

# Chapter 10. Free to Dance: A Somatic Approach to Teaching Writing

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“Beyond the realm of critical thought, it is equally crucial that we learn to enter the classroom ‘whole’ and not as ‘disembodied spirits.’”

– bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*

## The Return-and-Dash

Graded papers in a stack, students lined up like they’re waiting at the DMV or the health center. I work to give neutral face. On this day in November, the heating in our classroom had been preemptively triggered by a week of unseasonable cold. The return to late-summer temperatures made it at least 85 degrees inside. On this day, I should have followed experience and chosen the cardigan. My white button down grew ever more transparent.

The Return-and-Dash is always awkward, made that way by the process of assessment. On this day in November, it’s made more awkward by my hyper-awareness of temperature and my body. *Please just take them and go*, I think. And their responses satisfy: silently flip to the back page, scan for the grade, and leave.

The practice is largely unsatisfying to all involved. Student: Here’s my text, a proxy for my thoughts. Teacher: Here’s my text alongside, marginalia-cum-thought. See me if you have questions. Know this: If you do have questions, they will be coded as lack of understanding, disengagement from process, or resistance to assessment. (Students are taught that it’s better *not* to have questions.) On this day in November, the complex exchange is further framed at the moment when I’m feeling like my skin might melt, and I’m half-crazy with anxiety as to what other corporeal shapes are becoming more noticeable in the heat.

In many of our writing classrooms, it may seem that bodies become salient only when they cause problems, need remediation, or fit imperfectly into our planned pedagogies, most of which privilege clear and confident prose as the most valuable exchange we can make with students. This chapter presents the idea of somatic—or body-centered—pedagogies by connecting the writing classroom with Human Movement Studies. Such “embodied literacies” (Kerkham, Fleckenstein) provide an opportunity to think about text as beyond the alphabetic. As Kristie Fleckenstein notes, “[T]ext refers not only to textbooks but also to any artifact that might help us attend to the edges that blur,” including corporeal

ones (105). My students on that warm November day may have been reading my marginal and terminal comments as authoritative and punitive. I was concerned they would read my body counter to that authority. In this case, the text to be read extended beyond the page to include the performance of handing back papers in an educational setting, a routine made more complicated by factors like the heat and my affective context.

If embodied literacies help us revise and extend the meaning of *text* to include non-alphabetic artifacts, even dynamic artifacts like bodies, we consequently are open to revising concepts like *Writing* and *Curriculum*. Compositionists often frame Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) as a vertical model that distributes alphabetic (printed) writing throughout a student's college experience, starting with first-year composition. However, we may productively borrow methods and epistemologies from other fields—in this case, Human Movement Studies with a focus on dance—to enrich our teaching of writing and rethink our definitions of text, writing, and curriculum. In proposing a more interdisciplinary model for writing studies, I am not advocating Writing in the Disciplines (WID), though this curriculum may be used. Instead of exploring how other disciplines conduct research or share their findings, an interdisciplinary writing classroom would import pedagogies from other fields in order to meet the needs of our students and enliven our teaching.

The study and practice of rhetoric is historically grounded in a more holistic understanding of the body, but our first-year writing classrooms overwhelmingly privilege student texts—and teacher textual response—as the primary pedagogical tools. These practices—trading text for text—are informed by social expectations of higher education and metrics-based secondary schooling practices, in addition to shared disciplinary attitudes about teaching writing. (See Rachel Formalhaut's piece in this collection, "Holistic Learning for Real-Life Writers," for a more in-depth treatment of the topic).

In this chapter, I wish to raise questions about our current educational context in the corporatized classroom—with its emphasis on metrics and top-down Common Core—to consider Patricia Cranton's statement: "It takes only a few minutes' thought to list a dozen characteristics of educational systems that seem deliberately designed to take the soul out of teaching and learning" (126). By reflecting on ways we can seek soul in teaching, by giving ourselves and our students room to dance, we can productively resist these dominant educational structures. What follows is an exploration of the concealed bodies in composition and suggestions for moving away from the primacy of the written to incorporate movement as a composition pedagogy. The goal is to encourage students to be more present in our classrooms, both physically and intellectually. Further, and to illustrate the core purpose of this collection, a somatic pedagogy would center composition in individual student bodies to engage students in their own education, to make space for them to practice agency at a time when learning has been constructed as a passive act. Somatic pedagogies thus have the potential to radically influence

how students perceive their own roles in education and, by extension, their power as informed citizens influenced by material culture.

## Embodied Intelligence: The Move from Public Speaking to Private Management

Rhetoric's long history supplements composition's short one by more fully attending to the body-as-text, with discussions of the flesh most closely focused on codifying its rhetorical potential. For example, Greek methods of holistic training, detailed by Debra Hawhee as a process of "virtuosity inhered in corporeality," a process of "seeing and recognizing" a body's physical and intellectual potential (4). In addition, textbooks like Austin's *Chironomia*, a guide for the "proper regulation of the voice, the countenance, and the gesture," position the body as an integrated, trainable, and iterative mode of appeal. The Greek concept of *metis*, or the "mode of negotiating agonistic forces, the ability to cunningly and effectively maneuver a cutting instrument, a ship, a chariot, a body, on the spot, in the heat of the moment" (Hawhee 47), underpins this embodied intelligence. Care of the body supports cognition, and synthesis of the body with language becomes a crucial final step in a successful oration.

It stands to reason, then, that the move from apt oration to fluency with written text as the measure of a learned person shrinks delivery as it accentuates invention, arrangement, and style. The move gradually de-emphasized rhetoric as human interaction; instead, rhetoric—as it tends to be taught in our composition classrooms—engages unidirectional, non-specific utterances for generic layperson audiences (see Ong). Students have been trained against considering themselves part of the "Conversation of Mankind" (Bruffee), where rhetorical motivation and consequence are intimately tied to in-flesh audiences and the real-life consequences of rhetoric. The result: Our writing courses, situated as they are in the humanities, can make human bodies virtually absent.

Prior scholarship on the teaching and learning body in composition has been discussed under a number of rubrics: critical pedagogies, feminism, histories of rhetoric, disability studies, and critical race theory, to name only a few. Student bodies have been reduced to sites of cultural reproduction and schools to oppressive status-quo factories that use pedagogic authority as a "substitute for physical constraint" in order "to produce a permanent disposition to give, in every situation . . . , the right response" (Bourdieu 36; see also Bernstein; Bowles and Gintis; Giroux). Scholars such as Ira Shor and Henry Giroux have suggested how teachers and students alike may physically resist these spatial models of playing school. Shor's "Siberian" students, for example, populate the back row, and thus trouble the territory of the composition classroom by remaining physically present while cuing themselves as pedagogically absent. In this way, Shor argues, they "appear to both reject authority and submit to it at the same time" by positioning

themselves as far away from the teacher's podium as the space allows (12). Their bodies provide the vehicle for this quiet act of resistance.

More recently, theorists have posited teacher-body-as-text via identity categories like race, gender, class, and sexuality (Kopelson; hooks; Kirsch et. al). Kopelson warns against organizing under any managed identity, as students then read teachers reductively, to make what is partial whole and generalizable (23). The conclusion seems to be that students take up classroom scripts per their cultural training and that teachers' bodies—how they are coded, read, and enacted—become perhaps the most important texts in the class. Students read them as authority, sometimes as novel or superficially transgressive, and no measure of classroom decentering changes the fact of end-of-semester assessment. However, the interaction is never absolute: Moments of resistance to dominant educational models can happen. Even as the stage of the composition classroom is inscribed through layers of institutional power and social expectation, these boundaries can be playfully disrupted.

Somatic pedagogies, as I sketch them out, borrow ideas from Human Movement Studies, specifically dance, to recognize that even as our student and teacher populations become more diverse and as instructional methods innovate with new technologies, the old ways of trading text for text stand. Bodies in composition become salient only when they are disruptive or need accommodating; writing is our body's commodity in the composition classroom, both students' texts and teachers' marginalia. A move to incorporate somatic pedagogies can upset this overvaluation of textual product to emphasize processes that address felt needs and encourage presence.

## The Anesthetized Classroom

The writing classroom often makes part of its goal recognition and analysis of aesthetic or pathetic features of texts. Our assessment practices, however, tend toward the anesthetic: at a remove, etymologically "without sensation" (OED). Our daily classroom practices may also reflect this deadening of sense.

Epistemologically, we know that students gain situated knowledge anchored in the body and that the negotiated truths of the composition classroom filter through sociopolitical histories, which can never be separated from the body. Realistically, the increasingly corporatized structure of the higher education system forces us to greater efficiency. Cranton notes, "[l]arge lumbering systems that see themselves as needing to be accountable to those who fund them . . . cannot be much bothered with the joy of learning" (126). She continues to argue that the very terms we use to describe our labor constrain how we think and perform it: lecturers lecture, teachers grade papers, students arrive to class prepared to passively accept instruction (Cranton 127; see also Horner).

Students and teachers alike operate within these practiced paradigms of acceptable school behavior. It is a deeply held tenant of schooling in America: All

physical action must be cleared with the teacher. To implement somatic pedagogies in first-year writing, then, is to ask students to question at least 12 years of bodily instruction. The composition course may thus encourage the very actions students have been trained to consider off-limits. The shift is no less than a move from rugged individualism—and solipsistic views of features like error—to recognition of socially negotiated truths. It's a move from training compliant employees to recognizing the creative power of many minds and bodies working together, a move that unravels students' taken-for-granted ideas about learning: how it happens, who it's for, and what it does. Matthew Heard, drawing from philosopher Carlos Sini's *The Ethics of Writing*, reframes writing as a "living habit of being" emphasizing responsiveness (42). This framework privileges the body as a locus of knowledge—and thus as an important consideration in praxis—to help move composition instruction into the realm of the somatic.

## Defining Somatic Learning

I do not wish to conflate training dancers with teaching writing, but there are similarities. Most salient is the mutual connection to training a familiar responsiveness to kiarotic exigencies. Just as a dancer must know the next appropriate step or steps, a writer must be able to feel through the constraints and affordances of each discrete rhetorical situation to provide the most fitting response. Thomas Hannah's foundational definition of somatics encourages whole-person consideration: "Any viewpoint of the human being that fails to include both the first-person, somatic view and the third-person, physiological view is deceptive. To view a human only as a third-person, externalized body is to see only a physical puppet or dummy" (20). Somatic awareness or body-centered learning, according to Li-ora Bresler, implicates pedagogies that recognize that "[T]he body is personal. At the same time, it has a tremendous capacity to connect with others" (128). Bresler goes on to describe the choreography of the classroom: students raise hands, teachers direct bodies in prescribed paths. Everyone dances the dance of formalized education, and those out of step are recognized as disruptive.

Peggy Phelan, performance theorist, writes, "The body is always a disciplined entity. One part is temporal linguistic, the other is temporal physical" (qtd. in Ross 173). Here, she sketches the recursive path of student response, tied in writing classes to texts, as both creating and supporting practices that keep students physically, and perhaps intellectually, still. Compliant students and docile bodies are rewarded, echoing Bourdieu's definition of schooling. Janice Ross clarifies this dichotomy through a familiar student/prisoner metaphor, focusing on the dance class: "Sitting down is interdict, unless one is specifically told to do so. The bodies in this space are to be primed and alert, freed temporarily of appetites and bodily needs and prepped to explode into physical action" (169). Quick substitutions—standing up for sitting down, physical for textual—move this landscape of the dance class to the writing class. Ross continues: "The body-of-knowledge

becomes the body-of-means and the body-in-view” (169). In composition, students’ texts efface their bodies-of-view, just as marginalia efface instructor bodies.

A move to somatic composition instruction undoes the way most students have participated in scenes of humanities education, as much of the learning expected of them is assumed to take place outside the classroom. Assessment of that learning, usually in the form of evaluation of polished prose, considers the final inscribed form as the best representation of the mind’s work. Even as composition values writing processes, it is the final draft that instructors heavily weigh. Visible classroom engagement often takes the shape of collaboration and inventional work, methods used by many composition instructors. These managed practices are comfortable to both students and teachers, as they support prior training foregrounding teacher expertise and classroom control, where the teacher is the only body sanctioned to move freely about the room. However, radical pedagogies that begin to interrogate the foundations of how knowledge is created, assessed, and reinforced—and that begin to trouble our assumptions about teaching writing—indicate that physical movement and recognition of situated learning work together to promote engagement (Lave and Wenger).

## A Somatic Class in Situated Practice

Knowing that student and instructor bodies are held to culturally reinforced roles, and that these roles tend to elide difference and enforce silence and stillness, how might a composition instructor encourage the body’s potential?

Dance.

Dance textually, dance actually; take joy in teaching and in students’ inquiry into their world. The following methods do not presume physical mobility by either instructor or student. As Petra Kupperts, a self-identified “disabled dance teacher” attests: “My goal in performance and choreography is to make bodies and spaces strange and interesting” (122). Her wheelchair holds the “potential for movement,” and she trains her dance students to recognize her kinesphere, or personal space, as complex and responsive. We can thus disrupt the pathways that students have (usually grimly, usually passively) followed prior to their entry in our classes by recognizing the individual impact each of them make with their physical and intellectual presence.

What follows are a few methods I’ve used in my own classrooms to create these disruptions. They’re influenced by the work of the performance theorists I’ve noted, as well as accepted disciplinary practices in composition. The list is partial and situated, and I’ve worked to address the issues of access that a discussion of movement necessarily implicates.

## Moving Meditation and Mentoring

I recognize that moving mediation, per Thoreau, might present a prohibitive

activity for some teachers and students. But the principle remains: Be removed from the bounds of the office or the classroom when possible. Take in the fresh air. If walking is comfortable, do so. Sitting and talking about writing in an office, with a text front-and-center, surrounded by books and to-do lists, reinforces the act of writing as only the textual representation of thought and as work. Stroll, broadly conceived, and ask students to narrate their thoughts as you do.

### Standing and Sitting, Leaning, Lying Down

I once invited students to write in class in the way that was most comfortable for them, as long as they didn't impede anyone else's progress or create distress. Quite naturally, one student stretched out full length on the floor (with its dirty carpet and all). Opening the classroom space beyond the obligatory rows or falsely democratic circle (or even the assumption that we *sit in chairs to learn*) asks students to query their material needs when writing.

### Muscle Memories

Offering students frequent impromptu opportunities for physical engagement—positioning themselves at the front of the class to present work, circulating the room, creating visually on whiteboards—reinforces the material concerns of writing and of kairotic responsiveness. Simple tools like multicolored sticky notes invite students to move about the room as they collaborate. We've charted arguments, outlined assignments, parsed rhetorical elements, and participated in ad hoc Post-It sessions, where students designed and presented analyses on large post-it notes.

Further, I try to disrupt the notion that speakers should address the class only when they are prepared to deliver a polished argument. Students too easily fall into operationalized hierarchies where only teachers and students-prepared-to-act-as-teachers are qualified to speak. Making presentation both routine and casual invites students to become more active learners while deemphasizing the importance of the one-shot-best-shot group presentation. This practice is initially met with resistance but, on reflection, students overwhelmingly evaluate it as useful in breaking down anxieties, getting comfortable with verbally presenting ideas, and building classroom community.

### Textual Directives

Asking students to write textual directive, or steps, for their peers encourages them to consider the physical implications and assumptions of their texts. We've written instructions as simple as turning on a laptop and as complex as dance steps. Reflecting on taken-for-granted movements works to make the familiar strange.



## Shifting Our Texts

That we move bodies in two ways, with physical force or with language, is one of the first, and perhaps most foundational, lessons students can learn from first-year composition, and it becomes one of the most important lessons they transfer into their other classes and careers. In this way, we reframe text as holding the potential for physical consequence. For example, presenting declarations of war as utterances that move physical bodies into conflict with other physical bodies illustrates the power of textual communication. I solicit course texts for analysis from students' lives, and they have been as varied as health insurance benefit guides, pre-natal care directives, gym memberships, and pancake preparation instructions.

## Performing Our Research

Scripting and performing research stories encourages students to translate data between genres and practice meeting the expectations of different audiences. As a follow-up to a fieldworking paper, I asked students to script short monologues from the point of view of a composite character created from interview, survey, and observation data. Living the research story demands that these novice researchers practice reflexivity to question their presuppositions about the research scene and participants. The texts produced are in-flesh, drawn from living sources, as is the audience. When making these projects open to the public (usually a smattering of colleagues and a few students' friends) some monologues were met with standing ovations.

## Contextualized and Individual Assessment

It is unrealistic expectation to conference with each student multiple times throughout the semester. I have managed to find a workable semi-solution by handing back papers individually in class while students collaborate. The scene of return is less private than an office; however, making eye contact and narrating my process assures students that I did, indeed, thoughtfully read their work, while also giving them the opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns. Because of time constraints, around five minutes for each conference, I follow a 1:2:2 schedule: one minute for my voice, two minutes for the student to skim the paper silently, two minutes for questions. Of course this structure is far from perfect—both parties feel rushed. But compared to the anxious steps of the Return-and-Dash, these brief conversations allow students to engage with the process as active partners. Of course, if students have in-depth questions about their grades—or I have to have a conversation with a student that demands attention to FERPA regulations—I will negotiate those needs individually.



## Bodies Outside the Classroom

These methods are framed in terms of training responsiveness. Through repetition of movement—addressing the class as an expert, for example, or exploring ideas verbally, face-to-face—students begin to integrate more holistically the practices of thoughtful rhetors. These low-stakes opportunities in the first-year writing classroom can build habits that inform students' practices in college beyond first-year composition and in both personal and professional venues. I've offered four potential implications:

- **Recognizing material needs and consequences:** When we recognize materiality in our teaching practices, our students learn more about what they need to thoughtfully engage and confidently generate. Bodies are never without restraint: As students, teachers, and employees, we are each expected to fall in line with social norms. However, trying on new ways of learning and communicating—composing in different scenes, for example—may help students understand the material effects of work outside the academy and how they may revise their work practices to meet their personal needs. In this way, as students chart their future plans, they may have clearer ideas about what they need to flourish.
- **Recognizing the influence of text on bodies:** Our students are awash in communication, even as we fuss about how little they read and write. Much of their social interaction is textual, through quick messages on phones and social networks, but their engagement with these texts often remains passive. By reintroducing the physical consequences of real-world texts—laws, medical directives, work contracts, custody agreements, declarations of war—we help them critically and creatively tangle with the texts they'll encounter, and produce, throughout their lives.
- **Emphasizing face-to-face communication:** As more college courses choose to expand their offerings to include distance-education methods, in-person interaction in small classes has become rare. Our students, as a result, are getting fewer opportunities to practice professional oral communication and even casual conversation outside their peer groups. Somatic pedagogies, by reinforcing in-person rhetorical responsiveness, necessarily value face-to-face communication in low-stakes scenes by mixing registers and encouraging spontaneous conversations among teachers and students. The idea here is to move away from the sedimented relationships we feel constitute our role (and thus our students' roles) in the first-year writing classroom to include a greater valuation of the casual and playful. In this way, we can help students—even in short interchanges—practice the conversation(s) of (hu)mankind.
- **Training process:** Finally, somatic pedagogies may help students learn

more about their learning processes, specifically moving-to-learn and talking-to-learn analogous to writing-to-learn (WTL) strategies. By de-emphasizing the written text as the most important measure of learning in the composition classroom, we revise practices to give greater weight to the cognitive processes that precede writing. This approach does not presume to answer questions of duality nor to excerpt writing from the writing classroom; it does, however, acknowledge that learning occurs dialogically and dialectically. Since many real-world situations expect on-the-fly, heat-of-the-moment responses, training students in process work can inform their professional identities by preparing them to interact in situations that call for immediacy. Having students, for example, routinely address the class before they've polished their ideas thus builds a storehouse of practices with direct professional parallels.

Making pedagogical room to dance—to engage with and create new scenes of learning—frees teachers and students from the clinch of top-down corporate delivery structures that have taken over many of our classrooms. Some of these structures may emerge as policy language in our individual writing programs. One doesn't have to look far to find programs where revision is discouraged (on the basis, perhaps, that it's unrealistic to get a second chance in a real-life setting) or where required page production overshadows student engagement in process. Teachers looking to incorporate somatic pedagogies in the context of administrative oversight may choose to explore flexible gray areas, places where policies do not prescribe action.<sup>1</sup>

Further, building in opportunities for students to practice presence, instead of acting at a remove where they passively accept knowledge, is to encourage them to value their experiences as meaningful educational engagement. This engagement may take the form of a dress rehearsal, as Pamela Henny notes, drawing from Konstantin Stanislavsky's ideas on method acting. It may also look like the holistic, affective pedagogies proposed by Rachel Anya Dearie Fomalhaut. These methods take into account "intuitive rather than transmissible learning," a sort of learning "by feel" keyed to individual student needs (17). If we offer students opportunities to practice the moves of academia off the page—as actors or dancers, over time, with regard to the complexity of their whole selves—we may help them build the fluency and confidence to control printed text, still a highly-valued commodity, while also encouraging creative, embodied ways of thinking.

These methods go beyond decentering the classroom. Students recognize the artificial democracy of circled desks and negotiated syllabi. A somatically-informed composition class honors students' lived experiences, their first-person selves as well as ours, while also reintroducing in-the-flesh audiences for classroom texts (Hannah 20). These methods may offer a counterpoint to the soulless bureaucracies that dog our composition pedagogies, encouraging both students and teachers to joyfully engage in the writing classroom. We show our students

that learning must move beyond rote memorization and repetition to include their voices as the next generation of thinkers and doers.

## Note

1. This chapter does not wish to ignore the material realities for those teaching in insecure positions, but it cannot give the situation the attention it requires here. Somatic pedagogies thus have ramifications for teachers and students alike, as they intersect with administrative oversight in some programs.

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