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The Missing Body—Yoga and Higher Education

Cover Page Footnote

Judith Beth Cohen is core faculty in the Interdisciplinary Studies Master's Program at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA. She is the author of *Seasons*, a novel, numerous short stories, and several articles on adult learners.

The Missing Body—Yoga and Higher Education

Judith Beth Cohen

When I practice Yoga, I imagine a female serpent awakening at the base of my spine. My breath moves her slowly upward to the crown of my head where she will emerge to unite with her spouse. This erotic metaphor of mind/body integration helps me to experience breath as a form of thought linking me to invisible sources of energy. After half a life as a fairly sedentary academic, I'd become a serious student of Yoga. Skeptical of New Age fads, I was reluctant to plunge in, but after months of practice my energy level increased, my concentration deepened, and my mental acuity sharpened. Hatha Yoga's relative absence of dogma and its rigorous mix of breath-work, strength, and flexibility training helped to demolish many assumptions about my aging female body. In a strange reversal of time, I'd become physically stronger and more flexible at sixty than I'd been in my youth. Yet in class I continued to behave as if my students and I were no more than talking heads. During one day long seminar, I noticed many of them sprawled on the floor in various postures as if their bodies were crying out for movement even if it wasn't on the syllabus. So I posed myself a challenge. If I was serious about mind/body integration, why did I continue to operate like a Cartesian dualist in my classroom? This led me to explore the body's role in development and learning and to change the way I teach.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to educational engagement is our student's learned passivity, the result of years spent watching television or sitting in school. When their bodies are not engaged, they easily tune out or turn off. Yet they willingly pay for dance, martial arts, or Yoga classes as extra curricular activities. These body-based practices are most often sought for reducing health problems, lowering stress, or meeting spiritual needs, but I was curious about the overall cognitive advantages that come from somatic engagement. Beyond the obvious benefits of harnessing attention and relieving stress, such activities promote the kinesthetic, somatic, and cognitive integration that most accurately reflects the way our brains operate. When I coordinate inhaling and exhaling while moving, simultaneously attending to breath, balance, and alignment, I harness my energy for a single purpose. My thoughts scatter less, and my concentration deepens. This inward focus does not lead to self-obsession; in fact, bringing the body into the classroom makes us better observers of the plight of human bodies, whether the issue be prisoner abuse, starvation, terrorism, or war. The educational fragmentation that leaves the body out of learning, despite ample evidence of its centrality, is more likely to produce further such abominations.

In this essay I hope to provoke many ideas about ways to actively engage the body in learning.

Why Yoga?

Yoga philosophy has much in common with the educational theories that

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have influenced my pedagogy. Like progressive educational practices, Yoga promotes major life changes through a continuum of theory and practice. Scholar George Feuerstein describes Yoga as “a gradual process of replacing our conscious patterns of thought and behavior with new, more benign patterns . . . expressive of the higher powers and virtues of self-realization” (“Ten” 3). Similarly progressive and liberatory pedagogies strive for deeper self-awareness and freedom from entrenched patterns of behavior. The Sanskrit word *yoga*, “to yoke,” encompasses both the physical discipline and the spiritual concept of union or wholeness, but one need not be a supernatural seeker to reap its benefits. Though traditional Yoga sought to overcome the body’s limitations by reaching toward a higher spiritual state, our current understanding of mind/body wholeness allows us to reject this binary, hierarchical view. In its non-theistic forms, Yoga envisions liberation taking place in ordinary life, with no ascetic behavior required (“Ten”). Though Yoga’s roots go back 2000 years to Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist traditions in India, today it has become a transnational phenomenon, shaped by the cultures in which it lives (“Yoga” 2).

Hatha-Yoga, one of seven branches, uses the body as a route toward fuller human development (Feuerstein, “Ten” 1). *Ha* (sun) and *Tha* (moon) represent a balance between opposites: day and night, light and dark. Improved balance as well as greater physical strength and flexibility results from an integration of breath work, physical postures, and meditation. Eventually the qualities of strength and flexibility become embodied at an unconscious level and begin to infuse my life. As I maintain a tree pose, standing on one leg with my arms outspread, I am enacting both balance and stability. Strength acquired through repeating these poses or asanas decreases my sense of vulnerability and gives me a greater ability to focus and concentrate. Indeed, flexibility becomes more than a physical attribute; it is transformed into a living metaphor for accepting change and tolerating ambiguity, deepening my ability to deal with complex issues whether they be personal, political, or academic. Like Buddhism, Yoga offers a way to balance our high tech culture’s constant distractions. Agonizing over one’s appearance, possessions, or relationships only causes suffering, for we cannot control these aspects of our lives.

Research on the bodily basis of cognition supports Yoga’s ancient insights about the body/mind connection. Convincing evidence for acknowledging the body’s role in pedagogy comes from the neurologist’s laboratory. Antonio Damasio argues that consciousness originates in a pre-linguistic core self that maintains survival by taking its cues from the body. He pictures the brain as “the body’s captive audience” (150). The emotions and feelings that consciousness is based on emerge from bodily encounters with external objects. As Damasio so cleverly puts it: “Body-minded minds help save the body” (143). Without mental images drawn from these physical experiences, survival and human consciousness would be impossible, for we would be unable to connect “the biological machinery of life regulation and the biological machinery of thought” (304). Because we are drawn to focus outward on the external environment, this internal process remains hidden by a metaphorical veil, yet “I am, therefore I think” is a more accurate statement than Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am.”

Damasio’s research supports the argument of philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson who remind us how outdated our current discourse remains. Whether we assume Descartes’s notion of the body as a machine, independent of

reason, or the more ancient image of a homonculus, a little man living in our heads, our concepts have not kept pace with science's discoveries (5). Despite the persistent denial of our bodily reality in intellectual discourse, these authors insist that our rational faculties emerge from the structural "details of our embodiment" and that reason itself "is shaped by our bodies' peculiarities, our brain's neural structures, and our everyday functioning in the world" (4). Such fundamental concepts as up and down, near and far, more or less depend upon images derived from our bodily experiences. Even our intellectual discourse is shaped by the material world of architecture for we speak of arguments as "constructed" or "built" upon "foundations" (Johnson 102-107). If emotion, reason, and consciousness are deeply rooted in the body, then leaving the body out of education is all the more irrational.

Yoga and Pedagogy

John Dewey implicitly included body-based learning when he urged pedagogues to make experience central to education. As early as 1898 he argued against the dualistic notion that thought and action or theory and practice could be separated, thus challenging the prevailing belief that theorizing was the superior endeavor. Dewey envisioned the university as a bridge between the mind and the material world (Hein). Building upon Dewey, Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, especially influential in adult pedagogy, likewise refuses to divorce learning from direct experience. Mezirow argues that education should lead students away from their old habits of mind and outmoded assumptions to a wider array of choices. This happens when they reflect critically upon their own lives and analyze their underlying assumptions. Educational paths to transformation must encompass more than the cognitive realm since experience includes our corporeal lives as well as our thoughts and ideas.

Feminist theorists also envision self-knowledge as a path toward liberation. Developmentalists like Mary Field Belenky and her collaborators stress the relational aspects of epistemology, often overlooked in studies based upon male reasoning. The women she and her colleagues interviewed construct knowledge by making connections between their personal experiences and abstract ideas, a process similar to that described by Damasio, Lakoff and Johnson, Dewey, and Mezirow. Feminists go further when they point out how cultural attitudes about women's bodies inscribed on our psyches and our institutions limit us and often produce pathologies like anorexia nervosa and self-harming. Philosopher Susan Bordo highlights the danger of denying the materiality of human experiences and critiques postmodernist and feminist thinkers who dismiss the body as simply another text. She reports on a personal encounter with academic prejudice when she learned of her failure to get a position because she "moved her body too much during the interview" (284). Bordo reminds us that we cannot take the body out of human history, whether we're talking about Nazi crematoria or contemporary events like suicide bombs and hurricane disasters.

Central to Yoga practice is pausing to notice what the body does and feels. "Reflection," sometimes called "critical reflection," has been identified as central to significant learning by a number of educators, notably Mezirow, Donald Schon, and Robert Tremmel. In our rush for "coverage," we often deprive students of the time to look back and make meaning of their studies. Just yesterday a colleague was told by the department chair to add two more books to an

already packed syllabus; the only rationale was that requirements should be consistent across sections. Clearly, asking students to reflect upon their reading is not a high value in this department. Schon, whose work focuses on professional education, defines reflection as “knowing-in-action” (*Reflective* 72). It’s possible to be both thoughtful and active at the same time; one need not be sitting in silent meditation to be reflective. As teachers, we’re used to enacting three functions simultaneously: attending to classroom reality, accessing our intuitive responses, and examining alternative ways of proceeding. Like Dewey, who called for melding theory and practice, Schon regards teachers as researchers whose laboratory is the classroom. In that sense, educators are like Yoga practitioners who regard their bodies as the research site.

Building upon Schon’s work, Robert Tremmel reminds us that genuine reflection involves more than thinking about something; it must be cultivated (442). For that he turns to eastern teachings like Zen Buddhism. Buddhism defines mindfulness as intentional, non-judgmental, moment to moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn). Since mindfulness asks that we constantly call our attention back to the here and now, Tremmel finds this metaphor of returning again and again to express accurately the purpose of reflection. Ideally, one brings awareness to an action as it is taking place and stays attentive, rather than using a pat response (449). Jon Kabat-Zinn’s Center for Mindfulness (CFM) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School was originally designed for patients dealing with chronic pain and life threatening diseases. Using mindfulness practice as a basis, CFM has spawned two hundred new programs and is increasingly being applied in educational settings (Waring 21). For those who find disciplined attention difficult to maintain, Yoga poses and breathing exercises offer tools for deepening one’s ability to pay attention and reflect on what one notices.

Yoga and the Schools

Yoga has been introduced into the elementary school curriculum in many parts of the US, Canada, Europe, India, Australia, and South Africa. Advocates make impressive claims about its positive effects, such as better concentration and test performance, decreased Hyperactivity, and relief from asthma, but these accounts are largely anecdotal. Medically based research studies on Yoga and education coming from India tell us about Yoga’s positive effects on muscle power, dexterity, and visual perception in young girls (Raghuraj and Telles). Girls who have engaged in Yoga solve puzzles faster than girls who haven’t (Manjunath and Telles), and medical students who practiced Yoga before and after taking exams showed measurable psycho-physiological changes (Malathi and Damodaran). Such “hard” evidence may help persuade skeptics that Yoga is more than a New Age fad, but these controlled studies seem paradoxically reductionist in light of Yoga’s doctrine of wholeness (Feuerstein, “Yoga”). Some American elementary schools are beginning to acknowledge the body’s place in learning (though the recent emphasis on standardized testing is threatening these innovations). James Zull and Eric Jensen both urge elementary educators to include the body in academics rather than relegating it to athletics or extra curricular work. Citing research from brain studies, human development, and ergonomics, Jensen argues for the inclusion of activities like stretching and walking in the learning process (34). Using Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence theory, which identifies kinesthetic, musical, and spatial intelligences as important, educators have designed curricula

for teaching academic subjects using movement, music, art, and other active forms of learning (*Frames*).

When it comes to body awareness, the business world is ahead of universities. Readers of *Training and Development* are told that a three-minute breathing exercise can change group interaction more effectively than a thirty-minute presentation on organizational behavior (Weiss 67). We may acknowledge that our students' bodies are more than inconvenient baggage needing bathroom breaks, yet the universities I searched address the active body only in physical education or health studies departments. In our own Interdisciplinary Studies Master's program (Lesley University), students can combine subjects like writing and environmental studies or art and technology to create a unique degree focus, yet their bodies move only if they elect classes devoted to dance or drama. Theories of gender, race, and disability may have moved discourse about bodies onto the syllabus, but discussants sit passively, often uncomfortably, and it's rare to find the actual bodies of students engaged in a college classroom.

The Language Problem

The term "embodied education" has multiple meanings, and it's difficult to find a shared vocabulary on this topic. In a review of higher education literature on embodied learning, Tara Amann (herself a Yoga teacher) found an assortment of definitions. "Somatic" refers to experiences like role-playing or art-making; "Kinesthetic" involved moving muscles, joints, and tendons; "Sensory" includes activities which involved sight, hearing, taste, and touch; "Affective" deals with emotions, and finally "Spiritual" encompasses notions of transcendence and philosophy. Despite these discrete labels, the categories contain many overlapping activities (Amann). If we reject the mind/body dichotomy, we need a unified way of describing what we mean. A group of Canadian educators have chosen the word "bodymind" to capture the integration of thinking, being, doing, and interacting. To them, "knowledge does not reside in body or mind but in interactions with world" (Miller vii).

Composition theorist Kristie S. Fleckenstein has a similar suggestion. For her, the concept of "somatic mind" recognizes the fluidity of boundaries between the material world and discourse with each one influencing the other in a continuous process (286). Just as our cellular DNA operates from a back and forth flow, our somatic minds can change our corporeal situation (288). Fleckenstein's notion of somatic mind resonates with Damasio's view of consciousness and Lakoff and Johnson's image of reason emerging from bodies interacting with objects in the environment. To address this body/mind problem, Fleckenstein advocates a form of writing in composition studies that is simultaneously immersed and emerging. As she puts it: "the writing figure cannot be separated from the figure writing . . . both are immanent in the other" (296). Like Bordo, Fleckenstein criticizes postmodernist approaches that reduce everything to discourse; if we remove bodies thus "denying the language of blood and bone," we cripple and undermine the potential power of discourse to transform our pedagogies (283).

As a writing teacher and thesis director, I encourage students to include personal narratives in their academic work, and I reject polarizing expressive and cognitively based writing as distinct genres. Elsewhere, I have argued that

examining one's own story can lead to livelier research papers, since students are motivated to answer their own burning question (Cohen). With mature students, personal narrative writing can reveal unconscious assumptions and unquestioned cultural scripts, leading to reflection and deeper critical thinking. Narrative writing can be a powerful container for experiences that involve the body, leading to real life changes. When Nancy, an adult student, embodied her learning by narrating her experience of sexual abuse, she became curious about its causes and prevention. Her research led from an academic inquiry to action when she became an advocate for battered women. Sequenced assignments that move from personal stories to research help students connect theories, experiences, and action ("to immerse and emerge" in Fleckenstein's words). As a result of writing, reflecting, and revising, I've seen women who doubted their intellectual ability reclaim their intelligence, and men whose identity was based on "macho" silence become more flexible thinkers (Cohen; Cohen and Piper).

Still, my Yoga practice continues to raise questions about the sufficiency of language for fully capturing the bodily elements of our lives. Combining Yoga exercises with writing can help address the language gap since the process of movement, breathing, and self-observation requires simultaneous immersion in internal experience and emergence through external observations. Two of my recent graduate students tried to bridge this language/body barrier. Sara Latta, working on an MFA in creative writing, developed a Writing/Yoga retreat to fulfill an interdisciplinary requirement. At the end of a challenging Yoga class, she'd solved a problem she'd been wrestling with in her novel: "It was as if the asanas or poses had . . . liberated this knowledge trapped in my body." To share this process with other writers, she and a colleague designed a retreat they co-led with a Yoga instructor. Using selected concepts of Yoga philosophy (called Yamas), they generated writing exercises to go with the physical postures. For example, focusing on Ahimsa or non-violence, they asked participants to abandon the separation between themselves and a character they disliked in their work, then spend ten minutes writing from that character's point of view. In another session, the class focused on poses that required twists (intended to turn the mind inward and encourage self-study). Then they asked the group to freewrite in response to a list of prompts intended to elicit vivid, emotional responses. Finally, students listed specific writing projects and reflected on ways Yoga insights might apply to them. In this workshop, movement, discourse, and reflection are seamlessly combined so these artificial categories disappear. In the more linear college classroom, such melding offers greater challenges.

Dunya McPherson, a professional dancer in Lesley's Independent Study degree program was writing her master's thesis on dance as a spiritual practice. She searched the dance literature for literary models. After extensive reading in dancer's memoirs and spiritual autobiographies, she was disappointed to find "the narration located in the disembodied mind. The body was an object and the dance existed as an abstract subject." In her search for writing that "initiated somatic resonance in the reader," she discovered clues in the literary memoirs of Harry Crews, Vivian Gornick, and Tobias Wolff: "Their ability to move fluidly through time and jump realities illuminated my interior space, much in the way I wanted to illuminate my reader's somatic field" (McPherson). Gretel Erlich's *This Cold Heaven; Seven Seasons in Greenland* resonated for her. Erlich's travel memoir reveals scant personal material about the writer, yet her evocations of the land-

scape made Dunya “feel the text” in her body (McPherson). Images such as “my eyes had been smeared with ground glass” (Erllich 194) or “ice pinched and pocked like old skin” (310) were especially powerful for her. As she revised her memoir about her long career as a dancer and Sufi teacher, Dunya continually sought to “substitute my body for Ehrlich’s Greenland.”

Yoga in the Classroom

Inspired by both my students and my budding Yoga practice, I now incorporate many Yoga-based mind/body strategies into my classes. Since I teach in a variety of formats including week-long intensives, weekend sessions, and day-long sessions geared toward adult graduate students, I have much time flexibility. However, the following ideas could be easily adapted to more traditional class settings. In a core requirement for the Master’s program (*Ways of Knowing: How We Make Meaning*), a course that examines and critiques the western paradigm, I ask students to identify their strongest “intelligence” using an inventory based upon Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence theory (*Frames*). Their first assignment is to engage in an activity in their weakest domain, record their observations, and then share their discoveries with the class. Half the students select body-based activities, further evidence of their yearning to integrate somatic experiences with their academic work. For her project, Sarah Warren, a preschool teacher passionate about her inner city children, reluctantly signed up for Yoga classes. Though she appeared to be fit and agile, Sarah was frank about her bodily discomfort:

I consider my body to be a heavy jangle of parts. It seems to get in my way of knowing the world, causing embarrassment. . . . My body has failed me before . . . my mind has too, but it’s hard to hold your brain in contempt the way you can your body.

Sarah’s image of her body and brain as distinct entities illustrates Lakoff and Johnson’s point that our linguistic concepts lag behind what is known about body/mind integration. When we address this contradiction directly, we begin to notice changes:

The teacher comes over during the downward facing dog routine and tells me to stick my butt in the air more and to bend my knees a little. Something changes, something serious. I feel this whole other kind of stretch happening. She asks me to focus, to really focus on what I’m about to do before I do it; I try again; I hold the tree pose. . . . I begin to carry the teachings to the rest of my life. I pay attention to my shoulders and what their position tells me about my stress level and mood, I tell myself to breathe more . . . it seems to take a great deal of awareness to help the body be integrated with the mind (Warren).

Sarah moves toward integration as she “pays attention” to stress in her body and connects this with her mood, an observation she did not make before her Yoga experience.

Mary Sheys, an academically oriented scholar, chose to embark on a weight loss/exercise program which lasted the entire semester. She wrote: “When pro-

cessing through experience of the body . . . the intrinsically valuable outcomes are not recognized in traditional academic contexts. . . . This knowing is new—I think it will allow me to synthesize thought more easily as I learn how to produce through process, not just product.” Though we use the notion of process often, especially in regard to writing, it is easier to grasp with bodily engagement.

Fatma, a woman from Egypt, chose to take Swing Dancing lessons. She told us that women in her culture cannot be touched, that dancers are considered “bad women.” Her self-image was that of “a brain on a stick,” but the experience of moving her body made her feel alive in a new way. Other activities students have chosen for this assignment include studying meditation, kick boxing, and practicing Japanese swordsmanship. The challenge to engage bodily and then reflect on the experience could be integrated into any number of writing exercises.

In addition to these “homework” assignments, I also bring body-based activities into real class time. The changes are small, but I try to model the observation, reflection, and critical thinking that I wish students to practice. During a discussion, I remind them to listen without judgment before leaping into a defensive position or a rushed response. When discourse is the dominant mode, silence can be welcome. Before turning inward, students can observe the absence of noise. What do they notice? How unusual is it to be silent in a group? Moments like these can disrupt patterns in which the same people jump in with answers. Those who tend to be quieter or less articulate may feel a space opened for them.

When using freewriting, I add some breathing. If we stop and pay attention to our breath before we write or speak, our minds return to the present moment. Unlike silence, breathing gives a focus to emptiness. A further instruction would ask them to try a three-part breath: consciously breathe in to the count of three, hold the breath for three counts, then exhale for three. (A longer count can be added each time.) For students who may be resistant to “writing on command,” breathing allows time for images and thoughts to form and offers a strategy they can use when feeling blocked.

To create a transition from one topic or activity to another, I engage students in a simple stretching and breathing exercise. Yoga movement is different from exercise, for in Yoga you breathe before moving while in exercise you breathe after moving. Asking students to squat after sitting or stand balanced on one leg brings their wandering thoughts back to the present. Even simple movements done in a chair can harness the breath to enliven the body. After they notice how their bodies are feeling, I give them time to make themselves more comfortable. They may simply stand with eyes closed sensing their feet on the floor. They might do a more energizing stretch such as “breath of fire,” which involves inhaling, bending with head to floor, and exhaling in rapid succession. I might invoke the Buddhist image of our minds as naughty, distractable monkeys and invite students to tame the wild creature by trying a more challenging pose like the dancer or tree that involves standing on one leg for several breaths. Participation is voluntary, and anyone who prefers to watch is free to do so.

These exercises model a form of inquiry based upon observation. Information gathered from our somatic laboratories can help us to become more sensitive observers of other phenomena. Since most Yoga postures (or asanas) are repeated on one’s left and right sides, the practitioner will notice subtle differences in her body. Working with sensory evidence builds the habit of collecting data without prejudgment then drawing conclusions. Contrasting our personal observations with

dominant knowledge claims can lead to questioning them when appropriate (Kerka). If my own body tells me that my left side responds differently than my right, perhaps I should also question generalizations made about women's bodies or menopause or ethnic traits. Discourse about our own bodily responses in a non-competitive learning environment shows that human diversity is more complex than categories like race and gender imply (Barlas, Gustafson, and Todd, ctd. by Kerka). Noticing our somatic changes from day to day undermines the outdated Platonic notion of essentialized identities and challenges the doctrine that human nature is fixed and unchangeable. The more fluid, scientifically sound view that posits culture and identity as complex, dynamic processes becomes visceral as well as theoretical. Finally, we might experience media images of torture or death with less desensitized indifference.

During longer classes, I add activities that require movement and make use of the entire room as well as the hallways. For one assignment students create a visual representation or poster instead of a paper. We then hold class in a conference format in which students move around the room in small groups and talk with the presenters. For visually oriented students, this provides an alternative way of processing the material. Though some use PowerPoint or video, most construct old fashioned posters out of art materials. After ten or fifteen minutes, I call time, and they move on to the next presenter. If Howard Gardner is right, this classroom activity should create optimal conditions for brain functioning since it involves interacting physically with materials, asking questions, and using dialogue (*Disciplined* 82).

While practices such as Tai Chi Chuan and Karate similarly promote body/mind integration, Yoga movements need not be carried out in a fixed sequence. Once learned, the rather simple acts of breathing, stretching, and attending can be done almost anywhere. Yoga offers many benefits, ranging from a stronger body, a calm demeanor, increased concentration, sharpened perception, and possibly greater spiritual development, but most compelling for me are the potential cognitive advantages that come from engaging the body in learning. When we engage our body/minds in class, our entrenched patterns are revealed, making them more accessible to change. An ecstatic union between Yoga and academic inquiry may be asking too much, but perhaps a courtship is possible.¹ ☐

¹A useful reference for combining writing and Yoga is Jeff Davis's *The Journey From the Center to the Page: Yoga Philosophies and Practices as Muse for Authentic Writing*.

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