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Embodied Ethos and a Pedagogy of Presence: Reflections from a Writing-Yogi

Christy I. Wenger

*"The materiality of writing is both the central fact
of literacy and its central puzzle."*

—Christina Haas, Writing Technology

I could tell you about the quiet space of my yoga practice at my local studio where it's as easy to slip into presence on my sticky mat as it is to slip off my flip flops at the studio door. There, I unroll my mat on the cool, hardwood floor of a peaceful room that invites me to leave my worries at the door by my shoes. I appreciate my hour-long, uninterrupted Saturday practice at the studio; it has taught me how to find *presence*—that is, to take up the spaces of my body mindfully and with purpose.

But I'd rather tell you about my practice any other day of the week. At home, my yoga mat remains unrolled in my office. I often write until I find myself unable to resist the digital pull of email and Facebook, which tells me it's time to stop for a *vinayasa*, a series of poses linked with breath, in order to rejuvenate and center myself once more. With two bookcases, two filing cabinets and a large desk in a small upstairs bedroom, my home office is so full that I've had to carefully angle my mat just so or a vigorous sun salute slightly off center might send my head into a filing cabinet, or a three-legged down dog might end with a kick to the door. At home, my mat lies on carpet that probably needs vacuuming, and even when I close the door, my practice is often set to the sounds of my daughters, one and three, playing downstairs with daddy, or to the numerous tunes emitted from the Baby Einstein piano my littlest loves. My work to find presence at home is harder but feels a sweeter victory when achieved.

It's no coincidence that my yoga space and my writing space are one. My personal and professional lives coalesce around a shared center: I am a writer who does yoga; a yogi who writes. After eight years of intentionally practicing yoga and writing together—and teaching my students how to do this, too—I have come to understand yoga not only as its own literate act but also as an integral part of my writing process, a lived site of my continuing rhetorical education. My "dwelling" (Reynolds) in both spaces shapes my ethos, and the point at which these two activities merge marks my literacy as a feminist, materialist writing yogi and informs my teaching around a pedagogy of presence, of teaching students to consciously inhabit their writing bodies as I've learned to inhabit mine.

Nedra Reynolds argues that "we should investigate encounters with place and space and reconsider the kinds of movement (and stillness) that characterize acts of writing and places for learning" (176). I use this narrative to investigate what happens when we consider the writer's own body as a primary space for her sense of presence and dwelling, one that impacts how we approach the writing process and the products we create. As I explore the consequences of using yoga to do a materialist-feminist remapping of the writer's body via her presence, I expand upon Reynolds' theories of ethos as dwell-

ing to illustrate how inhabiting our bodies through the presence of mindfulness, learned through yoga, can help us generate new embodied understandings of ethos that see it less as a rhetorical strategy and more as a means of mindfully taking up our bodily spaces. These new understandings have consequences for our professional writing and the way we teach our students.

In what follows, I use my evolving literacy as a writing-yogi to theorize what work a pedagogy of presence, built upon the tenants of mindfulness, might do within our college writing classrooms. I contextualize the value of this work by turning to student reflections and testimony from three semesters' worth of advanced writing classes I taught using mindfulness as a focus for both the curriculum—readings and research on contemplative practice drawn from both academic and Eastern philosophy texts—and our writing process, which encourages an integrated yoga-writing practice. By blending my own development as a writing-yogi with my students' in what follows, I hope to underscore how a pedagogy of presence can be built from our felt experience as writers, teachers and learners while arguing for its effectiveness in helping writers envision their rhetorical agency as contingent on their own and others' bodies. To illustrate its value, I theorize a pedagogy of presence from three perspectives: presence as embodied agency, presence as resilience, and presence as formative of responsible rhetorical relationships.

Presence as Embodied Agency

In her recent *College English* article, "Writing Material," Laura Micciche argues for the material connectedness of writing and traces the emergence of what she names "new materialism" within writing studies. Reacting against the limiting textual tools of the social turn, new materialism has shaped up in the field as a means of "honor[ing] daily life experiences" and reclaiming matter and the body for a new sense of "distributed agency" that accounts for the interconnection of humans, nature and the environmental surround (490-91). The interrelation of yoga and writing might be best explained by what Micciche calls writing's "coexistence," or how writing merges with other forms of matter, since material objects determine the possibility of our composing: "[w]riting is more than something one is called to do; dependent on time and energy; a linchpin to academic advancement; it is also a codependent interaction with a whole host of others—materials, power, grids, people, animals, rituals, feelings, stuff, and much else" (498). My daughter, my husband, my sticky mat: they are a vibrant part of the material grid of my composing process, as I relate in my introduction, and they all work to give me a sense of power and presence on the page.

In this way, Micciche helps me to consider the importance of reconceiving writerly agency through the lens of lived experience, particularly how it feels to be a body in the world and how writers understand the role of the body when writing. Part of the challenge of first incorporating yoga into my writing process was learning how to find agency, a sense of place, within my writing body. Now it is teaching my students to do the same. These days, I don't think much about what to practice on my mat. I let my body take me where I need to go. That would have sounded like an odd statement to me years ago. As a beginning yogi, I worried much more about these choices I copied sequences from books, yoga DVDs and from my teachers. After a particularly good Sat-

urday practice at the studio, I would come home and write down what I could remember of our sequence of poses and mimic that when practicing on my own. As I move once more into a fall semester of first-year composition, my initial practice as a beginner reminds me of how many of my students use the templates in *They Say, I Say*. I trust my body more now. I listen to it with more fluency.

Yoga, like other contemplative methods, offers mindfulness as the tool we should use to read our lived experiences, to find a sense of agency and purpose and to see ourselves as intimately connected to a larger material world. To begin our collaborative investigation of mindfulness, I share with students in my advanced composition class—The Zen of Writing: Mindfulness and the Writing Life, a seminar for English majors and minors—Jon Kabat-Zinn’s definition of mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (4). We start the semester talking about how mindfulness is regulation of the here and now, this moment. Therefore, it is always situated in a particular body, their individual bodies. The need to locate mindfulness in our bodies gives us a reason to turn to those bodies within the space of our classroom and to begin to ask questions about how they might impact our writing and persuasive processes, questions that are often novel to most students. As one student reflects at the beginning of the semester, “I never really thought about how I learned and how I wrote before. I just did it. I certainly never thought about my body impacting any of this before.”¹

Awakening students to the rhetorical and real impacts of their bodies on their learning and communicative patterns has a major impact on learning for my students. The benefits of becoming metacognitively aware of their embodied learning and writing processes are essential to students’ success in postsecondary writing, as suggested by such key field documents as the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing and comprehensive studies such as Anne Beaufort’s *College Writing and Beyond*. While these studies don’t necessarily focus on writing as embodied, they do insist upon examining difference and situatedness, two aspects of rhetoric that are enhanced by a focus on the body.

In this class, we supplement readings in the genre of Eastern philosophy, like those mentioned above by Jon Kabat Zinn and others by authors such as Thich Nhat Hanh, with academic studies of mindfulness to dig deeper into contemplative practice and its impact on how we learn—a subtheme of the course that dovetails with our investigation of mindful writing. I pointedly ask students to come to terms with what it means to be “present,” to attend to their experiences fully and with awareness. We read about how mindfulness asks us to interrupt our ruminative thoughts about experience to focus on experience itself, inhibiting “secondary elaborative processing of the thoughts, feelings and sensations that arise in the stream of consciousness” (Bishop et al 9). This practice involves a direct experience of and respect for embodied events. The very act of turning off rumination (or at least putting our resources toward that noble goal) increases our capacity for attending to the present because our attentional range is limited when

1. All student names have been changed to protect privacy. Unless otherwise noted, student reflections come from a course blog students were required to post to weekly, reflecting on their integrated practice of yoga and writing in my advanced composition course. Permissions are IRB approved.

focused on both rumination and processing (Schneider & Shiffin 1977; qtd Bishop et al 10). Mindfulness is an act of repeatedly choosing presence. I challenge my students to adopt this habit for the semester.

Mindfulness provides a means of reading the texts of our lives and our worlds with perspective and purpose. Yet, this reading is not simply a mental endeavor; we cannot simply will ourselves into mindfulness without tuning into our bodies. While we tend to “think of intelligence and perception as taking place exclusively in our brains,” yoga guru B.K.S. Iyengar notes, “yoga teaches us that awareness and intelligence must permeate the body” (28-29). In other words, mindfulness is the means we have to secure literacy of the body, and in turn, of the world. Iyengar, the founder of the yoga practice with which I most identify, gives meaning to this ecological process when he notes that, typically, we are more worried about the space we exclude, the space around the body, than the space we include. Bodies, Western logic goes, separate and create borders we struggle to rectify with language. This is why Linda Flower worries over the “strikingly different life experiences” that lie behind the words we share in her analysis of the “submerged iceberg” of situated knowledge, or knowledge that accounts for the social and material placement of the individual (42). Situated knowledge is key for the writer who wants to be receptive to a diverse audience. But we always need to see it as a bridge and not a block. The Eastern contemplative practice of yoga provides a more inclusive framework that understands bodies as connectors, material bridges between individuals and other objects and the environment that surrounds us.

Paradoxically, students in my class learn that the way we connect to others begins with a full understanding of ourselves. As we recognize our own bodies, we connect to others by virtue of our shared materiality. Yoga, as Iyengar sees it, helps us to understand and map the “the space within.” When we access this space within, we claim the fullness of our bodies, which Iyengar calls presence (203). I introduce presence to my student writers as an alternative to more traditional definitions of ethos, a way to embrace our lived, moment-to-moment materiality and to use it as a source of rhetorical agency and power. It is a means of reconceiving our ethos as materially connected to our bodies so that we see our rhetorical authority as stemming from the body. For writers, presence is a conscious inhabiting of the body so the felt experience of writing is one in which the body’s role in composing is acknowledged and the body itself is understood to leave traces, embodied markers, on our writing. Presence affirms William Banks’ call for embodied writing and Jane Hindman’s resonant notion of “making writing matter,” or the ways the real and the rhetorical equally position us within our writing (97).

As they learn to pay attention to their writing bodies, my students begin to theorize presence in everyday language: “when I really think mindfully about my body as a writer, I somehow feel like more of me is able to get on the page, though I haven’t really figured out why this is yet,” says one student. Another argues that with conscious attention, “I can really feel myself pouring onto the page now in a way I’ve never felt before.” Traditional conceptions of ethos cannot easily capture these understandings of presence. Nan Johnson notes that ethos is often taught and conceived of as “a stylistic strategy of gaining audience favor and empathy” (112), which is itself based on Aristotle’s definition in Book I of *Rhetoric*. Aristotle aligns ethos with “character whenever the speech is spoken in such a way to make the speaker worthy of credence” (38). What these defi-

nitions miss is a means of mapping the embodied dimensions of communication, of a body connecting to other bodies.²

Reconceiving ethos as presence is a means of capturing that embodied dimension and therefore provides my students a way of articulating the felt experience of getting “more” of themselves on the page. This process is of great value to them. A common sentiment among students in this class is echoed by Jake:

I never really cared about my writing before in the way I cared about my writing for this class. It's like with the permission you gave us to really find ourselves in the writing, like by seeing it as part of our bodies and connected to the [mindfulness] practices you taught us, I somehow felt like my writing had a purpose beyond just getting done and getting a grade.

To fully understand the impact of such statements, I feel it necessary to further explain the writing habits my advanced composition students have often developed prior to entering my course, according to their own testimony. By the time students find themselves in my class, they have usually mastered successful writing strategies that have secured for them identities as junior and senior English majors and minors. But with such success sometimes comes the desire to “perform” an academic identity in order to sound smart and impress the teacher with “what they want to hear” as opposed to approaching their writing as a means of personal investment. While I've never written a day into my lesson plans in this class to discuss the performative nature of much school writing, students have led our discussion to this topic in every one of the three sections of this advanced seminar. In one of these discussions, a student summed up the take-away of these candid conversations, noting that college students more often seek primarily to “manage teachers and massage assignments” than to use course writing projects as a means of fostering a personal investment in writing. I don't necessarily agree with my students' too easy assessment of teachers' expectations, but I do find significant the way they suggest that finding a sense of writerly agency as stemming from their bodies is a benefit of a pedagogy of presence. After all, the students in my class were still writing for a grade within the context of course assignments, but the difference was the invitation for them to find their bodies through the process. A pedagogy of presence, I believe, can help to cultivate students' discovery of what is and what may be if we allow being open to the present moment and our bodies within it to guide our rhetorical actions. Rather than striving for how we think we should feel or should write, we flow with the moment to discover what is real, easing our struggle with preconceptions and giving us a new sense of purposefulness as writers.

For me then, Reynolds's definition of ethos as dwelling comes much closer to capturing the possibilities of presence for our student writers. Reynolds brings cultural geography to bear on writing studies in order to reimagine composing through the spatial, or the “where” of writing, to establish her theories of ethos as dwelling. Reynolds revisits classical concepts that see ethos as a place and a habit and defines ethos as a “set of practices as well as a sense of place” (140). She encourages us to approach this term through a sense of dwelling, which she describes as an act at once material and rhetorical, a “way

2. Editors' note: Readers with an understanding of classical rhetorical definitions and instructions about the body may find this observation of particular interest.

of being in the world that helps us to reimagine acts of writing and theories of composing” as inherently embodied(140). I see Reynolds’ theory as a means of exploring what happens when we inhabit our writing through the conscious act of presence. If “[w]riters construct and establish ethos when they say explicitly ‘where they are coming from,’” then writers must consciously examine the “where” of our bodies, from where we literally and metaphorically speak (Reynolds 332). Yoga helps writers construct a sense of self as secured by presence within and of the body—a process learned through mindfulness, which helps students translate the metaphorical to the lived.

Teaching student writers to claim the body as a site of situatedness has particular value when they locate it as a primary rhetorical dwelling by connecting it simultaneously to the ethos they build within their written products and the process they use to bring those products about. These conceptions are rhetorical, situated and social; claiming ethos as presence is not the same as claiming an essential “one true self” but is a way of honoring the body as a composing center from which relational embodiment is made possible. In teaching student writers to claim their bodies as markers for ethos, we can teach them to attend to the writing practices they use, the material traces of themselves left in their writing and the ways writers and audiences interact within their texts so that they approach their writing more dynamically—not to the end of getting stuck in that space and reifying borders but instead, paying “attention to place, not just to the borders that surround it . . . and how the social construction of space occurs at the level of the body” (Reynolds 142-43).

Writers commonly use spaces external to them to find agency and to sustain presence. Zan Meyer Gonçalves calls these spaces “sponsoring institutions”³ and identifies her campus’s Speaker’s Bureau as one (16). Sponsors help us read our experiences anew, making those experiences accessible to us and to others in novel ways that enhance our understanding. Gonçalves’s Bureau, a LGBT program that provides a forum for public speaking and outreach, helps students read their lives as texts and “learn, through specific identity performances (embodied speaking/ writing), to connect [their experiences] to public concerns” (16). Yoga has taught me to dwell mindfully in my body, making it as much a “sponsoring institution” for me as the Bureau is for Gonçalves’s students. Yoga helps me cultivate a rhetorical and material center. From there, I act, speak and write. In other words, yoga has helped me to reconstruct my writerly ethos through an understanding of dwelling.

In helping me remap the spaces of my body imaginatively and physically, my contemplative practice has changed the way I inhabit writing. Before, I gave little heed to my body’s fidgeting after an hour or two of sitting at my computer. Now, I listen to my body and incorporate plenty of time for yoga in my writing sessions. Aware of my attention span, I know that when my body sits for too long, my reading of sources gets cramped and less forgiving and my writing tends to wander. When I get up from my computer and step on my mat to flow through a *vinyasana*, a series of poses linked with breath, I feel full and present once more—and I take these feelings back to my writing. Neuroscience confirms these benefits. Yoga stimulates the parasympathetic nervous

3. Gonçalves’s term can itself be seen as a twist on Deborah Brandt’s notion of “literacy sponsors.”

system and reduces aminobutyric acid system activity, improving mood and decreasing anxiety in ways other physical exercises like walking do not (Streeter et al. 1145). Yoga has a positive impact on cognitive functions such as attention, memory and spatial abilities (Chaya et al. 1165). Yoga increases executive control, self-awareness and self-compassion (Roser and Peck 129). Yoga develops metacognitive thinking (Siegel 13). While born from my experiences, I understand my yoga-writing practice as continuing a Sophistic tradition of combining rhetorical and athletic training. Rhetoric, Debra Hawhee suggests, is a “bodily art: an art learned, practiced, and performed by and with the body as well as the mind” (144).

Inhabiting their bodies as yogis and consciously reflecting on this process as it relates to their writing helps students transfer the presence they learn on the mat to the page. As Reynolds notes, “learning to dwell can carry over into imagined geographies: into discourses, acts of writing, and/or written texts” (158). Like rhetoric, yoga is a bodily art, equal parts expression through physical movement and imaginative persuasion. Yoga teaches writers new ways to inhabit both the spaces of their bodies as well as their pages. To practice the act of dwelling mindfully together, students in my advanced composition classes learn how to execute very basic *asanas*, or yoga movements, such as downward-facing dog and tree pose, and also how to string these moves together through *vin-yasana*, the pairing of movement with breath. They also practice meditations on breath, sounds and mantras. I encourage them to actively integrate these techniques into their writing sessions, and we practice this integration together in class by adding these rituals into our reading and writing activities. This is how I teach presence and hold a space for my students to enter it within our course.

To encourage their expansive and embodied thinking, I share with students that my experience of the writing process is a physical one. My wrists hurt and my back aches from typing too long. My shoulders tense up when I’m working with counter lines of thought. I write best in comfy loungewear and a coffee cup beside me. And yoga gives me a way to interpret that experience. In the beginning weeks of my advanced writing class, I work with students to redefine the writing process as material, challenging them to find ways to be present in their writing and giving them yoga as a means of experimenting with their writing process.

When I first ask students what they “do” when they write, they often talk about conducting research, re-reading their work, and thinking of ideas and then accompany these responses with very cerebral activities like “thinking hard,” “getting stuck,” or “brainstorming.” So I push them further to explore the physical experiences that accompany these common descriptions of writing by encouraging them to “body map” their process, to examine the impact the presence of bodies has on their process. Our body mapping of the writing process places it in an ecological context where “place, embodied locatedness, and discursive interdependence” become the “conditions for the very possibility of knowledge and action” (Code 20). Some students resist this new way of thinking about writing as a material practice, but many more encounter revelations when they reconsider writing as both rhetorical and real. These students come to class energized to discuss their writing process after I assign them an experiment to write a reading response on a course text and to complete accompanying process notes that help

them recognize what impact their bodies have on their writing within the context of that assignment.

By the second reading response and set of process notes, students begin to report on the impact of integrating mindfulness-based writing rituals into their process and note how these rituals shift the terrain of writing to account for their bodies. One student, Melissa, says,

After taking notes on my process with the first and second responses, I realized that it is okay to take breaks and recharge when I work! I started to get up and do some gentle yoga like we do in class when I feel stuck or tired of writing, and that has helped me to work for longer periods without getting distracted. I think some of us get very consumed with the idea of being successful with assignments and just getting them done, myself included. I see now that I can get them done better if I take the time to practice a little yoga during writing, even if that takes a few minutes.

Melissa finds rhetorical agency in her writing body through the presence cultivated by mindfulness, which she easily transfers from yoga to writing as she begins to see them as interrelated practices. She literally refashions the material conditions of her writing and, in doing so, creates a new meaningfulness to her writing endeavors that sustain her instead of leaving her frustrated and empty. She observes: "Working to stay present to myself as a writer has helped me enjoy writing again in a way I haven't for years. In a way, writing itself has become a practice of mindfulness, and I kind of look forward to it just like I do my quiet morning cup of coffee."

Presence as Resiliency

When we approach our bodies as sponsoring institutions, we can understand and exercise writing at our "edge," the place yogis practice when they want to feel challenged but not defeated, the place where we learn resilience. When I practice yoga at my edge, I am consciously mindful of how each pose feels and actively survey my feelings as I move, using presence as my guide. Practicing at my edge brings growth and encourages me to reassess habits through the lens of mindfulness. Up until a year ago, instead of jumping back into sun salutations in my yoga practice, I chose to take the modification of stepping back. I stepped back for years out of unchecked habit and fear. Then, a year ago, after a four-week hiatus from yoga because I gave birth to my youngest daughter, I returned to practice with renewed motivation but knowledge that my body was still healing and would need more modifications than ever before. My intention was to practice at my edge, knowing that I needed to listen to my body carefully in order to discover any new restrictions but also desiring the challenge of testing my body's limits once again. That day, fearful but eager, I jumped back for the first time. Practicing this way can help us push out of our comfort zones, those safe houses we construct from our habits.

We can work at our edge as academic writers by being mindful of our bodies and using them as a source of rhetorical power. As a feminist academic, I understand the challenge and benefits of working at my "edge" in terms of what Elizabeth Flynn, Patricia Sotrin and Ann Brady have to say about rhetorical resilience, which takes place at the edge of where struggle and desire meet (7). Flynn et al. pinpoint the dearth of scholar-

ship on resilience in writing studies and contrast that to the social sciences, a field that has had much to say about this term. While borrowing from social science to construct their definition of resilience, these authors find limiting this field's focus on the individual psyche isolated from the community and the social context, making resilience a quality of the heroic individual (5). To give resilience a rhetorical emphasis, Flynn et al. instead approach the term as describing rhetorical action within communicative networks; they see it as "communal, relational, and social" (5). They offer a definition of resilience for writing studies as "not [as] a state of being but [as] a process of rhetorically engaging with material circumstances and situational exigencies...not as a quality of the heroic individual but as always relational" (7). Resilience is a powerful feminist action because it transforms the "way a life is lived" if not the material circumstances of that life, resulting in an "ongoing responsiveness" (7).

Because they learn to practice at their edge, student writers exposed to a pedagogy of presence develop rhetorical resilience. In the first weeks of my course, students take a reflective, open-ended survey of how present they feel as writers and learners and how they believe mindfulness and its correlate, mindlessness, impacts their writing. In the closing weeks of our course, I ask students to revisit their answers and to connect any changes to their learning and writing through the ideas of presence and mindfulness, which run throughout our course. At the beginning of the course, a student I'll call Jenny explored her extremely active academic life which had her working two campus jobs, taking nineteen credits for her English education major, and participating in an honor society, all while attempting to juggle the demands of living at home with her parents and maintaining a healthy social life. She says in her beginning reflection, "I like to think that I'm accomplishing a lot by being involved in so much along with school, but in reality by spreading myself so thin I am not being very productive in anything. Instead of focusing my attention on one thing and doing well at that one thing, I am half-assing a lot." Of her writing habits, Jenny observes that she is "scatter-brained to the point where I have to reread assignments multiple times because I am not able to focus on what I had read the first time...[and] can't seem to bring myself to revise anything I've written." The lack of presence Jenny describes here has significant rhetorical consequences. Not only can she not maintain focus to write well and efficiently, but she cannot muster the energy to revise, showing a lack of concern for her audience and testifying to how a writer's self-reflective embodied attention may be a prerequisite to investing in the relational and social networks of writing. To momentarily return to Micciche, appreciating writing's "withness," or its material connectedness, seems dependent on a writer's presence. Without a felt experience of "withness" to connect her to her writing, Jenny cannot place herself within the material networks of composing which would necessitate audience attention.

Ironically, while Jenny concludes that she isn't living a very mindful writing life, she is unable to find the strength to make a positive change. "It's a vicious cycle," she continues, "but it feels like it would take too much energy to change anything. I have so much to do, but my mind is going a million miles a minute. I try to write one thing but end up becoming distracted by something else. In the end, I usually shut down because of the stress and nothing gets done." Arguably, this is the description of a student who lacks a sense of resilience in the face of her struggles. She only sees the challenge and

not the potential opportunity of practicing at her edges because they feel overwhelming. While she may not be able to change her material circumstances, she could develop the “ongoing responsiveness” of which Flynn et al. speak to find the agency and energy to persevere while looking after her wellbeing and increasing her mindfulness. Without any acknowledgement of the systemic issues she faces as a student, she internalizes her struggle as individual failure, what Flynn et al. note is common with traditional pathology models of resilience (6).

Like many of my students, I watched Jenny develop rhetorical resilience during her time in my class as she delved into the study and practice of mindfulness. While time and space necessarily limits how much of that transformation I can share here, the Jenny who reflected on her mindfulness and presence at the end of the course clearly exhibits resilience as she describes her choice to “legitimize negative feelings while foregrounding productive action” and simultaneously place her struggle to resilience within social terms (Flynn et al. 4). In her final reflection, Jenny relates the negative feelings she still has about writing “within” for academic purposes for the sake of earning grades: “I’m an English education major, so it’s not like I don’t believe I can [write well], I just hate the process, I’ve realized. If I am writing for fun it is different, but writing for a professor and grade is so stressful.” This stress doesn’t disappear for Jenny by the end of our course, and therefore her story doesn’t have a simple happy ending—hers is a more complicated and real transformation. In the face of a stressful writing environment, Jenny creates new ways of crafting resiliency by turning to presence to find strength and motivation in defining her writing’s success in terms of manifesting embodied agency on the page and not (only) by the grade her writing earns. As she says, “When we first began this class, I’ll be the first to admit that I wasn’t so sure that this whole tuning into my body thing would work. However, I was pleasantly surprised. Not only do I feel less stressed in general, I also think I’ve become stronger by working to be more present in my writing.”

I believe it is no coincidence that Jenny discusses strength as a benefit of becoming more present in her writing, which she describes as a process: “I try to think about how I want my reader to read my paper, and I want them to read it with complete focus, so I am giving that focus to my writing and using meditation on my breath during my writing to stay focused.” Jenny’s use of “stronger” in this context pushes toward a sense of a writing self connected to her body. “My papers feel different to me now that I am writing with my body instead of against it,” she continues. “It’s like with more attention to my body through my breath, I am able to write differently and that helps me care more about what I am writing,” even if that writing is still prompted by a class and eventually assessed by a teacher. “I try to just forget about the grade as I write and think more about staying present,” she says. Jenny concludes her remarks by sharing that she has begun to revise her writing, a positive consequence of her new resilient writing process. She plans to continue experimenting with her yoga-writing process after our class ends. If we conceive of rhetorical resilience as realizing “possibilities and resources by shaping and enacting relationships among selves and others, speakers and audiences, things and dreams, bodies and needs,” Jenny can be seen here as negotiating a sense of resilience and strength through attention to her body (Flynn et al. 7).

The resource Jenny calls upon for rhetorical strength as related by her reflection is the strength of presence, underscoring Flynn et al.’s framing of resilience as “creative,

animating the potential of whatever comes to hand as a suitable rhetorical ‘resource’” (Flynn et al. 7). While I’ve quoted Jenny at length, her classmates’ sentiments in their final reflections tend to repeat the keyword “strength” throughout, illuminating the ways her peers have also fashioned newfound resilience as writers. Sarah, for instance, says, “What I have taken away the most with me from this class is the idea of fully being in the present moment. There is always so much to do that pulls me in different directions but finding the strength to just be fully invested in what I am creating at that present moment has greatly helped me.” When Sarah applies this present-mindedness to her writing, she claims that “being mindful of my writing process helps me to see faults, but it’s also a very difficult process . . . before this class, I never thought about my body when writing.” Sarah claims of her embodied transformation, “Now, I realize how much of an impact [my body] has on what I write, which can be bad if I ignore it. Giving our bodies attention when writing does not mean we are not smart, capable students, but instead, we are being more productive by giving our bodies what it needs. Sometimes, it needs love and rest rather than to push and push and push it to keep going.” What’s valuable in Sarah’s analysis is that she recognizes the struggle inherent in becoming more consciously embodied as a writer at the same time that she exhibits positive rhetorical action. She reflects:

This semester has given me so much more confidence as a writer and participator in class, even though I am not always the student to speak out in discussion. That has been a gift to me, especially considering I had worked on such an important project to me this semester (my senior thesis) where I felt very challenged to write in such a new way. I think this class really did help give me some of the confidence to approach a project like that.

Sarah goes on to say of her senior thesis project, a project she worked on for a class required of all graduating seniors, “I did not push to do anything that did not feel right or like the work I wanted to do, and I think that came from the confidence of knowing I can take a break to wait until something feels good and right.”

Sarah’s resilience transferred to writing in classes beyond ours, and increased presence in her writing process gave way to a greater sense of self and security in her topic and content choices in her writing, showing how presence impacts the work writers do physically and create rhetorically. Crafting a pedagogy of presence is a means of getting students to attend to their felt experiences as writers and learners, encouraging them to examine the ways material forces mediate their writing and how that writing might be received by an audience. Attunement to her body gave Sarah a compass for her writing, telling her when to slow down and speed up, providing an anchor for her focus and giving her permission to develop self-confidence through an assessment of her limits and what conditions are necessary for her writerly well being. Writing teachers often take for granted that students will invest in their work if they only dig deeper into their ideas and research subjects. But watching my students develop resilience in these ways testifies to how students benefit when they are also provided explicit ways of developing stamina and perseverance through the embodied process of writing.

Presence as Rhetorical Relationships

My opening to this essay makes clear that yoga makes my writing possible in the sense that the yoking of these activities infuses both with fullness and presence. Just as my yoga instructor reminds us to “live our yoga” off the mat, I can live my writing off the page. My practice translates expertise into awareness of my body and illuminates how inhabiting my body consciously shapes my experience of the world and of others. This practice transforms my writing and my living. Gwen Gorzelsky argues that the contemplative practices advocated for by Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh are best understood as literary acts that shape the self and our response to others because they “provide a conceptual framework for interpreting one’s individual experience and one’s relation to larger systems” (406). The same can be said of other contemplative practices such as yoga. When I first started taking classes at my local studio, I had much to learn: the verbal cues (“Find space in your back body to release down to the floor”); the Sanskrit terminology (*Om*, *Namaste*); and the pervasive value system (honoring all beings, practicing acceptance and non-violence). Yogis enter a discourse system, which encourages reading and writing the body as a primary text, and they rely on a “polymorphic literacy” which “operates on the level of bodies, minds and contexts” (Fleckenstein 616).

Gorzelsky’s analysis, together with Hawhee and Micciche, serve as a reminder that when approaching literacy, it helps to keep focus on the corporeal process and not just the discursive products of our literate acts. To view the writing process as materially mundane is to miss the extraordinary qualities of our “ordinary” material lives. Sondra Perl reminded us of these qualities years ago in *Felt Sense*. In Reynolds’ discussion of ethos as dwelling, she argues that “for writers, location is an act of inhabiting one’s words; location is a struggle as well as a place, an act of coming into being and taking responsibility” (11). I have been arguing here that a pedagogy of presence takes the writer’s body as a primary location for the writer’s sense of dwelling within so that she may take responsibility for her words and rhetorical actions and use the body as a means of mapping responsible movement with and among others.

Presence requires that we approach the body as located within networks and interactions with others we “dwell with.” The continuous interplay between our bodies and the universe is a contemplative understanding that underscores Iyengar’s conception of presence, from which I have been drawing. His isn’t a solipsistic conception, for “inside the microcosm of the individual exists the macrocosm of the universe” (Iyengar 203). Or, in the words of contemplative educator Arthur Zajonc, “We attend, the world forms around us . . . and so on cyclically. In this way, attentiveness works back on us as formation” (91). Contemplatively, finding a fullness of self by claiming our space within leads us to discover how we are all connected by the experience of our lived materiality. Yoga’s relational ethos is why Linda Adler-Kassner reflects on her yoga practice at the start of *The Activist WPA*. She hopes to foreshadow her book’s investment in the embodied and political dynamics of community. As Adler-Kassner states, the breathing practices she does with her yoga community reminds her “to focus on the here and now—to be in this moment, in this time and space. Not two minutes ago, not in the future—now, now, and now. Together, here, now. Together, here, and now are three ideas that run throughout this book” (vii).

Audience is widely accepted as a threshold concept of writing studies, one that is often difficult for students to grasp. Writing is inherently social. Learning to apply the “together, here, and now” mantra like Addler-Kassner is the last benefit of a pedagogy of presence I will explore. A student I’ll call Mike reaped this benefit from his experience in my class, according to his final reflection: “This class has me thinking more about my audience as a writer more than I ever had before . . . We talked in class about building a community of writers, and I am trying to think more about that when I write, like how I can build a community in my paper that other *real* people can respond to” (emphasis in original). Mike’s nod to “real people” and his choice to italicize hints at his emphasis on the body and how his embodied ethos as a writer may help connect him as one lived body to other lived bodies. His point is especially relevant when read in tandem with an insight his reflection, where he meditates on how he is aware that mindfulness is portrayed as promoting individual wellbeing, but that he immediately saw its relational impact as well. He resolved early on to apply mindfulness to his relationships: “Near the beginning of the class, one of my goals was to be a better listener and to hear what people actually say so that I don’t misunderstand; I feel like it is so easy to misunderstand or miscommunicate with people and have arguments/ disagreements, but being more mindful of how you listen and interact can make these connections more positive.” Mike says this resolution impacts his writing, too, as he has tried to become a better listener to “other sources and other sides of the arguments I am writing about . . . mak[ing] sure that I don’t misinterpret others’ words.”

Reading my students’ testimony through Reynolds gives new meaning to the statement that “for writers, location is an act of inhabiting one’s words; location is a struggle as well as a place, an act of coming into being and taking responsibility” (11). My student writers exhibit this struggle as they work to locate themselves within their bodies and take responsibility for the ways their embodiment as writers may impact their audiences. As Mike worked to take responsibility for his listening, another student, Kailee, worked to establish a more ethical and responsible sense of ethos within her writing: “Mindfulness has really paid off for me as a writer. I feel like what I am saying in my writing now is what I believe, like I am not just BSing my way through anymore because I really want my readers to trust me. I think the shift in my writing . . . is due to the fact of having a good, clear mind and ideas of how to be present and aware in the writing process. I think [that] really led to my success this semester.”

Kailee’s remarks point to a number of notable elements, the first of which is how she envisions her text as an interaction between her and the audience and judges success on its dialogic exchange value. Kailee defines responsible rhetorical action by the meaningful connection she can establish with her readers, a connection she believes is made stronger when she brings presence to her writing, which she believes can promote trust in the relationship she creates with her reader. Tellingly, working to deepen her presence within writing helps Kailee recognize some of the classical elements of ethos, including the responsibility of the writer to be ethical and fair. But the action of inhabiting her prose has shifted to include her body. The ethical writer must be responsible both to the rhetorical and the real so that ethos becomes more than a stylistic, persuasive device, even if it is that, too. Kailee’s recognition is a result of seeing her body as a sponsoring institution: she can both claim hold on her embodied ethos through the felt experience

of presence when both constructing and consuming her own text, but she can also envision her ethos as social and contingent on others, as coexistent with her community while still being immutably hers.

Working to create products that invite meaningful connection is not easy, Kailee admits, but she feels emboldened by her newfound presence to embrace the challenge: "I feel like that confidence in my writing and being comfortable with the idea of sometimes not being comfortable (but being mindful and aware of this) has been such a useful tool." Kailee's testimony illustrates how Western conceptions of space have for too long dominated our understanding of how writers can effectively map rhetorical connections through ethos. Typically, we do not use terms such as "presence" to understand this rhetorical concept, and we do not believe a focus on the self will help writers to better connect to their audiences. However, when we view ethos through presence, establishing rhetorical authority necessarily calls upon the connection of our shared materiality. Responsible action toward others thus starts with the self.

I return to Sarah, who also articulates this insight: "Practicing yoga throughout my day helps me understand others as much as myself." Sarah's insight is one I can apply to the structure of this article as well. While I have examined three configurations of presence as embodied agency, resilience and the generation of responsible rhetorical relationships, these elements are interconnected as my reader has likely noticed through the close reading of my student testimony. Present writers are attentive to their readers and develop resilient responsiveness to their own needs as writers as well as the needs of their embodied audiences.

James Lang's 2015 *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "Waiting for Us to Notice Them," documents a version of a "pedagogy of presence," one that challenges us to put connection with our students first, before coverage of material or more conventional measures of curricular success. Lang suggests that teachers often get too wrapped up in their teaching, leading to a devaluation of student learning. When we teach without presence, we forget to decenter the classroom experience to help students claim their learning, and we forget to work with the flow of the classroom. While Lang doesn't refer to mindfulness, nor is he primarily concerned with writing, a common thread between his and my exploration is that under a pedagogy of presence, we learn to draw our boundaries differently—with writing, with our students, with the composing process.

Some of my readers may not be comfortable bringing mindfulness to the classroom in the ways I have described using yoga. But the use of yoga matters much less than the attempt to challenge students to a process of greater embodied awareness, of redrawing the boundaries between the writer and her body.⁴ Instead of yoga, we might ask students to simply move more while writing, to investigate their writing environments and to note the felt differences between composing with pen and paper, through digital images or with text typed in Microsoft Word. Instead of teaching yoga as a means of making visible the ways our bodies impact meaning, perhaps we ask students to find another physical practice, like running or singing, and urge them to experiment with its integration into their writing process.

4. See, for example, Barry M. Kroll's *The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace* for an exploration of how writing instruction might incorporate the contemplative practice of aikido.

What matters is that we challenge students to become mindful of their writing bodies so they regain a sense of connection to themselves and to others—and then, to help them fashion new ways of connecting to their readers’ bodies as well. Our writerly agency is a complex interaction between multiple material and rhetorical factors, and “it can be adopted strategically, and rigorously, to bring about desired action” (Leff and Lunsford 65). We can teach students to bring about such desired action within a pedagogy of presence.



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