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Review of Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies: Contemplative Writing Pedagogy by Christy Wenger

Matthew Overstreet

Khalifa University, Abu Dhabi, matthew.overstreet@ku.ac.ae

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Wenger, Christy. *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies: Contemplative Writing Pedagogy*. WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2015. 199 pp.

Matthew Overstreet

Khalifa University

When given the chance to review a book for *JAEPL*, I immediately suggested Christy Wenger's *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies*. Not only is this a book I highly respect, but one of its themes is perhaps more relevant than ever today, some six years after its publication. As we struggle through a seemingly interminable pandemic, frustration and frayed nerves abound. Now is an apt time to slow down, to consider our embodied reality and the automated, habituated responses that often alienate us from ourselves and the world. Wenger's book, apart from being philosophically insightful and artfully written, provides practical guidance as to how we might do such work with our students.

Wenger is an advocate of contemplative pedagogy, an oft-discussed topic in *JAEPL*, to which, you might have noticed, she has been a contributor as well as the editor of "Connecting." *Yoga Minds* details her efforts to integrate her preferred contemplative practice—yoga—with college writing instruction. Admittedly, I'm an odd choice to review a book about yoga. I'm a fairly staid 40-year-old man who has never done yoga and who tried meditation once only to be profoundly bored. I also, I'm ashamed to admit, have not yet incorporated into my pedagogy the contemplative practices for which Wenger advocates. That said, even if they are not my own, I can see the value of Wenger's teaching methods. I can also see the value of her theoretical insights, particularly as they relate to the role of embodiment in the writing and thinking process. All told, I believe that the ideas in *Yoga Minds* can be of broad relevance.

Structure-wise, *Yoga Minds* consists of an introduction, then three theory-centric chapters along with three extensive interchapters in which teaching practices are discussed. The theory portion centers on explicating and showing the value of mindfulness, defined as "embodied self-reflectivity" (40). Mindfulness, achieved through non-judgmental focus, Wenger argues, "creates a critical distance, a space between perception and response, that allows for . . . intentional response as opposed to automatic, unthinking and habitual reaction" (11). This more intentional orientation towards self and world, she argues, can greatly benefit writers and thinkers. It can help us notice and adjust habitual practices or default reactions that might interfere with knowledge-making. Through attention to our bodies and the affective energy they generate and channel, Wenger argues, we can move beyond the limits of self-consciousness or self-centeredness, become more attuned to others and the world, and ultimately become more generous and effective meaning-makers.

In pressing her case, Wenger draws on contemplative pedagogy scholarship, the teachings of yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar, and feminist theory, particularly that of Donna Haraway. The concepts of the "writing yogi" and the "embodied imagination" are at the core of her analysis. The writing yogi is the type of student subjectivity Wenger hopes to cultivate. Such beings are "situated, connected knowers," capable of weaving together personal and community knowledge, as well as reason and emotion (105). They recognize the partial and interested nature of their own perspective and can use "the insertion

of the self in knowledge production as a way to generate reflection and analysis” (105). The embodied imagination, in turn, is the faculty by which body, heart, and mind are combined within the writing yogi’s practice. When writing is informed by this faculty, knowers “experience the self in relational webs” (30). Wenger sees deep ethical implications in such positioning. Via deployment of the embodied imagination, writing yogis become more open to the world and its varied inhabitants. Integrally, for Wenger, this is all a very material process. It is only through attention to the individual, thinking-feeling body, paradoxically, that openness to the world can be achieved.

In the pedagogy-focused interchapters Wenger illustrates how the above ideas might inform work in the writing classroom. She presents a writing class centered around the investigation of embodiment. In addition to the standard practice of reading and writing about the topic, though, Wenger makes the very brave move of integrating yoga into the daily workings of the class. The result is a fascinating example of theory and practice informing one another.

Wenger believes that her students can use yoga as a site to generate knowledge about the writing process. Writing assignments in the class are designed to facilitate linkage. Students write “body blogs,” for instance, in which they consider how their physicality is implicated in writing and learning. Wenger believes that embodiment is key to how we make sense of the world, but that the connection between mind and body has been obscured by conventional education. When writing is “rematerialized” students come to see how bodily needs, actions, and positioning can and do impact writing and thinking. This insight is key to developing the ethically informed “embodied imagination” discussed earlier. It also allows students to use knowledge from physical activities (e.g., sports, yoga) to inform intellectual work. To prove such transfer is possible the interchapters are filled with examples of students drawing generative connections between their work “on the mat” and their work “on the page.”

Overall, I think Wenger makes a strong case for the pedagogy proposed. Ideally, I would like to see some extended samples of student writing to illustrate the gains in openness, audience-awareness, and general writing ability Wenger claims to achieve (the book mainly draws on textual snippets in which students profess change). It would also be interesting to check back with students, say a year or two later, to see if any of the lessons learned stuck after the class ended. These are minor quibbles, though. *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies* is a valuable piece of scholarship. It can obviously be of great use to those who wish to incorporate contemplative practices into their teaching. Perhaps less obvious, though, it can also serve as a model for what rhet/comp scholarship can be. First off, though informed by her personal interests, Wenger’s project remains deeply rooted in the practical work of writing instruction. The danger with pursuing your passions as a writing teacher, I’ve found, is that those passions can decenter writing. You end up teaching something else, in other words. I don’t think that happens here. Also, *Yoga Minds* is, simply put, a well-written book. Wenger combines rigorous scholarly argument with detailed description of teaching practices and does so in an artful and, honestly, quite entertaining manner. This formal elegance is why I wanted to review *Yoga Minds* despite having little interest in yoga.

I would like to close by pointing out one area in which I believe Wenger’s work may have unexplored implications. As you may know, in the past ten years there’s been much

talk of a “material turn” in rhetoric and composition. The general idea is that writing studies scholars should do more to account for the role of material forces in the writing and thinking process. Wenger’s work is exemplary in this regard. Throughout *Yoga Minds* she foregrounds the active role of individual human bodies in the construction of knowledge. In doing so, she forcefully rejects the postmodern notion that bodies are simply vehicles via which cultural scripts are performed. Integrally, *contra* much so-called new materialism, she also insists on the reality and importance of the embodied self. As Wenger puts it, she refuses to allow the “I” to be dissolved either in discourse or “a vortex of intertextual materialities” (55). This is a quietly radical orientation. It posits a self that can stand in ethical relation with other selves yet maintain its fundamental integrity. I would suggest that this conception of social space has much to recommend it. It respects empirical reality as well as the phenomenological reality of everyday experience. To my knowledge, the consequences of Wenger’s body-centric individualism—and how it connects with and pushes against other work in feminist theory, materialist-oriented writing studies, and embodied rhetorics—has yet to be explored. I urge scholars to take up the challenge.



Borgman, Jessie, and Casey McArdle, editors. *PARS in Practice: More Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*. WAC Clearinghouse, University Press of Colorado, 2021. 384 pp.

Madeline Crozier

University of Tennessee, Knoxville

The charge that “we are all online writing instructors” should resonate with any composition instructor who has taught during the Covid-19 pandemic (Borgman and McArdle 3). This exigent universal truth gives rise to the compilation of this volume. The well-timed collection builds on Borgman and McArdle’s co-authored book *Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic: Resources and Strategies for Online Writing Instructors*, which earned the 2020 Computers and Composition Distinguished Book Award and introduced the PARS approach to online writing instruction—Personal, Accessible, Responsive, Strategic. (Yes, it’s a golf metaphor for achieving the goal of shooting a *par* score.) The unique PARS framework provides a generative, systematic approach to creating and sustaining more effective and equitable online writing courses, and *PARS in Practice* builds on this landmark contribution with an even greater range of practical approaches that instructors, administrators, and scholars can use to develop their theories and practices of online writing instruction (OWI). As a graduate student who began a PhD program and became a first-year composition (FYC) instructor during the pandemic, the collection guided me to develop sound online teaching practices, and it reminded me to do well by my students in a time of crisis.

As Borgman and McArdle explain in their introduction, “PARS spans three layers: design, instruction, and administration,” and “when these layers are combined, they equal the user/student experience” (5). Much like the components of the PARS approach, these layers intersect and overlap productively throughout the 20 core chap-