

# Release the Body,

As a teacher of college literature and writing, I spent almost fifteen years working with students whose bodies were caged by desks, and whose energy and freedom of thought were also caged by the fact that their bodies were imprisoned. Like most of my fellow teachers, it never occurred to me that the physical body had anything to do with the learning process. Yet I now know that the mind feeds the body and the body feeds the mind in a constant dance of fluctuating, and often imperceptible, energy flow.

# Release the Mind

From the time I was young, I was a dancer, and as a college student, I learned yoga, but when I entered the classroom to teach, I forgot that I was bringing a body with me, and I didn't notice that my students had also brought theirs. But I did notice very early in my teaching career that my students experienced a lot of anxiety when faced with writing assignments. Their anxiety was noticeable in the way they hunched their shoulders and gripped their pens when writing in class or in the way they stood before me after class asking questions about an assignment, nervously shifting from one foot to the other or not making eye contact.

*By Martha Goff Stoner*

Early in my teaching career, I taught many freshman composition courses. Because these were required courses, rarely did my students think of themselves as writers. In fact, many of my students did not like writing. Not only did these students carry a significant burden of anxiety, they also clung to prejudices about themselves and about writing classes. Many *knew* they couldn't write well, *hated* writing classes, and were suspicious of "English" teachers.

Aware of my students' anxiety and resentment, I decided I would be more likely to teach them to write well if I first attempted to relieve them of their resistance to writing, to writing classes, and to writing teachers. My strategy included lots of free-writing (writing which is not critiqued and in which the student is counseled not to worry about grammar, punctuation, or spelling, but simply to put words on paper), many hours of individual conferences in which I verbally encouraged and cajoled, numerous ungraded essay assignments, emphasis upon end-of-the-term writing for the grade (this allowed students to be graded upon improvement), and practice in meditation to counter in-the-moment anxiety.

It was the use of meditation in the classroom that initiated the discoveries that led to my current use of body movement in writing classes. Teaching meditation in a conventional college classroom was an unheard of practice in 1985 when I began doing this. I was hesitant at first because I feared my students would react negatively. But I knew that meditation calmed my nerves and thought it might also calm theirs.

I taught a very simple breath-awareness technique. At the beginning of each class, I asked my students to sit quietly with their eyes closed. When everyone was

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*Editor's Note.*  
This essay is a slightly revised version of an article first published in *SKOLE: The Journal of Alternative Education*, Winter 1998, Vol. XV, No. 1, pp. 80-85.

silent and when bodies seemed still, I asked students to bring their awareness to their breath and to allow their thoughts to float through their consciousness without clinging to them. We practiced this technique for five minutes at the beginning of class. Afterwards, students wrote for five minutes or so about anything that came to their minds. They were told that their writing was private and that they needn't worry about any of the conventional forms—spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc. I emphasized that these two experiences—the meditation and the writing—were entirely for the student. I stayed out of their 10-minute free time as much as I could.

The results were astonishing—far beyond anything I expected when I tentatively began the practice. As one student wrote in her end-of-the-term course evaluation:

The meditations helped me a great deal in relaxing and learning how to let myself write without restrictions. I think this writing adds a lot to the course. It helped me see a lot of things about myself that I hadn't seen before. I also think it's good because you can go back, re-read the meditation, and see how you've grown as a writer and as a person.

Meditation practice enabled many students to relax before they wrote and to write freely once they put pen to paper. As I watched students writing after meditation, however, I noticed something else. I noticed a shift in the way their bodies looked. After meditation, everyone was writing. Rarely did I see anyone looking out the window, bored. Rarely did I see anyone sitting back in his chair, chewing on his pencil, frustrated and unable to write. Typically, students seemed alert and engaged in their writing. They leaned forward over their papers, determined to catch the flow before it stopped. Meditation after meditation, day after day, everyone was writing calmly in a spirit of flow, and many sighs of satisfaction or smiles were evident when students looked up from their papers, having said all they had to say.

Though students knew that their writing was private and that they did not have to share it aloud in class or turn it in after class, many students wanted to read aloud after meditation and writing practice. The following indicates just how much had changed for one student:

I learned that I can write. If somebody allows me to write about what I feel is important, and how I want to express it I can do it. When I came into this class for the first time I thought I would never be able to write. Now I love writing, expressing myself in new ways.

What more could a writing teacher ask for?

Yet I was more than fortunate, for I received more. As I experimented with meditation, I learned that the body was part of the writing act. Movement, I noticed, seemed to be expressive of what was happening in the mind of the writer. A calm, alert body seemed connected to a satisfying writing experience. Body reflected mind.

From my own writing experience, I knew that when I was frustrated, when ideas did not seem to come, I might jump up from my desk and pace. Sometimes I would open a window and breathe the fresh air. Or perhaps I would leave my study and go out for a walk.

I thought of these acts, if I thought of them at all, as ways of "getting away" from my frustration. But it had never occurred to me that perhaps by moving my body, I was actually enabling myself to think.

Now, I began to suspect that body movement was not just a *reflection* of what was going on in the mind. I began to wonder if body movement might in fact *alter* what was going on in the mind. If this were true, body movement could become a conscious part of the learning experience. I decided to experiment. I began asking students to get up out of their seats, to wander aimlessly, to hop, to sit on the floor, to go outdoors.

Consider:

*It is a gray November day. My students walk into the classroom and sit at their desks. No meditation today. I ask the students to write spontaneous free-writing. I tell them the writing will be private. Some bend over their writing. Some can't seem to begin and keep gazing out the window. A few yawn and lean back in their seats, idly doodling with their pencils. After a time, I ask them to stop writing, to stand up and to walk out into the hallway and wait for me there. The students appear surprised, but do as I ask. In the hall, I tell them, "Now go back into the classroom, only this time, walk in backwards, find your paper and pen, then sit on the floor and write whatever is on your mind." Immediately, they begin talking to each other, some laughing, some directing sarcastic remarks at me. A few of the more adventurous begin the backward walk into the classroom. More giggling ensues as more students follow, some bumping into the students behind (ahead of) them. A young man trips and makes a big display of falling. Virtually everyone is laughing now. By the time they have found their paper and pens and are sitting on the floor, there's general uproar and confusion. Lots of talking. Lots of laughing. In my*

*“teacherly” voice, I rise above the noise to remind them that they are to write, in silence now, whatever is on their minds.*

*Bodies attack paper. Everyone is engaged in the writing. No one is talking. No one is looking out the window. Attention is focused on the page. What has happened? A simple waking-up exercise. Not only have I asked them to move their bodies when they thought they’d be sitting for an hour, but I’ve asked them to move in an unconventional, albeit relatively safe, fashion (backwards) and I’ve asked them to sit where they typically do not sit in a classroom (on the floor).*

*After the writing, I ask if anyone would like to read their floor-sitting writing. Several hands go up. Jokes fly off the pages. One reader-writer hits a deep, serious vein. Everyone listens quietly and respectfully. I ask those who volunteered to read the floor-sitting writing if they would like to read their chair-sitting pieces aloud. Some do. To a person, they all prefer their second writing. Even those who did not volunteer to read chime in when asked what it was about the second piece that they liked better. They cite characteristics like spontaneity, excitement, truth. “That’s the real me,” says one student. “When I was sitting in my chair I was being good, a good student. Here on the floor I’m just a nobody and I can say anything I want. Walking backwards felt goofy and risky; it made me feel like writing goofy and risky too.”*

It is certainly true that simply doing something unconventional in a classroom can shake things up enough to cause some authentic writing to occur. But in this case, each student’s body was involved in the act. The students were not spectators of someone else’s unconventionality. They all took part in and created their own spontaneous unconventionality.

But I wonder if even more than this happened when the students moved backward. I wonder if a physiological transformation took place as the students moved. Did the fact that they moved cause their writing to be more exciting? More pleasurable?

Consider, for a moment, the phenomenon of incubation. We all know about this process—a person is stuck in the midst of a creative project, has run out of ideas, or is perplexed about a particularly knotty problem that seems to have no solution. He or she takes a walk, drives to the store, goes to sleep or in some other way engages the body in action while allowing the conscious mind to forget the problem. Then suddenly, as if from

nowhere, “eureka!” the solution pops into the mind.

Where did that solution come from? Is the phenomenon of incubation a matter of simply taking time out from focusing the mind on the issue at hand, thereby giving the mind enough rest to allow an idea to emerge, or is the body itself playing a key role both in the fact that the idea does emerge and, even, in the nature of the idea that emerges?

Might a walk in the woods promote a particular train of thought and thereby enable a certain form of creative idea to emerge, whereas a jog through two miles of city streets might be responsible for the emergence of significantly different ideas? Certainly, there are many variables here. The environments are different. The type of person who chooses such environments and activities is, arguably, different. So, logically, we assume, these variations could produce different ideas. But is it possible that in addition to these different environments and personality traits, the actual movement of the bodies influenced the nature of the ideas that emerged? If we move slowly, do we think differently from the way that we think when we move quickly? If we walk backwards, does our thinking reorient itself? If we hop, skip, jump, do we shift our inner awareness and, thereby, affect our way of expressing that awareness?

In such cases, how is the body participating? Does the body mold or reflect back to us our thought processes? Can we discover individualized body rhythms that make it more likely for us to be creatively expressive and fulfilled? Is it possible that a person who believes “I cannot write” might become a writer if she first became a dancer?

Such questions lead us into the realm of consciousness studies. To ask if the body might in some way be a repository of ideas is to ask a fundamentally materialist question. That is, we seem to be asking if thoughts “reside” in the body, if consciousness has a location that we might someday be able to map in the body. But those who study consciousness know that consciousness is much more elusive than these questions imply. If, through practice and experimentation, we find ourselves able to say that movement of the body *does* affect thought, we cannot so easily explain why this is so.

We can, however, begin to include body movement in our classrooms. Without precisely understanding the mechanism, we can still conduct the experiments that will lead us to a deeper understanding of the role the body plays in learning. We can study our students and ourselves. We can notice that in moving, we grow; in remaining static, we inhibit. We can affirm that if we release the body into movement, so too do we release the mind.