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## Active Receptivity: The Positive, Mindful Flow of Mental Energy

### Cover Page Footnote

Terri Pullen teaches English at State University of West Georgia while taking her doctorate in Rhetoric Composition from Illinois State University.

# Active Receptivity

## The Positive, *Mindful* Flow of Mental Energy

Terri G. Pullen

In order to demonstrate two points—what energy following attention means and what the physical sensation of being truly still and focused feels like—I taught the students in my composition classroom how to use make-shift pendulums (Brande 1934/1981). As a class, we had been struggling over an idea in a particular essay. What William Stafford called “just plain receptivity” (1979/1992) was actually not so simple a concept to demonstrate without confusing the idea with the *bolt-from-the-blue* school of invention. The pendulum exercise seemed an appropriate way to demonstrate this activity.

Crystal, a talented and curious premed student, was so intrigued by the exercise that she cornered one of her biology professors in an attempt to understand physiologically how what she had experienced was possible. How can a pendulum swing in the intended direction if the hand holding it is still? The answer was easy, according to the biology professor: Electric impulses in the brain communicate very subtly with the skin, and eventually, enough energy is communicated to the string through the hand that the ring or key on the end begins to swing in the *intended* direction. Students were amazed that they could make the pendulum swing along a bull’s-eye pattern I had drawn for them on paper. With their minds they could actually trace the circle and the cross-hair design before them. There was no trick, and this exercise required no special talent. Everyone was able to swing the pendulum again and again.

I had tried this exercise for the first time, and because of no particular precedence for such a thing in classroom pedagogy, I was more than a bit unsure. Despite my initial concerns, however, I considered the exercise to be a huge success: I had demonstrated what I felt were essential principles about focusing before writing through experientially accessing sensations characteristic of an active state of receptivity. I felt that I had created an important experience for myself and my students.

Yet, there was more to come from this exercise. An unusual question from Crystal followed close on the heels of the pendulum exercise. “Why are you in composition?” she asked. In the pause, I entertained the fear that the exercise had caused a breach and in some way had been too New Age. Worse, I found that I had no answer to what sounded like a rather simple question. But the pull of something—that felt sense—was too strong. I decided to pursue the question. As for Crystal, I saw no contention in her face. Instead, I sensed she was so

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impressed by the exercise that she had ultimately concluded I was a misplaced soul of sorts. Her biology professor failed to explain this incident away neatly. Instead, Crystal seemed even more intrigued by the idea that this physiological principle could demonstrate something about writing. I ran the mental gauntlet of responses before speaking, responses ranging from the initial canned phrases about the importance of communicating successfully to silence. And it was in that silence that I finally had to surrender to the idea that Crystal was asking me a question that it was time for me to answer.

"I don't know, Crystal. Why do you ask?"

"Well," she paused, "it's just that you're always talking about something else . . . psychology, medicine, Eastern philosophy, art. . . . We are always working on writing, but it's never *just* about writing." Just as the pendulum demonstrated active receptivity and helped us all to focus, Crystal's inquiry did the same for me as I set about answering the question that in some way has come to frame every day I enter the classroom. What was it I was trying to understand through incorporating this array of perspectives into my classroom approach? Crystal's question drew into focus the fact that I was attempting to define for myself a sense of personal vision in my relationship to the composition classroom, a sense of vision that would privilege the exploration of composition as a learning act, with a particular interest in the mind states involved in actualizing more and more of our potential. I was seeking to know more about the mind states we all employ as we compose knowledge and manifest this exploration in its various forms. My answer to Crystal's question was eventually this: I was in composition because I *could* bring into play all of these seemingly divergent areas, all toward the purpose of studying in some way this incredible, dynamic use of energy that we rather nonchalantly encapsulate in the word *thinking*.

Since Crystal's question, every day in the classroom seems to be a variation on this theme. My goal is to understand thinking as the flow of energy and attention. And, as a teacher, I seek every day to understand better the patterns that are most conducive to the positive flow of this mental energy. How can I beneficially work with the subtle energies demonstrated by the pendulum? How do I draw into play this effective, focused, engaged thinking? How do I create an appropriate environment for this active receptivity? Obviously, I continue to explore any avenue that might inform my responses and answers to these questions. In my search, I have found one researcher in particular who has served as an amazing springboard into constellations of beneficial areas of inquiry, all in some way focusing on this idea of understanding and cultivating the most active and beneficial mind sets.

Research psychologist Ellen J. Langer (1989) has investigated this state of active receptivity, which she terms *mindfulness*, as well as its counterpart, *mindlessness*. The latter seems the most prevalent as well as the easier one to define. According to Langer, mindlessness is the result of limiting mind sets or "premature cognitive commitments" (p. 19) that we allow to rule our thinking, resulting in ineffective emotional and behavioral patterns. Langer names the prevalent patterns of mindlessness: categories, automatic behaviors, and actions based on a single perspective. Categories that trap us are those from our pasts on which we over-rely. Categories such as young/old, success/failure, and so on represent some

of the limiting pairs. Overuse leads us to forget these are only constructs and are therefore open to question. Automatic behaviors are repetitive behaviors that we indulge in to the point of negative automaticity. These need not be simple tasks, either, and Langer points out that complex skills such as reading and writing are not immune to this negative repetition. Finally, actions based on a single perspective or a recipe approach to thinking involve solving a problem from a prelearned perspective, again forgetting that variations can be both necessary and desirable.

But rarely is it simply enough to create a typology of problems. Langer goes deeper into persistent, destructive beliefs that underlie these inefficient behaviors. Apparently, on a more intuitive level, we are initiated early into constraining beliefs. First, we learn that our resources are limited, and, as a result, we assume we are caught within categories and are blocked from seeing the world as dynamic in nature. In a sense, we are controlled by a focus on limitations as opposed to an awareness of alternatives that could widen the horizon of problem-solving. This perspective mandates that energy as an end is not renewable, and therefore, must be conserved from the outset. This conservation of energy leads to the second set of problematic beliefs, those of entropy and linear time. The belief that energy must be conserved is based on the idea that our limited energy resources are nonrenewable and will eventually run out. This assumed progression toward entropy is encased in linear time as a concept. As a result of these beliefs, we operate on the expectation that events will occur in a neat progression and when events do not fit, frustration sets in. Ironically, this frustration leads to a greater waste of energy and is rather inefficient by most standards.

What is important about these ideas is how they relate to our educational environments and behaviors within those contexts. Obviously, if mindlessness permeates all areas of life, our classrooms then are no exception. According to Langer, our early education contributes significantly to mindlessness (1989). The educational focus on outcome instead of process allows the success/failure dichotomy to rule our perspective as we are evaluated on the product. Furthermore, this education reinforces the beliefs in linear, limited time frames, and nonrenewable energy. This educational view also stipulates that since energy is limited, we must disregard learning opportunities that might not have a direct or immediate bearing on the impending outcome.

Conversely, mindfulness is a more flexible mind set marked by the perspective that change is a positive inevitability. This positive, more energy-efficient mind set involves the perpetual creation and refinement of new categories based on continuous labeling and relabeling that requires consistent reflection on ideas and experiences. The categories themselves are not inherently negative; instead, it is the over-extension of these categories that can represent mindlessness. However, if categories are used in an exploratory sense, *re-creation* becomes *recreation*. By breaking down categories into more precise distinctions, we can begin to find new openings in our work. As a result, categories are *not* viewed as limitations or unquestionable boundaries; rather, categories represent opportunities to raise questions and challenge demarcations that might otherwise have been perceived as limitations. This positive mind set is marked by a sense of discov-

ery, a directed playfulness that brings with it renewed focus and energy. This part of the dynamic requires us to be attentive and engaged. But before discovery can occur, mindfulness also involves an openness to new information. Such openness creates the opportunity for discovery and adds to the dynamic of situation-monitoring and category-refinement. Again, discovery brings with it personal involvement, investment, and, consequently, more energy.

Langer briefly notes that her collage of information concerning mindfulness parallels three large areas of inquiry into creating and sustaining high-vibrational contexts for personal energy and its manifestations: current studies in physics, focusing on refinements concerning our ideas of energy, time, and relational dynamics; creativity studies, emphasizing questions as to the role and development of intuition and contexts for innovative thinking; and Eastern philosophy and religion, forefronting meditation, visualization, and reassessment. Though Langer taken alone represents a valuable resource for re-envisioning classroom design and pedagogy, the directions she indicates for further study collectively constitute nothing short of a gold mine on two levels. From New Physics and creativity studies, we can draw positive and challenging ways in which we can re-envision the composition classroom dynamic. Additionally, methods from Eastern philosophy represent immediate and practical applications for helping our students to focus and center their energies around the tasks at hand.

Quantum physics offers one of the richest veins for new metaphors through which we can define consciousness, or the animating energy of our beings and environments. Primarily, these insights allow us to conceptualize thinking as patterns of energy, vibrating in various frequencies with our environments instead of mere machinations of the brain. Stanislav Grof (1993) recognizes the implications of the shift away from Newtonian science toward a sense of the quantum field theory of energy:

Up to now, Newtonian science has been responsible for creating a very limited view of human beings and their potential. . . . [Our mental functions] are limited to taking in information from our sensory organs, storing it in our "mental computer banks," and then perhaps recombining sensory data to create something new. . . .

Instead of there being discrete objects and empty spaces between them the entire universe is seen as one continuous field of varying density. . . .

Now we have a universe that is an infinitely complex system of vibratory phenomena rather than an agglomerate of Newtonian objects. These vibratory systems have properties and possibilities undreamed of in Newtonian science. (pp. 5-7)

In *The Quantum Self*, Danah Zohar (1990) demonstrates that this sense of "vibratory systems" has already established a stronghold in how we metaphorically represent the energy patterns of our thoughts: "Consciousness is, in its essence, relational, and it can arise only where at least two things come together" (p. 104). This action of coming together automatically creates the sense of movement, of momentum where the two spin, change each other in the process and attract other

elements into the dynamic. This description of the new vision of consciousness closely parallels the one noted by Langer as the positive readiness to new information and multiple perspectives in a mindful state.

What's more, this idea parallels the creative tension between two entities that is one of the major features characterizing creative persons and creative mind sets. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1996) notes ten sets of "apparently antithetical traits" that in fact exist in a "dialectical tension" time after time in the personalities of those considered to be innovative or creative. For example, Csikszentmihalyi notes that such persons often exude a sense of physical endurance though they are frequently at rest or sleeping for long periods of time. The distinction to be made here, according to Csikszentmihalyi, is that

the energy of these people is internally generated and is due more to their focused minds than the superiority of their genes. . . the important thing is that the energy is under their own control—it is not controlled by the calendar, the clock, an external schedule. (p. 58)

In this sense, the entropy that Langer views as a negative factor is transformed into a natural downtime or creative dormancy period in the dynamic, a part of the cycle that is similar to a change in density in the continuous field of energy. This perspective on entropy as downtime is necessarily based on the perspective that energy is a renewable resource, and that the periods of lesser creative density are opportunities to recharge.

Other tensions that are of interest here are playfulness/discipline, fantasy or imagination/reality, extroversion/introversion, masculine/feminine, and suffering/enjoyment. At first, these tensions sound uncomfortably like the categories Langer warns against; however, in his descriptions, Csikszentmihalyi depicts a circular, dynamic stance rather than an oppositional, either/or perspective. As a result, these tensions support not the constraining categories of mindlessness, but the constant re-creation that Langer supports as part of the positive, mindful direction of thought energy. According to Langer, categories can be positive entities when they are used not as limitations but opportunities to make further distinctions. Each turn to the polarity is a checkpoint in the cycle and each represents a mutually renewing counterpart for the other.

Renewal is exactly the basis on which the third aspect that Langer notes comes most directly and practically into play. Eastern philosophy and methods are inundating the West on an unprecedented scale, affecting everything from our views on medicine and aging, to relaxation and stress management and performance enhancement in any activity. All these areas have one thing in common—the emphasis on the mind/body relationship, a concept difficult to express in Western terms because the two have so long been dichotomized.

Though Langer is hesitant to recognize more fully the connections between her research and certain Eastern concepts, her conceptualization of mindfulness directly relates to the Buddhist practice of *Vipassana*, or mindfulness meditation. In this practice, the meditator consciously detaches from thoughts as they pass through the mind during the meditation experience. Ultimately, meditation

exercises are meant to demonstrate the impermanence of mental states and thereby allow the meditator to recognize greater distinctions and relativity within the physical world experience. This rejection of solidity and permanence is what connects *Vipassana* practice with the principles of physics, according to Buddhist Master Mohnyin Sayadaw (1996):

By discarding the concept of solidity, scientists have analyzed all matter into more than 100 elements. Ultimately, even these elements and atoms when examined become waves of energy in largely empty space. The particles/waves are always dynamic so that modern physics points to the basic impermanent and soulless nature of all matter. (p. 196)

*Vipassana* practice involves starting with a close observation of everyday physical movement in order to understand these actions as mind/body energy in an ever-changing dynamic relationship. Sayadaw describes this process:

[E]ach moment old “groups” of energy-physical matter arise and vanish yielding place to new ones. . . . Moving his hand from one position to another *again and again* he contemplates the impermanence of form and sensation. In the ultimate sense the diffusion (the process of oscillation or vibration born of mental activity) gives the appearance of a hand moving. (p. 200)

Many other sources springing from Eastern traditions currently exist, holding as a common thread this emphasis on a greater understanding of mind/body energy in order to counter current inefficient, ingrained assumptions concerning limited energy resources, linear time, and impending entropy. Handbooks and videotapes abound for those concerned with discovering the *ki* or *chi* energy, this unlimited, renewable life-force animating us all. Many of these sources attempt to counter the Western mind/body division for the sake of health and performance enhancement. For example, Chungliang Al Huang and Jerry Lynch (1992), in *Thinking Body, Dancing Mind*, offer alternatives to the destructive mind set that the fracture between mind and body creates: “If you soften and relax your mental approach to athletics, . . . you reduce the anxiety, tension and stress that could inhibit your success. . . . Relax in order to max” (p. 46). Huang and Lynch reveal ways in which we can continually renew mind/body energy, and, intrinsically, that renewal involves rejecting the concept of entropy as the end of energy and de-emphasizing linear time and progression. These writers stress repeatedly the importance of self-aware, relaxed participation in the process, the role of intuition, and a circular, rather than linear, progression toward a goal.

By incorporating these and related ideas, are we suggesting the possibility of a complete restructuring of classroom experiences? The goal here is to augment and refine our implementations of current methods, not to displace them. These ideas can serve as theoretical underpinnings that help us extend and invigorate approaches already in place. For example, on an immediate level, we can help our students become mindfully present in the classroom with activities



similar to the pendulum exercise as we help our students to center and focus. Who among us has not wished for a way to help a student through a case of writing trepidation?

Such fears are not specific to writing and Huang and Lynch present numerous "relax and max" meditations for performance enhancement that are applicable to any situation. One such meditation involves flooding the mind with all sorts of worries and fears, recognizing them, and then turning to a focusing meditation that requires one to visualize a simple action—peace and calm in on the inhalation, tension and anxiety out on the exhalation. By simply implementing this meditation in a classroom context, we demonstrate to students that they indeed have a source of empowerment readily available. Similar meditations emphasizing centering or regaining an equilibrium in the mind/body dynamic demonstrate that one can also become much more tolerant of what initially is perceived as adversity and remain more effective during periods of stress and distraction. Centering recognizes the cyclical nature of our existence. Centering meditations where one breathes, relaxes, and then visualizes pro-active instead of reactive behavior help to create positive, mindful behaviors.

Furthermore, the efficiency of these meditations can be augmented with a layperson's knowledge of acupressure points. For example, Michael Reed Gach (1990) demonstrates a cycle of point stimulations for the head and neck area that are designed to increase memory and concentration, and this session is quick, unintrusive, and perfectly suited to a classroom setting. By massaging the *Gates of Consciousness* at the base of the skull and the *Heavenly Pillar* one inch below, students can relieve neck and shoulder tension while increasing circulation in the brainstem area. The *Sun Point* at the temples and the *One Hundred Meeting Point* just before the hollow at the top of the skull increase memory and concentration. All points should receive a firm but gentle pressure for the best effects. And if one is short on time, simply pressing on the *Third Eye Point* in the center of the forehead at the indentation above the nose "clears the mind and uplifts the spirit" (p. 163).

These meditations can be important because they demonstrate to students an efficient means of accessing a mindful state. Immediately students can become positively self-aware. This self-awareness need not be merely a backdrop for classroom activities; it can also be an integral part of assignment design. Journal activities currently in place can be used to encourage an engaged state during the writing process. Students can use these writings as an opportunity to describe and monitor their thinking processes, record images, and recognize lateral ideas as they occur and change the process. Also, I have found it valuable to build self-awareness through the process journal, a running log in which students record their thinking about a particular writing assignment. As a result, I have a record of the students' particular energy patterns during composition upon which we can all reflect.

Just as we can attune to our students' energy patterns during a single task, we can use the ideas from quantum physics and creativity studies to enhance our thinking about sequencing assignments within broader frameworks such as portfolio-based course design. This represents another point to which Langer again contributes directly. The portfolio is a perfect vehicle to recognize the students'

work for the course as a continuous field of energy made up of various densities. Also important to the portfolio implementation is this idea that the positive use of periods of entropy can actually serve to renew energy.

Downtime can be overtly recognized as a range of energy within this field, one which is serving a particular purpose in the cycle as opposed to the blank or empty space it is often viewed as being. As Langer points out, recognizing periods of downtime can reduce the incidence of overload and burnout, two features of an over-adherence to a linear mind set and repetition. By allowing portfolios to represent a variety of tasks of varying density in terms of energy and attention required, we can deepen the portfolio experience with creative tensions and task switching between various writing-to-learn activities as well as within the drafting process. In this way we satisfy the need for both structure and variety with a greater sense of balance. Variety, according to Langer, allows us the renewal of energy that is often called a second wind as we briefly shift focus. It is important to remember that doing so does not take us off task; instead, it allows us to participate in the same dynamic at a different vibratory intensity in another aspect of the portfolio. This shift in focus can renew energy and this renewal hedges energy lags and overall burnout, and if planned carefully, the task shifted to can possibly be exactly the sort of lateral shift/new idea creative tension so highly valued as a part of creative behaviors.

Through an acquaintance with Langer's ideas and continual study in these related areas, we can build for ourselves a fountain of energy with which we can renew ourselves and our pedagogies. With more exposure to studies in consciousness and creativity, and their subsequent applications in the classroom, we can perhaps more readily assure that we are having a greater impact on our students' energy levels and thinking patterns. We have tremendous resources at our disposal to better insure that we can demonstrate thinking as movement of energy and a positive avenue of change in an ever-shifting, synergetic fashion.

As for the rewards of active receptivity and greater awareness, suffice it to say that no one is immune to this energy, whether the vibration is negative or positive. Fortunately, I am finding that the positive mind set seems not so hard won, for these and other methods are progressively becoming options in the classroom on a more consistent basis. Here is a recent example:

It was another Georgia day of drenching rain in January. Students were grumpy and distracted. Some sighed. Others slumped in their chairs. I decided to guide them in a breathing exercise, invited them to visualize a mental piece of paper and pencil and asked them to see themselves writing all their worries and concerns on the page. Then we created the "mental trash can," wadded up the paper and threw those distractions away. I guided them back to an awareness of their breathing, and as they opened their eyes, their presence filled the room around me.

"How do you feel now?" I asked.

I was met with smiles.

"Good." I answered. "Welcome back! I am so glad to have you here. Now we can begin . . . ." ☺

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