This meditation was designed to calm and redirect students' minds from the demands of academic life to a single personal moment imbued with peaceful emotions. By assuaging "the stresses of being a first-year college student," I hoped to in other words "shift the habitual chatter of the mind to cultivate a capacity for deepened awareness, concentration, and insight" (Kroll 120; Hart 29).

After the meditation, we transcribed sensory details from the mind to the page through a freewrite. "Describe this moment in writing," I said. "Be as vivid and precise

4. Editors' note: The description of contemplative practices that follows provides details that are relevant to Catherine Chaterdon's essay, "Contemplative Neuroscience and the Teaching of Writing," this volume of *JAEPL*.

as possible.” Sitting and lying on the blankets, students appeared deeply focused in our candle-lit classroom. Afterwards, two volunteers read their writing to the class. A second meditation followed—this one centered on students’ essays. I asked them to envision the female rhetor they had chosen and the rhetorical context in which she wrote or spoke, imagining sensory details. Perhaps this involved a podium in front of a large crowd. Perhaps it involved the feel of a pen, the creak of a desk, or the stare of a judge in a courtroom. We are typically invested in the experiences of our *own* lives, I said to students, but perhaps might challenge ourselves to more fully engage with the lives and experiences of others. Through this meditation, I hoped students would in other words invest themselves more deeply in the rich words, rhetorical strategies, and exigences of nineteenth-century women rhetors (bearing in mind ways they had invested themselves in their own meaningful moments).

Personal writing was key to this effort. Elizabeth Kimball, Emily Schnee, and Liesl Schwabe advocate for preserving the personal in the face of the learning outcomes assessment movement. Their argument serves as a reminder that personal writing “effectively engages students in the writing process” while simultaneously building essential critical thinking skills (Kimball et al. 113). In our case, personal writing did trigger students’ investment in the writing process—as importantly, it functioned as a gateway to deeper “critical engagement” with nineteenth-century woman’s rights rhetoric (Kimball et al. 129). By linking personal meditation and freewriting with visualization of rhetorical context, I hoped students “adept at playing the game of college” would practice more mindful textual engagement—thereby embarking on revision with newfound focus, motivation, and close attention to language (Clydesdale 180).

Students were offered a choice of two revision exercises: (1) the option to strengthen analysis through vivid, attentive, and life-filled prose; or (2) the option to improve their introduction or conclusion to more strongly interest readers. The first exercise asked students to “look for ways to inject more life, vividness, and precision into your writing” by revising three weak supporting points. I particularly encouraged students to breathe life into vague or general writing—writing that lacked investment. To this end, I asked students to recall their vivid personal freewrites and cultivate a similar stance of deep attention and focus. The second exercise asked students to revise their introduction in order to more fully engage readers—enticing them to read on. Or, they could revise the conclusion to leave a lasting impression on readers. To illustrate these options, I offered examples such as a compelling introductory question, a vivid opening anecdote, or a concrete concluding takeaway. The writing samples that follow illustrate meaningful work completed by students who voluntarily shared aspects of their revision process.⁵

To begin, the writing and oral reflections of two students reveal how a contemplative approach can spark motivation to engage closely and empathetically with course texts.

5. During the first semester in which I integrated contemplative revision, I did not require students to share changes made or planned during the workshop. I therefore draw on voluntarily shared student writing and oral reflections. The following semester, in an effort to capture a wider sample of student revisions, I collected changes made by all students. IRB approval was obtained for both classes. I quote only those students who agreed in writing to the protected use of their data. All student names have been changed to pseudonyms as requested by the Saint Joseph’s University IRB.

The first student, Pierce, used the workshop to listen more deeply to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's "We Are All Bound Up Together" (1866). Specifically, he developed his rhetorical analysis by unpacking a quote in which Harper describes an administrator who "swept the very milk-crocks and wash tubs from my hands" following the death of her husband (Harper). Pierce attended closely to the word "swept," which—as he told us during the workshop—"implies they were overpowering Watkins . . . They didn't drudge through or anything else . . . they swept. Swept is a task you don't think twice about—she has no power and worth to them." His critical thinking here reflects a focused attention to language that is likely attributable to contemplative pedagogy. As Gunnlaugson et al. argue, "contemplative practices help focus the mind"; Kroll similarly notes that mindfulness "helps one to listen well" (Gunnlaugson et al. 2; Kroll 16). More specifically, Pierce practices what Barbezat and Bush term "deep listening"—"a way of hearing in which we are fully present with what is happening in the moment" (137). Relevant not only to sounds but also to written words, deep listening offsets the tendency to "race" through a text. It instead involves more attentive and respectful reading (137).

For Pierce, our contemplative workshop enabled him to listen carefully to the word "swept" and contemplate its meaning within the context of Harper's speech. Ultimately, this inspired Pierce's writing process as it continued beyond the workshop. The following passages (first draft versus final portfolio version) reveal the substantial development in this student's close reading:

Before: [Harper] talks about how the 'administrator swept' through her home taking all she owned leaving her in a more fragile state than she and her family were three months prior.

After: [Harper] talks about how the 'administrator swept' through her home taking all she owned leaving her in a more fragile state than she and her family were three months prior. The administration symbolizes that she is still under a group of people, and that she cannot live a free life. The administration 'swept' as if her home were just a piece of garbage needing to be taken care of and thrown away . . . [T]he administrators . . . feel as if taking away lives and well-beings is as easy as sweeping the floor.

Here, Pierce uses a vivid simile and an attentive eye to describe the "sweeping" actions of the administrator. This effective revision attests to the complementary relationship between contemplative practices and close reading, which requires the type of deep focus that mindfulness cultivates.

A second student, Kingston, revised his analysis of *The U.S.A. v. Susan B. Anthony* (1873) in ways that echo those of Pierce. This student concentrated on the word "prisoner," explaining to us during the workshop that "Susan B. Anthony was called a prisoner, but she wanted to be a human being. I'll write more about her desire to be a human being, a person who lives on this planet." This statement reflects not only Kingston's focus on a key word, but also the possibility that visualization helped him see Anthony (and her purpose) more globally. His final draft—which I quote at length—reveals how the workshop planted crucial seeds for revision. This is evident in a revised paragraph that

begins almost identically to the first draft before diverging:⁶ “As the court case begins, we automatically feel a loss for Anthony coming,” writes Kingston, “This is the beginning point where pathos is used to help emotionally attach the reader. From the very beginning of the discussion between the judge and Anthony he refers to her as ‘prisoner.’” Here, Kingston’s first and final drafts begin to differ significantly:

Before: Anthony begins with ‘I am degraded from the status of a citizen to that of a subject; and not only myself individually, but all of my sex, are, by your honor’s verdict, doomed to political subjection under this so-called Republican government.’ Only for the judge to reply ‘The Court cannot listen to a rehearsal of arguments the prisoner’s counsel has already consumed three hours in presenting.’ It makes us question the entire court case, how can you not listen to someone who is fighting for their right, but for the rights of so many others?

After: Prisoner reflects not only how Anthony feels, but also how she is treated. It can be said that she is a ‘prisoner’ of her own body. The judge’s opening remarks towards Anthony are ‘Has the prisoner have [sic] anything to say?’ and never once stating her name. We start to understand that Anthony is a prisoner to her own sex, nothing more than a person who is alive, but not living. Anthony begins with ‘I am degraded from the status of a citizen to that of a subject; and not only myself individually, but all of my sex, are, by your honor’s verdict, doomed to political subjection under this so-called Republican government.’ Only for the judge to reply ‘The Court cannot listen to a rehearsal of arguments the prisoner’s counsel has already consumed three hours in presenting.’ When Anthony talks about being degraded from a citizen, we see that it directly underlies the meaning of ‘prisoner.’ This particular statement lets the audience understand what type of treatment Anthony [sic] receives, because although she technically is free she is not. She makes us question the entire court case. How can you not listen to someone who is fighting for not only her rights, but for the rights of so many others?

While the first passage contains relevant quotations, the revision unpacks these quotations in deeper relation to issues of social justice. To this end, Kingston also adds a second quotation spotlighting the judge’s dehumanization of Anthony. Kingston’s claim that “Anthony is a prisoner to her own sex, nothing more than a person who is alive, but not living” is particularly meaningful. By reinscribing the word “prisoner,” Kingston characterizes Anthony not as a true court offender but as a political prisoner whose liberties and self-respect have been stripped. The phrase “nothing more than a person who is alive, but not living”—reminiscent of Pierce’s claim that Harper “cannot live a free life”—is further notable in revealing more compassionate and pronounced attention to civil rights violations. Ultimately, Kingston fulfills his intention to “write more about [Anthony’s] desire to be a human being, a person who lives on this planet.”

These two examples demonstrate how contemplative methods nurture attention and deeply connect students with course material (Hart 32). Both Pierce and Kingston offer focused close readings that reflect rhetorical awareness, rich attention to language,

6. I say “almost identically” due to slight differences in the versions. The first draft reads, “As the court case begins we automatically feel a loss for Anthony coming, this is a crucial point where *pathos* is used to help emotionally attach the reader. From the very beginning of the discussion between the judge and Anthony he refers to her as ‘prisoner’ never once stating her name.”

and openness to new insights. These are crucial skills in First-Year English. As Gesa Kirsch similarly contends, contemplative practices “can enhance creativity, listening, and expression of meaning—key goals of most writing courses. They do so by inviting students . . . to practice mindfulness, to become introspective, to listen to the voices of others” (W2). In this case, Pierce and Kingston carefully considered how Harper and Anthony protested oppressive constraints. They approached these nineteenth-century texts as powerfully present—reflecting their motivated, mindful engagement with the words of others.

This contemplative workshop also indicated students’ heightened ability to use language vividly in their own writing. One student, Meghan, completed the introduction/conclusion exercise to improve her essay on *The U.S.A. v. Susan B. Anthony*. Her revised introduction—written in class during the workshop—introduces this text using a vivid reporting style: “November 5, 1872. Rochester, New York. Susan B. Anthony was arrested and put on trial for illegally casting a vote in the Election.” These crisp opening sentences capture readers’ attention like a well-crafted news story. They mark a shift from the first draft’s opening, which lacked a sense of immediacy: “Susan B. Anthony was one of the most influential and dominant figures during a time when women were fighting for their own natural, civil, and political rights.” Meghan explained that she “changed [the introduction] by setting the scene,” shifting from a general to specific orientation. Her revision indicates how contemplative methods promote vividness and concrete detail—important means of engaging readers.

Revision work by Pierce, Kingston, and Meghan overall points to important ways in which contemplative practices can inspire concentrated close reading, vivid writing, and stronger investment in the writing process when such practices precede revision. These are highly valuable outcomes for students who are tasked with revising analysis essays. Ultimately, this initial workshop indicates the potential of contemplative practices to both invigorate minds and produce skills conducive to strong essay revision.

Building Habits of Mind: Contemplative Revision of Rhetorical and Intertextual Analyses

With a burgeoning awareness of the valuable capacities fostered by contemplative revision, I planned a second and more systematically designed workshop prioritizing key habits of mind that had surfaced the previous semester: openness, focused attention, visualization of rhetorical context, and invention of vivid, sensory detail. This second workshop was conducted in a first-year composition class and followed this sequence: (1) gentle yoga; (2) personal meditation; (3) freewriting; (4) revision (focused on close reading); (5) essay-related meditation; and (6) revision (focused on introductions/con-

clusions). Students were asked to revise their rhetorical analyses of a current op-ed and/or their intertextual analyses which compared a written and visual or audio-visual text.⁷

My planning followed this rationale: I emphasized openness by retaining an initial gentle yoga series prefaced by classroom transformations such as a blanket-covered floor, candles, and serene music. The first workshop had suggested how yoga “clears the mind, leaving openness to new and creative ideas” (Barbezat and Bush 168). Combined with a relaxing classroom environment, this use of yoga likely facilitated both Pierce and Kingston’s new textual understandings and Meghan’s creative rewriting of her introduction—as well as all three students’ willingness to perform “deep” versus surface revision. These examples suggested to me the profound value of mind-body-breath connections, which can initiate students into a deep awareness anchored in openness (Barbezat and Bush 168).

Next, I again followed with a personal meditation and freewrite as a means of cultivating focused attention in preparation for close reading and vivid, rhetorically effective writing. Students meditated on a moment when they felt truly happy and content as I encouraged them to “envision it as vividly and intimately as possible, as if you’re there.” Once more, I invited them to see, smell, feel, hear, and taste all the applicable dimensions of the scene—in this way striving to promote concentration on sensory detail. The ability of personal meditation and freewriting to focus attention and inspire creativity is evident in students’ work. “I sit in a chair on the beach with my toes buried deep in the sand, the most natural version of warm socks,” one freewrite begins. “I smell the salt of the ocean, reminding me of the days my family lay on the beach together.” Another freewrite describes a different scene with equally sensory details: “The air was heavy after fallen rain, the sky was dark but we were surrounded by light . . . the explosion of fireworks turning night into day. A rainbow of colors and shapes that dazzled the imagination.” Samples of student writing such as these indicate the value of preceding essay revision with personal meditation and freewriting. Indeed, focusing the mind and pen on intimate details infused with personal meaning can set the stage for more attentive close reading. As one student confirmed, “Thinking deeply about a personal feeling and moment definitely helped me to unpack and understand how to analyze the work’s moment in detail.”

Focused attention—a byproduct of students’ personal mediation and freewriting—in other words drives effective close reading. With this in mind, I underscored links between the personal freewrite and focused, engaged essay revision. “You just described a moment in very close detail. You paid attention to all the dimensions of that moment. Now, select one moment in any of your three texts,” I told students, “and try to inject some of the same life into your essay writing. Try to think about this moment in the same vivid, close detail.” To optimize students’ focused attention to the textual moment, I offered a catalog

7. Some text options for the rhetorical analysis included: “Why Scandinavian Prisons are Superior” (*The Atlantic*); “From Prison to Paycheck” (*Wall Street Journal*); “We Must Demilitarize the Police” (*TIME*); and “Graying Prisoners” (*New York Times*). Some text options for the intertextual analysis included: Martin O’Malley’s “Repealing Capital Punishment in MD”; Ani DiFranco’s “Crime for Crime”; Bruce Springsteen’s “Dead Man Walking”; selected photographs from Ken Light’s *Texas Death Row*; Michelle Obama’s “Remarks by the First Lady at the 2014 National Alliance to End Homelessness Annual Conference”; George Carlin’s “Homelessness and Golf”; and Andres Serrano’s “Residents of New York” photograph series.

of guiding questions: “What do you think or feel in this moment?” I asked. “What grabs you? Why?” My guiding questions also addressed specific components of written and visual/audio-visual texts:

- *Written Texts*: How does each word matter? What are the strongest words, the most powerful words, the words that evoke the most feeling? What associations come to mind when you read these words? What is the tone with which they’re delivered? Why is this important?
- *Photographs and Audio-Visual Texts*: How does each detail matter? How does facial expression and body language matter? What mood is set? How? What emotions are heightened? How? For songs, does the voice waver? Does the voice escalate—grow more passionate?

These questions aimed to encourage students to analyze the moment as deeply, vividly, and precisely as possible—recalling the stance they adopted during their rich, intimate descriptions of personal memories. Students were asked to strengthen a close reading already present in their first draft or otherwise choose a new moment to analyze. The following revision examples illustrate how students mindfully pursued both options.

First, students revised close readings lacking depth and precision in their first drafts. I will highlight the revision work of one student, Caryn, who analyzed a photograph from Andres Serrano’s 2014 “Residents of New York” series documenting homelessness in the five boroughs. This example showcases meaningful revisions that Caryn completed in class during the workshop.

Before: Because of the sign that he is holding, we know that this was a man who served in the Vietnam War, fighting for the safety of our country, and yet now is left alone to fend for himself and his family. Serrano specifically captured the portrait of this man to provoke sympathy towards veterans who have no place to go and are in need of help.

After: The dog tag and key are directly in the center of the picture drawing obvious attention to it...The dog tag and key play a large role in the message that this picture is trying to convey The fact that he is a veteran shows that he is a hard working, strong, dedicated person. I think this detail of the picture is so important and meaningful because it is trying to make a point to the audience that this man is homeless through no fault of his own. I feel as if a misconception that is held by many people is that the homeless became homeless because of something they did. However, for many, by mere circumstance this came about. The dog tag illustrates that this soldier veteran has character and dignity and deserves to be helped; after all he did sacrifice his own safety to protect our country.

Here, Caryn analyzes important symbols. She unpacks the significance of the dog tag in the context of the picture’s overarching argument, which debunks the myth of personal responsibility. The revision thus reflects Caryn’s growing social consciousness and attention to structural causes of homelessness. Notably, Caryn credits the meditative workshop for promoting focused thinking: “I never had a writing experience like this before but I definitely liked it,” she explains. “I think I was able to think better and more

clearly when I was in this relaxed setting.” This comment reinforces the link between calmness and concentrated analysis when essay revision is conducted in a contemplative frame of mind.

Caryn’s final draft reflects even further progression. She devotes an entire paragraph to the dog tag and key—attending mindfully to visual details such as the striking placement of the tag and key over the sign:

Wrapped around his neck are the veteran’s dog tags and key. These items are located in the center of the photograph and are one of the first things that you notice. They strategically hang over the sign, not tucked inside his jacket, because they play a part in telling the veteran’s story. The dog tag represent [sic] the pride which the veteran had in serving his country Seeing the dog tag forces the viewer to acknowledge the strength and courage this man had to risk his life for our own. This recognition helps us to sympathize with the man and encourage the audience to take action to put an end to veteran homelessness. The house key suggests that the man once owned a home where he supported his family, but perhaps lost it because of financial reasons Serrano specifically captured the portrait of this man to provoke sympathy towards veterans who have no place to go and are in need of help.

This final draft showcases crisp prose and an attentive eye. The seeds planted during the revision workshop are more fully developed here—evident in deeper attention to the dogtag and new examination of the house key, which Caryn identified during her workshop revision but did not analyze until this point. These changes indicate how contemplative methods generated focused attention beneficial to Caryn’s writing process.

Second, students closely analyzed moments they did not consider in their first drafts. One new close reading by Kim (also conducted on Serrano’s “Residents of New York” series) uses vivid similes and metaphors to closely unpack the photograph. “The man’s face sits tilted like a time clock as though everything is just ticking,” she writes. “His wrinkles drip down his face like showing the pain and suffering he experiences daily.” Here, the clock simile and alliterative metaphor (“wrinkles drip down”) reflect creative concentration. Indeed, contemplative revision has the potential to simultaneously build focus and vividness. Kim noted during the reflection that “I liked [the workshop] because it was different than what I was used to. I like change so it made me more focused.” It is possible this difference inspired not only deeper focus, but a writing style open to creative experimentation. Breidenbach argues that a central challenge is finding ways “to keep the spark of creativity alive in revision” (200). Contemplative pedagogy offers one vibrant catalyst for the type of focused attention that is alive with creativity.

The next phase of the workshop introduced visualization of rhetorical context. This essay-based meditation asked students to imagine themselves as the author, photographer, comedian or musician of their chosen op-ed, speech, photograph, comedic skit, or music video. Afterwards, students revised their introduction or conclusion. My rationale for this sequence centered on motivating students to write in rhetorically powerful ways. To this end, I asked students to close their eyes and imagine themselves “invested in this issue; deep in the process of writing, photographing, speaking, or singing.” As students opened their eyes, I emphasized that these authors (in most cases) were highly motivated individuals concerned about the social issues in question. This may have resonated with

students' existing knowledge of rhetorical situations, as we had previously defined an arguer as "a person who is motivated to initiate the argument, to take a position on the issue . . . and to communicate a position to others" (Wood 12).⁸

I asked students: how can you make *your* readers care too? How can your introduction better engage readers? Entice them with life-filled words? How can your conclusion leave a lasting impression rather than simply restate points in a dull, rote manner? What resulted were students' heightened efforts to engage their readers with enhanced style—especially vivid, sensory detail. Beyond this, one student's revised conclusion reveals how this essay-based meditation prompted nuanced attention to a text's purpose.

First, one revised introduction emblemizes an engaging, sensory style. This student, Mark, wrote: "In the midst of winter while families gather around the fire in their nice heated homes and enjoy life, the streets are anything but joyful. Families huddle . . . and try to share their warmth. As snowflakes begin to fall, families rapidly seek some sort of shelter and pray that they will make it through the night." Mark's rich imagery—penned in class during the workshop—resonates with the workshop's overall emphasis on vivid, life-filled language. It marks a significant improvement from his previous opening, which stated that "[h]omelessness has become a significant and unfortunate problem in the United States."⁹ Notably, Mark sustains vivid imagery in his final draft:

In the midst of a bitter winter, households find comfort as they gather around the fire and share the joy of the holidays with their loved ones. The holidays are a time for joy and giving thanks, but outside it is anything but joyous. Outside in the bitter cold, hundreds of thousands of Americans struggle to find warmth. People huddle together in an attempt to share warmth and make it through the night. Every day is a struggle and a fight for survival, yet they garner little sympathy from the American public and government.

This final revision uses holiday associations to establish common ground with readers before juxtaposing these associations with the reality of homelessness. Overall, Mark's revision work suggests a link between contemplative exercises and students' improved capacity to engage readers with vivid, sensory detail.

Students also revised their conclusions in rhetorically effective ways. Tom, for instance, worked to stimulate reader action through crisply structured sentences and imagery. Substantial growth is evident in this revision of his intertextual analysis on Michelle Obama's "National Alliance to End Homelessness" Conference Speech and a photograph from Serrano's series:

Before: Homelessness is a horrible growing predicament in the United States today. Every day more and more people are becoming homeless. So what do we do now? Like Michelle Obama said, the problem is slowly decreasing, but it is still happening today. We know homelessness is bad, we can see it in Serrano's photos. What we have to do is have more and more people step up and help fight against this problem. With more and more

8. Here, I reference our course textbook, Nancy V. Wood's *Essentials of Argument*.

9. Aside from a statistic reporting the number of people experiencing homelessness on a given night in 2013, the original opening overall contained little to grip readers. Mark's final draft folds this statistic into the descriptive image ("Outside in the bitter cold, hundreds of thousands of Americans struggle to find warmth").

support I believe that this problem can be resolved.

After: Homelessness is a horrible growing predicament in the United States today. It demoralizes the human suffering through it. Sadly, even though we are aware of homelessness, the general public does nothing about it. Imagine yourself in their shoes. Tired, worn out, cold, and sick. It is time for America to wake up and do something about this crisis.

The first draft, while concluding with a proposal claim (“have more and more people step up”), does not clarify precisely who these “people” are and oversimplifies the solution with a vague remedy (“With more and more support I believe that this problem can be resolved”). The in-class revision bolsters the call to action by challenging readers to practice empathy toward other human beings. Tom’s terse catalog of vivid adjectives heightens the stakes—an effective segue into the concluding appeal.

Another student revised her conclusion in ways that demonstrate sophisticated thinking about rhetorical impact and purpose. This student, Sarah, strengthened her rhetorical analysis of Doran Larson’s *Atlantic* article, “Why Scandinavian Prisons Are Superior” (2013). In her first draft, Sarah concluded that “Larson is able to convince any type of reader that American prisons need very serious help.” In her workshop revision, she reflects more carefully on the function of this op-ed, while also heightening the rhetorical impact of her own conclusion. “If one nation can make this change for the better,” she writes, “what is to stop another from doing the same. Although Larson’s argument does not give us a plan of action, it gives us something nearly as important—a conversation topic.” Here, Sarah nuances Larson’s purpose, foregrounds a strong analogy (“If one nation can make this change...”), and inserts her own readers into the “conversation.” She asserts that “Human kind is distinguished by its gift of conversation and innovation and change can happen. However for it to happen, it has to start with the conversation.” Sarah invites readers to participate in a conversation that can spark change, concluding her own paper but shifting responsibility into their hands.

Her final draft accomplishes this shift in a new and more explicit way. She argues that Larson “leaves any persuaded reader with the responsibility to see out [his] dreams” and lists concrete steps various types of readers (from citizens to policy makers) might take, including voting, advocacy, or “investing in an open prison prototype.” Sarah’s revisions suggest ways in which meditative visualization can aid students in both rhetorically analyzing and revising texts. Overall, work by Mark, Tom, and Sarah supports links between contemplative practices and more rhetorically powerful prose. Revisions by Mark and Tom additionally indicate how such practices can drive the invention of vivid, sensory detail. This habit of mind—initially fostered by personal meditation and freewriting—is maintained by essay-based meditation on rhetorical considerations such as an author’s purpose and audience engagement.

Student testimonials from this workshop support the rich potential of contemplative practices to build all four habits of mind: openness; focused attention; visualization of rhetorical context; and invention of vivid, sensory detail. To begin, one student wrote that the workshop “helped me open up and really made me be able to put my voice into my writing.” A second announced, “I enjoyed this workshop! . . . I think the meditation and yoga gave a different meaning to essay revising. It shows that the tra-

ditional classroom setting is not always necessary. I enjoy other avenues to learn.” Both of these testimonials underscore the value of openness. While the first comment links openness with the application of personal voice, the second suggests that contemplative pedagogy can help students “re-see” essay revision—or as this student puts it, embrace new “avenues to learn.” For both of these students, openness is also a conduit for more motivated revision. The second testimonial uses the verb “enjoy” twice; meanwhile, the first anticipates proactively using contemplative methods in the future: “I plan on using similar techniques from now on when I write. I hope to be able to use this exercise and these techniques to improve my writing in the future. Maybe this will help my writing for the rest of my college career.” It is encouraging to see such openness to writing and revision result from contemplative methods.

Testimonials also uphold the link between contemplative practices and focused attention needed for stronger analysis and revision. “I think this particular workshop made me focus more and helped me analyze the text better,” one student said. “I didn’t have as many distractions and wasn’t thinking about anything that took my attention away from my paper.” Another student described her focus as “much better than a normal ICW,” while a third echoed that “it helped me clear my mind...I would like to do this again in the future.” These student comments reinforce the interrelations of motivation, focus, and relaxation. As Wenger attests, “The greater [students’] powers of attention, the more likely they will be motivated to continue writing, and the less likely they will be blocked by stress or anxiety” (34). This was an especially powerful realization for a fourth student who reflected, “For the first time I feel like I have found my peaceful place to go to with writing.”¹⁰ His comment reminds us that teaching writing—and meaningful revision—requires extending students opportunities to cultivate peace as a starting point.

Other testimonials remark on rhetorical awareness and the invention of vivid detail. First, one student asserted “the workshop was a success. It helped to open my mind and allowed to view writing these essays in different ways. Instead of just presenting the facts and explain them, I can also use more analysis and emotion to get my points across.” This comment not only reinforces the value of openness, but also implies ways in which visualization may have stimulated greater rhetorical awareness (particularly, through a reexamination of the artistic proofs used “to get my points across”). At the very least, contemplative methods appear to have awakened this student to new rhetorical possibilities—a valuable mindset for revision. A final and equally valuable capacity is the invention of vivid detail. Aside from students’ freewrites and essay revisions, evidence of this is present in a testimonial noting explicitly that the workshop “helped me being more descriptive.” Considered together, these reflections affirm that contemplative practices foster valuable habits of mind with clear benefits for revision.

Looking Ahead: Future Expansion and Further Research

This exploratory project has suggested that contemplative pedagogy builds essential capacities for revision, sparking student motivation along the way. As indicated by student writing and oral reflections from these two workshops, a contemplative approach to revision can inspire open-minded thinking, concentrated attention to course texts,

10. This student also said to me after class, “It was the most peaceful I ever felt writing.”

new rhetorical insights, and vivid style. Moving forward, I will seek to sustain students' contemplative mindset across the entire semester—both within and beyond the classroom. This is particularly important given one shortcoming that emerged upon reviewing some students' end-of-semester portfolios. While many final drafts (including those by Pierce, Kingston, Caryn, and Mark) preserve and often advance observations and revisions made during the workshops, others do not reflect the same mindful attention to language and rhetorical context. Two examples illustrate this point.

First, Kim's final draft on Serrano's "Residents of New York" series did not contain the vivid figurative language penned in class during the contemplative workshop ("The man's face sits tilted like a time clock" / "His wrinkles drip down"). Instead, she writes that the man "appears to be rather young but his face shows wrinkles and distress on his forehead and chin. These wrinkles are symbolic because it shows that homelessness can take a huge toll on people." Although this close reading is fairly attentive, her language takes less creative risks and her analysis lacks intimacy. One explanation is that she simply lost the loose leaf on which the changes were recorded. It is also possible that Kim reverted back to ingrained, perceived habits for academic writing.¹¹ A second example is the conclusion to Tom's intertextual analysis. His final draft—which tasks "the youth of America" to lead the fight against homelessness—notably lacks the powerful phrase "Tired, worn out, cold, and sick," along with the corresponding call for empathy.

To ameliorate this, I will hold two to three contemplative workshops per semester moving forward to ensure students do not lose sight of their vivid, sensory writing. I will also consider ways to better bridge in-class contemplative revision with revision done outside of class. Possibilities include at-home contemplative exercises and readings accompanied by follow-up class discussion. Students might also keep journals that record and reflect on their contemplative revision practices throughout a semester. Finally, a more comprehensive incorporation of mindfulness into the writing process (beginning with pre-writing and moving through drafting into revision) may most fully support first-year students' growth as writers.

Contemplative pedagogy has enormous potential to positively transform essay revision. This exploration has suggested that yoga, freewriting, and meditation can significantly enrich revision by inspiring more motivated, focused, rhetorically aware, and vibrant writing. Composition instructors would benefit now from research that more closely investigates links between revision and contemplative practices. If these practices support revision as relevantly as they appear to, it follows that more First-Year English courses (as well as writing courses of all kinds) might embrace the role of contemplative pedagogy in generating these valuable habits of mind.



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