

2016

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Paula Mathieu

Boston College, paula.mathieu@bc.edu

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Recommended Citation

Mathieu, Paula (2016) "Being There: Mindfulness as Ethical Classroom Practice," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 21 , Article 5.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl21hmb9>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol21/iss1/5>

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Being There: Mindfulness as Ethical Classroom Practice

Paula Mathieu

I begin with gratitude for the two essays preceding this one. When Lois Agnew writes about rhetorical history, pedagogy, or any subject for that matter, I find her to be both captivating and persuasive. Thank you, Lois, for all you do and teach. And my thanks also for John Duffy. John's work on the intersection of composition and ethics strikes me as critically urgent. If you haven't, you should read his wonderful article in the spring 2014 issue of the *Journal of Advanced Composition*, which details the tacit connections between composition and ethics and eloquently argues for a more explicit focus on ethics in our scholarship and public discourse.

I use some ideas from John's article as the springboard for my essay, which focuses on the intersection between ethics and mindfulness—which I define simply as “developing nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment while observing one's thoughts and emotions.”¹ John tells us:

. . .when we write for an audience. . . we propose a relationship with other human beings, our readers. And . . . we inevitably address, either explicitly and deliberately or implicitly and unintentionally, the questions that occupy moral philosophers: what kind of person do I want to be? How should I treat others? What are my commitments to my community? (218)

I would like to extend John's statement in ways I assume he would see as a friendly: When we teach writing, we *also* propose and enact relationships with other humans: our students and the larger community. And these propositions also imply ethical questions: what kind of teacher do I want to be? How should I treat my students? To whom do I feel committed?

John also writes the following: “To teach writing, then is to teach more than rhetorical strategies, and processes: it is equally to teach the ethical commitments that are enacted in the course of communicating with others” (219). I couldn't agree more.

But what exactly lies beyond rhetorical strategies and processes? *How* do we teach ethical commitments? Teaching and learning in a writing classroom is already complex and vexed, even more so if one considers the important ethical commitments that John discusses. Part of that complexity rests in the human interaction: each teacher and student brings accumulated past experiences, preconditioned responses, resistance and fears into every class. For example, a student might worry that she could never be the kind of writer she wants to be: What if my words have unintended affects? What if I'm too something (insert any negative self-talk word—stupid, lazy, distracted) to accomplish my goals? Such thoughts can cloud any genuine teaching interaction. In other words, there can be a significant gap between ethical intent and ethical effect. We as teachers might aim for ethical relations with our students, but our feedback on papers might ring

1. This definition draws from the definition used by John Kabat-Zinn.

to students as unnecessarily harsh or discouraging.² Our students might aim to create goodwill in an email with a professor, but by rushing to write between classes, the writer comes off as self-centered and sloppy.

The question I will explore here is what *else* should we teach besides rhetorical strategies and devices in order to enact more-ethical relationships in our classrooms? While there are numerous productive ways to respond to this question, my answer resides in issues of awareness and mindfulness.

Why mindfulness? For me, this relatively new research and teaching interest emerged from personal need and experience. After a challenging first semester as an assistant professor in fall 2001, I found myself hampered by negative self-talk and anxiety related to teaching. At the same time, I was preparing MA and PhD students to teach freshman composition for the first time. Similar to my struggles, many competent and skilled teachers with whom I worked excelled at teaching rhetorical strategies but stumbled when building productive working relationships with their students. This was sometimes out of fear (an inner rhetoric that told the teacher, "I'm not smart enough," or "I lack authority to teach these smart kids anything"), or other times out of self-involvement (one new teacher said that the best thing about teaching was hearing his own voice in the classroom). So for myself and for my new teachers, I increasingly have focused on awareness and mindfulness practices to help us pay attention to those "indoor voices" and perhaps revise them, working to develop compassion, and exploring empathy.³

What mindful practices share in common is that they're not about thinking. In fact, thinking and the intellect are the very problem they seek to counter. They are fundamentally about what could be called *awareness*. About being fully present—as a writer or a teacher—in the current moment, and not preoccupied with thoughts of the past or future. I would like to argue that mindfulness practices offer one way of teaching *awareness*, which is a necessary addition to the intellectual training we give to student writers and teachers of writing, especially if our goal is ethical teaching and writing.

I will spend my remaining pages justifying this argument and will do so from three sources: (1) scholarship within our discipline, (2) popular literature typically labeled as spiritual, and (3) scholarship in neuroscience.

Composition has had a longstanding relationship with various versions of what I would call awareness-focused practices (to distinguish them from thinking practices). Through reflective writing, for example, students are taught to gain metacognitive awareness of their processes as writers (Carroll). Writers such as Peter Elbow, Mary Rose O'Reilly, Barry Kroll, and Michael Blitz and Claude Mark Hurlbert have focused on teaching both hearts and minds, seeking ways that writing can help students make peace, end violence, or express authentic versions of themselves. Despite the importance of this work, the focus on awareness has remained at the periphery of the discipline. The past decade has seen a small but increasing interest in awareness practices in composition scholarship. I'll just offer a few examples. In 2002, Sheryl Fontaine wrote an essay that connects the Buddhist concept of "Beginner's Mind," to her work in the writing

2. Editors' note: see Rysdam and Johnson-Shull, this volume, on responding to student writing.

3. For more about my own teaching story and how I use mindfulness practices with new teachers, you can read my article in the same issue of *JAC* as John's essay on ethics.

classroom. Gesa Kirsch in 2009 argued that “mindfulness, introspection and reflection,” are practices helpful for discovering rhetorical agency. In 2013, Sheila Kennedy, Christy Wenger and Jen Consilio Kukler began the Writing and Mindfulness Network⁴, which is affiliated with the Assembly of Expanded Perspectives on Learning.⁵ The creation of this network, when announced on the WPA listserv, caused a lively and sometimes contentious discussion about the appropriateness of connections between mindfulness and writing. At the 2015 Conference on College Composition and Communication, at least three other panels centered on issues of mindfulness.

While these examples testify to the field’s interest in mindful awareness, it is Robert Yagelski’s 2011 *Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality and the Crisis of Sustainability* that offers the most in-depth theoretical justification for why “ways of being” should be made central to composition studies. I encourage you all to read this deep and thoughtful book, but I will summarize a few key points. Yagelski argues that contemporary schooling and writing instruction are limited because of a tacit but unshaking reliance on a Cartesian separation between self and the world (Descartes’ famous “I think, therefore I am”), which encourages students to pursue notions of success that are antithetical to the common good. Writing and writing instruction, argue Yagelski, foster a disconnection between self and world, not because writing itself is an alienating activity, but because our teaching of it, despite advances in our theorizing, still prioritizes textual production over the experience of writing itself. Even social and post-process theories, argues Yagelski, fall short of their radical potential because of their tacit embrace of Cartesian dualism, which posits the self as an autonomous being, the world as separate and knowable from the knower, and language as a relatively unproblematic conduit for thought (45). Separating self from world, argues Yagelski, erases the connections humans have with each other, other living beings, and the planet itself, which have led to numerous problems, including our planet’s worsening environmental crisis.

Relevant to my argument is Yagelski’s insistence that the self who thinks is insufficient as the subject of writing studies—if we hope for a more ethical and sustainable world. In addition to thought, we need to teach awareness and nondualist ways of being, because thinking alone is dangerous to our very survival.

A strikingly similar argument is made somewhat differently in what can be called popular spiritual literature, namely Eckhart Tolle’s *The Power of Now* and its follow-up, *A New Earth*. Tolle argues that when Descartes expressed, “I think therefore I am,” he had not found ultimate truth but “he had, in fact, given expression to the most basic error: to equate thinking with Being and identity with thinking” (*Now* 15). Tolle sees thinking as a valuable tool, but one that has “become a disease” because most thinking is typically incessant and compulsive, and because people tend to equate their thoughts with self (*Now* 16). “Identification with your mind,” according to Tolle, “creates an opaque screen of labels, images, words, judgments and definitions that blocks all true relationships” (*Now* 15).

Hmm. . . Images? Words? Definitions? Judgments? Definitions? Those seem to be the stock and trade of a writing instructor. Does this argument mean that teaching writ-

4. See <https://aeplblog.wordpress.com/mindfulness-network/>

5. See <http://www.iup.edu/page.aspx?id=175717>

ing is inherently problematic? Not necessarily. Tolle would argue that traditional forms of argumentation, based on pro-con, assertion and defense, can easily serve to uphold a “mind-made sense of self comprised of thought and emotion,” which he describes as the ego:

There is nothing that strengthens the ego more than being right. Being right is identification with a mental position—a perspective, an opinion, a judgment, a story. For you to be right of course, you need someone else to be wrong, and so the ego loves to make wrong in order to be right. . . . Being right puts you in a position of imagined moral superiority in relation to the person or situation that is being judged and found wanting. It is that sense of superiority that the ego craves and through which it enhances itself. (67)

To Tolle, arguing as a means to identify with mental positions is problematic. But aren’t argument and deliberation essentially what rhetoric is? Am I suggesting that the entire discipline teaches ego and greater unconsciousness? No. But I am suggesting that teaching the *intellectual tools* of writing and rhetoric without accompanying *tools of awareness* makes writing instruction incomplete at best and dangerous at worst. In Tolle’s viewpoint:

. . . you won’t find absolute truth if you look for it where it cannot be found: in doctrines, ideologies, sets of rules or stories. What do all of these have in common? They are made up of thought. Thought can at best point to the truth, but it never *is* the truth. That’s why Buddhists say, “The finger pointing to the moon is not the moon.” . . . (*Earth* 70).

In other words, thought, and writing (or any intellectual enterprise) are useful tools but incomplete; they need accompanying awareness in order to be ethical:

All that is required to become free of the ego is to be aware of it, since awareness and ego are incompatible. Awareness is the power that is concealed within the present moment. This is why we may also call it Presence. The ultimate purpose of human existence, which is to say, your purpose, is to bring that power into this world. And this is also why becoming free of the ego cannot be made into a goal to be attained at some point in the future. Only Presence can free you of the ego, and you can only be present Now, not yesterday or tomorrow. Only Presence can undo the past in you and thus transform your state of consciousness. (78)

For those of you who may not find spiritual writing persuasive, I turn now to the field of neuroscience, where, once again, a similar argument is being made in slightly different terms. Much research is being done in this area, so I will highlight only a few examples. Several studies are currently under way on what are deemed “expert meditators” (those who have meditated more than 10,000 hours) to see how their brains differ from more ordinary people. An article in the November 2014 *Scientific American* outlines some of these studies (Matthieu, Lutz et al). One finding relevant to my argument is that brain scanning shows that the wandering voice in the head (or what I called our *indoor voices* in my *JAC* article) occur in a different part of the brain than that which registers awareness of distraction, which is also a different part of the brain than where focused thinking occurs. In other words, the awareness part of the brain is separate from the thinking part of the brain, and in advanced meditators, there is significant difference in the structures of how brains look (Matthieu, Lutz et al). In still other words, as

writing teachers, we have mostly been teaching the thinking parts of writing, but that is only part of the mental apparatus that our brains conduct.

In the book *Buddha's Brain, The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom*, Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius argue that ethical behavior requires both the ability to assert an argument (what we typically teach) and compassion, which both inhabit separate places in the brain:

Doing the right thing draws on both head and heart. Your prefrontal cortex ('head') forms values, makes plans, and gives instructions to the rest of the brain. Your limbic system ('heart') fuels the inner strength you use to do the right thing when it's hard, and supports heart-centered virtues such as courage, generosity and forgiveness. . . . people with damage to the limbic system have a hard time making certain ethical decisions . . . (Hanson and Mendius 146-7)

The authors argue for the necessary linkage between assertion and compassion—that one without the other is incomplete and both are mutually informing. They further argue that not only can compassion be found in the brain, it can be fed (and reinforced) or starved, depending upon learning and usage: "What happens in your mind changes your brain, both temporarily and in lasting ways; neurons that fire together wire together. And what happens in your brain changes your mind, since the brain and mind are a single integrated system" (18).

To conclude, my argument is that if we accept the premise that the teaching of writing is or should be connected to ethics, then writing studies must teach not only the thinking mind but also must help cultivate awareness, in the forms of breaks from thinking or observing one's thinking. Incorporating mindful practices into our classes and in our preparation of new teachers is both necessary and urgent. Briefly, the mindfulness practices that I have done and do use in classes include meditation and mindful breathing, discussion of empathy and how much or little we each have, readings on issues of awareness, and discussions of inner rhetoric and ways to revise the voices in our heads.

Taken together, mindful awareness practices can help us teach both the human and the being—which can lead to more ethical practice. As one of my students recently wrote: "Being mindful makes me feel as though I have a better grasp on my priorities. I can think more clearly about what is important and for what reasons. In this way, mindfulness translates into a more ethical version of myself."

And as a caveat, I am not suggesting that a mindfully informed writing class or world would be utopian or idyllic. This sentiment is conveyed nicely by Congressman Tim Ryan in his recent book, *A Mindful Nation*:

In a mindful nation, we will still misplace our keys. We will still forget people's names. We will still say and do things that may hurt others, including those we love. We will say the exact wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. But in each of these instances, with mindfulness we may do it just a bit less. We may see the humor in our mistakes and be able to laugh at ourselves more. We may be just a little less critical of others, and of ourselves. Or we may deal with our mistakes more quickly and with a more sincere and kind heart. We may more easily forgive the people who have hurt us. We may sit down and have civil political conversations with those who strongly disagree with us. My goal is not that America will become a perfect nation. My goal is that

America will be a kinder, more compassionate nation, because I know down deep in my heart that we are a kinder, more compassionate country than is evident today. Reviving our compassionate spirit will allow us to listen carefully to each other, find points of agreement, and recapture the unity of purpose that made America great. (166-167).⁶

Nor would a mindful classroom and world eliminate the need for social and political struggle. It is not a retreat from political engagement, but as Deborah Shoeberlein writes, a necessary component of political engagement:

Mindfulness isn't a panacea for the world's problem, but it does provide a practical strategy for working directly with reality. You might not be able to change certain things in your life, at work, or at home, but you can change *how* you experience those immutable aspects of life, work, and home. And the more present you are to your own life, the more choices you have that influence its unfolding. (32).

Ultimately, the challenge of mindfulness is to change our practices, which require ongoing commitment and work, to help us grow in intellect *and* awareness, which together can bring us toward an ethical understanding of truth. And the discovery of truth is never a finished process, as Lucy Grealy wisely notes in her autobiography: "I once thought that truth was eternal, that when you understood something, it was with you forever. I now know that this isn't so, that most truths are inherently unretainable, that we have to work hard all our lives to remember the most basic things" (23).

That, surely, is a pronouncement that deserves our time and attention.



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6. Editors' note: Congressman Tim Ryan serves Ohio's 13th Congressional District. He is not to be confused with Paul Ryan, current Speaker of the House.

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