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Cover Page Footnote

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Before Belief: Embodiment and the “Trying Game”

Donna Strickland

Last semester I taught a class I called “Mindful Writing.” Together, the students and I practiced simple breath-awareness meditation and read, quite slowly and deliberately, much of Robert Boice’s *How Writers Journey to Comfort and Fluency: A Psychological Adventure*. Boice, a psychologist, advocates the use of brief, daily writing sessions of 15-60 minutes each and frequent “comfort breaks” to notice and release any tension that arises while writing. As the title of his book suggests, his concern is with the psychology of writing, the ways in which emotional states, habitual patterns, and negative beliefs tend to get in the way of consistent, productive writing. In our class, we used mindful breath awareness, as well as other contemplative practices, as a way to practice comfort in writing and to notice those mind states that interfere with comfort and fluency.

Teaching this class was, without a doubt, a highlight of my more than twenty years as a writing instructor. Having practiced yoga even longer than I’ve taught writing, I’ve sensed that paying attention to the breath and coming into the body would be a helpful support to the process of learning and teaching writing. As teachers, and as writers, too, we’ve surely seen how psychologically loaded writing can be. We bring to any writing experience so much baggage, including our own sense of ourselves as writers, things we’ve been told by teachers, and the expectations of the writing situation itself. Bringing a little bodily centering to the process has always seemed like a good idea to me. But it wasn’t until I read Boice’s book that I felt “authorized” to bring mindful practices so overtly into the classroom. And doing so was tremendously rewarding: many students reported a new confidence in their ability to meet the challenges of assigned writing for other classes, a desire to write more often for pleasure rather than using self-sponsored writing only as a means of venting, and a more relaxed pace in their approach to writing. The effects, for many students, spilled over into the rest of their lives so that they became more aware of the effects of stress on their bodies and felt motivated to better care for themselves, to get more sleep, not to push themselves so hard.

Given the significant benefits students were reporting, I was surprised that a number of students expressed reluctance to try out Boice’s suggestions for making the writing process more comfortable. When Boice offered evidence against the idea that writers must wait for inspiration and advised instead that writing a little every day was the most effective way to cultivate inspiration and creativity, for example, some students countered that this wasn’t true, or that, if it were true, it was impractical, given the busy lives of students. In addition to this doubting game they played with the text, students indicted the reading as repetitive and overwhelming, even though we were reading only six to ten pages at a time.

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These responses to Boice's book surprised me for at least two reasons. So many students were reporting benefits from the practice of bringing mindfulness to their writing that I found it difficult to understand why they would simultaneously argue with the messenger of these practices.¹ Another cause for my surprise, however, was the fact that I had asked the members of the class, in their blog-based responses to the reading, to report on their learning, to report on their experiences with trying out any of Boice's strategies. I hadn't asked (though I also hadn't actively suppressed) whether they agreed or disagreed with Boice.

The tendency to express agreement or disagreement, even when asked to do something else, speaks quite persuasively to the dominance of the doubting game, a problematic dominance that Peter Elbow has pointed to many times over the past thirty-five years. Learning or engaging with texts, under the dominance of this game, comes to mean taking a critical stance. And while, as Elbow has always made clear, this kind of adversarial learning can be valuable and shouldn't be discarded, it is also only one kind of learning.

It occurred to me, each time that I read another blog posting that expressed skepticism toward Boice, that I might talk to the group about the believing game. I thought I might ask them to do their best to refrain from arguing with the text, to try believing it, affirming it, instead. And yet I never did bring up the believing game. It didn't feel quite right for the situation. I didn't care so much whether they believed Boice, after all—I wanted them simply to try out his exercises, to see for themselves whether and how his "rules" for comfortable and fluent writing might work for them.

Since we were meditating in the class and since meditation is also a part of Buddhist practice, I couldn't help but think of the Buddha's words to anyone who came to him seeking "the truth." Don't take my word for it, the Buddha would always insist; try it out for yourself. A group of people known as the Kalamas, for example, asked the Buddha for guidance in making sense of the believing and doubting games played by traveling teachers:

They expound and glorify their own doctrines, but as for the doctrines of others, they deprecate them, revile them, show contempt for them, and disparage them. They leave us absolutely uncertain and in doubt: Which of these venerable priests and contemplatives are speaking the truth, and which ones are lying? (Kalama)

The Kalamas had heard a number of cognitive stances on the nature of truth, and they were left confused by the varieties. The Buddha, rather than offering another stance, advised them to test out the doctrines, to examine their effects:

Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for

¹Although Boice doesn't label his approach a mindful one, the practices he advises, such as pausing to notice tension and paying attention to the breath to produce calm, are quite in keeping with such as programs as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction; see Kabat-Zinn for more on this particular approach.

yourselves that, “These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness”—then you should enter and remain in them. (Kalama)

The Buddha advised coming to know through testing and experiencing, coming to “know for yourselves” what it is that, “when adopted and carried out,” leads to positive outcomes.

As it happens, one student very consistently tried out—that is, tested and experienced—Boice’s suggestions, as well as my own. I asked the class, for example, to sense what “unpleasant” feels like in the body. I wanted them to be able to feel when tension or aversion was coming up around writing. Not surprisingly, given the unfamiliar nature of this assignment, most students had trouble feeling, much less describing, the bodily sensations associated with the unpleasant. But not M. In his blog posting for that day of class, he described a heavy feeling in his chest. Another time, he tried out Boice’s advice on “preparing useful outlines” (64-72). Boice acknowledges that most people have experienced outlines as “mechanical listings that were unpleasant to assemble and unlikely to find much willing use” (64). His suggestion is that writers try conceptual outlines that describe how one point is connected to the next, as a way of arranging ideas that have been developed through reading and freewriting (65). Setting aside his own negative experiences with outlines, M. ended the class quite devoted to Boice’s method, writing in his final reflection for the class that doing outlines had significantly changed his writing for the better, helping him to better organize his thoughts.

When I expressed my appreciation to him for so consistently taking on the challenges of the class, M. explained to me that he approached it like learning strategies in a sport. When as a youngster he was learning to throw a baseball, he said he had to go against his natural inclinations in throwing, which would lead him to throw the ball with limited force. He had to learn to move his arm in ways that felt unnatural and awkward at first. But he stuck with it, practiced, and eventually learned to throw a baseball effectively, with power, according to the conventions of the game of baseball. He was approaching Boice’s recommendations in the same way: he knew that he needed to practice them in order to observe their effects and get any use out of them.

M.’s analogy of learning to throw a baseball immediately helped me to understand why I was inclining away from the believing game, or at least away from the language of belief. Belief wasn’t the issue here. Experience—embodied experience—was. What I wish to explore, then, is the possibility that embodied experience is prior to belief, that experience is non-cognitive, while belief is cognitive. I began to think of what I was asking of students as not so much the “believing” as the “trying” game. This essay is my effort to consider the difference this distinction might make.

The Believing Game

First, I want to make clear that I do understand Elbow’s believing game to be very much about experiencing and trying out ideas. In his recent *JAEPL* essay,

he asserts that “the doubting game is the rhetoric of *propositions* while the believing game is the rhetoric of experience” (“The Believing Game” 8, original emphasis). He emphasizes the importance of “understanding through doing and inhabiting not debating” (8). Just as I wanted the students in my class to do rather than debate, so does Elbow’s believing game asks this of all of us.

Writing Without Teachers, moreover, the book in which Elbow first articulated his epistemology of the believing game, is, above all, a book about experiences. Elbow privileges experience in dedicating the book “to those people who actually use it—not just read it.” In other words, he hopes readers will approach his book in the very same way that I hoped students in my class would approach Boice: I wanted them to use Boice’s book, not to simply read it and take some sort of stance, one that might ultimately defer writing experiences.

I could certainly offer even more examples of how prominent a role experience plays in Elbow’s believing game. Given the emphasis that Elbow places on experience, then, it would seem that my experiential “trying game” is very much the same as the believing game. And yet I don’t consider my request that students try out some of Boice’s suggestions to be the same as a wish that they would, at least temporarily, believe Boice. While it might seem that I am splitting semantic hairs here, I want to make clear that the distinction is in more than word choice. Believing, just like doubting, is a cognitive stance. Experiencing, on the other hand, is, at least at the beginning, non-cognitive. We experience all things first of all with the body, even if that experience is a gut-level reaction to a text. It can be difficult to see the separation between our bodily experience of and our cognitive stance on that experience, but I would suggest that noticing that separation offers a powerful opening for learning.

Before pursuing this distinction a bit further, I want to end this reflection on Elbow’s believing game by noting, then, that I find two different kinds of learning—the cognitive game of believing and the bodily, experiential game that I’m, for now, calling “trying”—in what Elbow has tended to describe as one. When Elbow construes the believing game as “searching out competing ideas and seeking strengths in them—instead of looking directly for weaknesses in what is to be tested,” then I understand him to be describing a cognitive process, one that isn’t quite the same as direct, bodily experience (*Writing* xxiv). Certainly, “seeking strengths” is a kind of experience, but it is a cognitive one. To actually experience competing ideas, we might try them out, as we try out, say, a new recipe or a new approach like freewriting. It’s through the experience of “trying out” that we then are able to bring a kind of experience-based cognition to the question: what does freewriting do? What does my experience of freewriting suggest to me about the benefits of freewriting? The experience happens, then the reflection, the cogitating on that experience. A person doesn’t need to believe in freewriting to try out freewriting, anymore than one needs to “believe” in a recipe in order to experiment with it. She needs simply to suspend her doubting, to suspend all stance-taking, including believing. And then see for herself how it works.

The Body in Motion

In his *JAEP* essay, Elbow offers a wonderful anecdote about being persuaded by his older siblings to try horseradish. I had a similar experience with hot peppers. He uses his anecdote to illustrate the propensity children have for

the believing game. He believed, as I believed, that older siblings tell the truth. The sharp experience of tasting the horseradish or hot peppers might insert a momentary doubting, but believing soon returns.

But what else is learned in that experience? I take the hot pepper; I put it in my mouth, expecting a pleasant sensation. My body reacts: I spit it out. No cognition there. Pure bodily movement.

But cognition and stance-taking follow so closely after the bodily experience that it can be hard to pry them apart. I decide that my older sister is mean, that hot peppers are to be avoided. These are beliefs born of experience. But they are not the same as the physical, embodied experience itself.

Writing, it bears noting, is a physical activity. Because we've long linked writing with thinking (a link I certainly wouldn't deny), we have tended to overlook the physicality of writing. Without a body, without bodily movements of one kind or another, writing would not happen. Think, for example, of the amazing feat accomplished by Jean-Dominique Bauby, the paralyzed author of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*. Deprived by a stroke of speech and of any movement save for the ability to blink his left eye, he used that one bodily movement to communicate telegraphically, letter by letter, a memoir of his experience. His story speaks powerfully to the endurance of the human spirit even as it demonstrates the necessity of the human body for its expression. Just as my student M. had to learn to move in new ways in order to throw a baseball effectively, so did Bauby have to learn to use a part of his body in new ways in order to write.

In addition to asking that writers try out new writing experiences, the trying game also asks that we become attuned to what it is that stops us from trying. While we might simply call the roadblock "doubt," doubt itself is a position, a way of holding the body. In other words, the motivation—or lack of motivation—to try necessarily begins with the body.

To explain what I mean here, I need to turn to a sampling of the recent scientific research and theoretical writings that have begun exploring the pre-cognitive, bodily experiences that precede and make possible thought. Although they often use different vocabularies to describe these experiences, they tend to all agree that what we usually call emotion occurs first as a bodily response of moving toward or away from something, and that the naming or narrativizing of that movement comes later (even if an infinitesimal microsecond later). Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist, refers to "the complex chain of events that begins with emotion and ends up with feeling," where "bodily emotions become the kinds of thoughts we call feelings" (27, 7). For Damasio, then, before they are anything else, emotions are bodily movements:

In the context of this book . . . emotions are actions or movements, many of them public, visible to others as they occur in the face, in the voice, in the specific behaviors. To be sure, some components of the emotion process are not visible to the naked eye but can be made "visible" with current scientific probes such as hormonal assays and electrophysiological wave patterns. Feelings, on the other hand, are always hidden, like all mental images necessarily are, unseen to anyone other than their rightful owner. (28)

What's significant here, for my purposes, is not so much the specific terms used (since different researchers may change the labels), but to see that emotion originates in the body before it is linguistic or symbolic. And, because emotions first occur in the body, they are "public," insofar as they appear in the face or voice or can be picked up by scientific scanning. Once they are labeled by the mind with names like "sad" or "happy" or even have a subtle feeling tone of "unpleasant" or "pleasant," they are private, in the locked domain of the cognitive until spoken. While Damasio places emphasis on the "public" dimension of the bodily, it is often the bodily that remains most unnoticed by the person experiencing the emotion. The attention tends to jump quickly to the "private" realm of thoughts and images associated with the bodily movement. When I eat something I don't like, for example, I tend to notice more the thought of not liking (what Damasio labels "feeling") than the way my upper body tends to subtly recoil from the taste, as if readying itself to spit it out (what Damasio terms "emotion"). The body moves with reactivity; the mind only afterwards labels that reactivity.

As writers, our bodies hold habitual emotional responses that we may no longer even consciously think about. I've noticed, for example, that I habitually tense my shoulders when writing. To some extent, I "knew" that: I recognized that my shoulders tend to feel worse after I've been writing. What I didn't realize is how my body almost automatically assumes this aversive tension when I start writing. My body reacts emotionally to the act of writing, tensing up against what has come to be experienced as unpleasant. The act of noticing this tension can be the starting point of beginning to release it. Not noticing it only further solidifies that tension into a cognitive stance. The tension in the body that arises around writing then creates the mental belief: writing is unpleasant.

Damasio goes so far as to make quite a radical statement about the relation of the body to the mind: "to say that our mind is made up of ideas of one's body is equivalent to saying that our mind is made up of images, representations, or thoughts of our own parts of our body in spontaneous action or in the process of modifications caused by objects in the environment" (213-14). Cognition, in other words, follows from bodily actions and reactions. Both belief and doubt, as cognitive stances, follow from bodily movement, physical experience. We believe (or doubt) only after our bodies move.

In fact, it is this attention to bodily movement that the cultural theorist Brian Massumi privileges in his work, especially *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. This book represents his effort "to explore the implications for cultural theory of this simple conceptual displacement: body—(movement/sensation)—change" (1). Massumi notes that most cultural theories, in their efforts to promote social change or to observe reasons for stasis, have tended to overlook the middle terms, the literality of bodily movement. As a result, they have focused on critique (the doubting game) in their efforts to enforce belief. Think, for instance, of the work in composition studies by critics of Peter Elbow's work. James Berlin, as an example, worked hard to see the composition classroom as an avenue for social change. To promote this stance, he played a rigorous game of doubting with other composition scholars whom he saw as inadequately promoting social change, and he also advocated cultural criticism as the most appropriate work for students in composition classrooms (see, for instance, Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*). But according to Massumi, this focus on critique and stance

taking and the subsequent overlooking of bodily movement has led to a stalemate in cultural theory. Cultural theorists have become quite good at identifying what needs to be changed but have had a more difficult time imagining how change might happen. For Massumi, who also draws on scientific research, change is effected by way of the body, through its experience and movement in the world, both of which trigger new thoughts. And, using language that should make a process-based writer and teacher proud, Massumi states his intention to place “the emphasis . . . on process before signification or coding” while maintaining that “the latter are not false or unreal” but are “truly, really stop-operations” (7). Belief and doubt, then, would be what Massumi calls “significations” or “stop-operations”: they stop the process of experiencing and name it, turn it into a mental phenomenon.

For Massumi the significant question to ask if we are interested in how change happens is not how we know—an epistemological question that seeks to stop and label experience—but how we get from one position to the next. He derives this shift in focus from Henri Bergson’s theories of “creative evolution”:

The Bergsonian revolution turns the world on its head. Position no longer comes first, with movement a problematic second. It is secondary to movement and derived from it. It is retro movement, movement residue. The problem is no longer to explain how there can be change given positioning. The problem is to explain the wonder that there can be stasis given the primacy of process. (8)

To put this in terms of the believing game, we might say that the question isn’t how someone takes on new ideas. The question is how there can be fixed views at all considering how much daily experience is one of flux. Our bodies are constantly in motion—even if we are apparently sitting still. The constant reaction to stimuli pulls and tugs at our viscera, furrows our brows, and, in moments of grace, relaxes our shoulders. The trying game asks readers and writers to suspend the stance-taking long enough to notice that flux of reactivity, the moment-to-moment changes as the body responds. It asks, moreover, that we acknowledge the inevitability of change, honor it, by trying out new things.

Positions, then, whether positions of believing or doubting, are “residue” of bodily movement. We believe when our bodies move toward something; we doubt as our bodies recoil and move away. Of course, after years of social conditioning, those things we move toward and those things we move away from become habituated in the body. My body had become habituated to recoil as it writes, to tense up, to get ready to run away as soon as possible. I’m working to retrain it, to notice that recoiling, to relax the body, to take breaks. Boice calls it, in the title of his book, a “journey to comfort and fluency.” In a telling slip, a colleague thought the title was how to journey “from comfort to fluency.” Our schooling often sends the message that writing is hard work, that to write well demands that we give up comfort and give ourselves over to that suffering. Our bodies hold on to that message. It takes something other than belief to loosen that hold: we need to try to move.

Conclusion: Notes Toward a Trying Game

As I've mentioned before, I do see what I'm calling the trying game to already be part of the believing game. What I would like to see is a separating out of the trying game from the believing game so that beliefs and stances don't get mixed up with the purely physical experiencing of action and reaction. I'll end, then, with an illustration of one distinction between the believing game and the trying game that I have experienced and passed on to my students.

I explained in the introduction to this article that I never did talk directly to my class about the believing game, even as I found a number of students expressing their doubt of and even exasperation with Boice. I wasn't particularly concerned with the stance they took in relation to Boice, whether it was one of belief or doubt. Rather, I wanted them to try to suspend stances, to try to suspend believing and doubting in order to try out some of his ideas, to move their writing bodies as he suggested, giving attention to bodily comfort, to pacing, and to moderation.

But just asking them to do that wasn't particularly effective. Instead, their stances toward Boice seemed to become further solidified with each short section that we read. How can there be such stasis, given the dominance of change in our lived experience? There is stasis because the body gets fixed in its emotional reactions. These reactions have become habitual.

So instead of asking them to try believing Boice's ideas, I began asking them simply to notice what was happening in their bodies as they were reading. I varied the instructions I gave, but they were all inclined toward asking students to notice what sensations arose in their bodies as they read, and to try to find what prompted the aversive feelings. Here are two examples of my reading prompts:

As you begin to read, please pause for a moment and consciously relax. I would encourage you, if possible, to practice pausing as you read. Maybe at the end of every page, just pause for a second. Notice what's happening in your body and mind as you read.

Pause if you notice yourself feeling bogged down, frustrated, or otherwise feeling unpleasant. Notice where you feel it in your body. Try to identify what particular words brought on this feeling and make a note of them. Please also notice any words or phrases that provoke a more pleasant feeling. Make a note of those also.

While I would by no means claim that pausing and noticing where and how negative feelings arise in the body led all students to lose their aversion toward Boice, it did nonetheless give them a tool for noticing what might trigger the aversion. And students also, by and large, expressed greater patience with Boice when they practiced this slowing-down of the reading process. They seemed grateful for the opportunity to pause, and that pausing of the body helped to condition (for a little while, at least) a slightly more open approach to Boice. And that slowing-down of their reading was an example of trying out something new, trying out a different way of attending to and using the body.

Attending to the body, then, both by putting ideas into practice and by noticing the reactivity in the body that keeps us from practicing, is a key feature of this trying game. Insofar as it is affirmative, an effort to try out new things and to acknowledge what might be blocking us, it closely resembles the believing game that Elbow has long advocated. But as an effort to pay attention to the body and to observe the effects while suspending cognitive positions, the trying game strategically departs from the believing game. As a strategy, the trying game asks us to observe our own bodily experiences, to notice the effects of trying something new, and, through that process, in the words of the Buddha, to come to know for ourselves.

Afterword

Today, in the midst of working on a revision of this article, a moment of serendipity: I happened to run into M.—the student who shared the baseball analogy with me—in a crowded hallway on campus. The Mindful Writing class ended almost five months ago, but M. greets me with enthusiasm and tells me that if he hadn't had the class last semester, he doesn't think he could have survived the current semester. "I have two or three papers to write every week," he tells me, "But I did it, and I'm doing okay." It's the last week of classes before finals, a tense time. And he does seem to be doing okay; his face breaks into a gentle smile. It's a small thing, but I'm willing to take that smile, that subtle movement of the body, as a sign of the hopeful possibilities of the trying game. ☺

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