

# Chapter 8. Holistic Learning for Real-Life Writers: A Call for Affective Pedagogy in First-Year Composition

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In recent years, much attention has been paid to the effects of virtual classrooms and the impact of technology on education. Many are concerned with the changes that online education seems to involve, but within those concerns, there seems to be only a vague consensus on what we are supposedly losing via the move to online. Perhaps the lack of clarity regarding what we might be losing in the move to online education stems from gaps in our shared understanding of what happens in our classrooms that is not strictly intellectual, but rather fully embodied. I propose that we, as teachers, more intentionally engage the affective spheres of our classrooms, whether traditional brick-and-mortar or online. I use the term *affective* here to encompass a range of considerations about what both we and our students bring into our classes, from attitudes, moods, and emotions to motivations, instincts, and habits. All of these factors play into what students need individually and collectively in order to learn. I intend to prompt us to become more mindful of the holistic and embodied way in which learning occurs because the way we learn any craft—whether the craft of painting or of writing and thinking as a sociologist—is a holistic process of continual development. In other words, writers and disciplinary practitioners do not become better in discrete stages, nor do we develop our skills *solely* by widening our vocabulary or discussing written works with others. The process of learning to write better, both within the broad academic sense and within the more focused and specific requirements of any particular discipline, is a holistic and gradual process, necessarily involving the slow development of habits as well as a deepening understanding of such wide-ranging concepts as the ethics of persuasion, the *feel* of wordiness, and the well-practiced sense that a paragraph is out of place.

Because craft learning is a holistic process, I find it beneficial to articulate the pedagogy of craft learning through the language of affect, which engages not only the cognitive but also the emotional and physical realms of learning. Following a recent *affective turn* in literary theory, wherein theorists increasingly focus their attention on the emotional and physical realms in which writing and reading operate, I apply a similar terminology and methodological approach to the realm of writing pedagogy. What I term *affective pedagogy*<sup>1</sup> is any teaching method founded upon a consideration of students as holistic, whole body learners who are undergoing a continual and gradual process of development as writers. One of the

central premises of an affective pedagogical approach to both first-year college writing and writing across the curriculum is that a particular kind of learning (i.e. intuitive rather than transmissible learning) is the goal of any teacher who is trying to pass along something other than memorizable facts, numbers, dates, or even procedures. Composition scholar and instructor Robert Danberg thoughtfully addresses the idea of non-transmissible learning. In his work, "Rhetorical Thinking as Dispositional: An Analytical Framework for Teachers," Danberg rethinks rhetorical concepts (such as proper source use) within the framework of *dispositions* and habits that a student can take on over time. He summarizes Perkins, Jay, and Tishman's view of dispositions as a framework that "describes the practitioner's knowledge when wisdom, intuition and judgment are required along with technical facility and formal field or domain knowledge" (Danberg "Rhetorical Thinking. . ." 17-18). A *writer's* wisdom and *intuition* are not merely intellectual matters; rather, they are tools gained through a process of holistic (i.e. academic as well as personal) development over time.

Starting from the premise that a particular, and tricky, kind of learning is our goal as writing teachers, I argue that the process of becoming a better writer occurs not only through the intellectual but also through the emotional, physical, and even spiritual dimensions of our students' capacities as learners. Perhaps more to the point, if we understand student learning as resting upon a notion of cognitive intellect that is inextricably bound to the affective *realms* of bodies, emotions, moods, and attitudes, then the question of whether or not it is our job to teach life skills (i.e. skills that extend beyond our classes, or even beyond any classes) becomes moot. I propose that teaching college writing cannot be separate from mentoring, because we cannot easily separate our students' development as writers from our students' holistic and personal development. This approach draws upon both my own experiences as a writing across the curriculum teacher as well as recent educational and neuroscientific theories of learning. Here I will outline some of the reasoning in support of a consideration of the affective realm of learning in writing pedagogy as well as look at some models for moving towards an affective pedagogy in college writing courses, namely the art studio, the psychomotor skills class, and the *flipped* classroom.

The idea that learning, like effective mentoring, is a holistic process that involves the learner's affective system as well as intellectual ability, is supported by recent neurobiological research. Ed Nuhfer, Director of Faculty Development and professor of Geoscience at California State University, Channel Islands has been advocating for affective pedagogy for several years. Working with Professor Maria Costa from CSU Los Angeles, Nuhfer put together faculty preparation materials that emphasize the importance of understanding the biological changes that occur in our bodies as we learn—changes that in fact must occur in order for learning to take place. In their description of the neurobiological characteristics of learning, they explain:

. . . repeated use of developed neural networks causes the brain

to coat these particular networks in myelin. As a result, the electrochemical signals that pass through the networks to the arms and fingers . . . can flow stronger, faster, and produce greater focus . . . . Once the needed networks form and become myelinated, the brain no longer needs to devote the immense energy needed to build them. Our conscious mind then becomes available for other things. (“The Psychomotor Domain . . .”)

In their materials, Nuhfer and Costa put forth the claim that “All learning involves building and stabilizing neural networks,” thus emphasizing the inextricability of cognitive learning from the physical and other affective realms. I’ll return to this later, but for now what I want to draw your attention to is the holistic and affective nature of learning any craft or skill.

Our job as writing teachers, and indeed the job of most teachers, is not merely the transmission of memorizable information, such as grammar rules. Although the lecture model for teaching college writing is largely out of favor today, some of its suppositions regarding the transmissibility of writing skills persist in some seminar style composition classrooms. One of those suppositions shows up commonly in the idea that consumption causes production, and subsequently in more class time spent reading and discussing model essays than in students actually doing the grunt work of writing. I argue for a shift away from the commonly accepted notion that what goes in as reading material and abstract principles will come out as writing, or what I like to call the *trickle down* theory of writing. I agree there is value in the practice of providing and assigning model essays and other college level reading material to students. Mimicry is certainly a vital part of learning any craft, and reading college-level texts offers students exposure to new strategies for using language.

However, it is important to remember that mimicry is always a whole-bodied, or affective, affair. In his essay, “Modeling a Writer’s Identity: Reading and Imitation in the Writing Classroom,” Robert Brooke offers an interesting argument on the subject of imitation in writing classrooms. He suggests that writers do not imitate other writing so much as they imitate other writers. According to Brooke’s concept of imitation, in which “Imitation as a learning/teaching strategy. . . is more concerned with the *identity* of the writer than the form of the text,” students need opportunities to imitate and embody the writer who is their teacher as well as the student writers who are their peer-colleagues (23, original italics). Robert Danberg offers another way to describe the dynamic of whole-person imitation when he says that one of the jobs of the writing teacher is to give your students permission to be like you (“Educating . . .”). In order to provide students with ample opportunities to imitate the whole person that a writer is, I propose we organize our classes as spaces where students are provided with the time, space, and structured activities necessary to practice being new kinds of writer-selves in the company of other whole writers. An important distinction I wish to draw

here is the difference between modeling as mentoring, which is accomplished by providing opportunities for *whole-writer*—imitation, and providing model writing (e.g. model essays) for consumption.

A rather size-able obstacle to the teaching as mentoring model that I advocate for here is that the ever-increasing adjunctification of higher education in the U.S. threatens the ability of college students to see their teachers as mentors who it would be desirable to imitate. This obstacle to mentoring is a particular problem in college writing courses, since a large proportion of both FYC and WAC courses are staffed by adjunct faculty earning barely or less than a living wage. The lack of institutional respect, resources, and compensation awarded to adjunct teachers make us very poorly positioned to act as mentor figures to our students, who are unlikely to look up to and attempt to imitate adults receiving such ill treatment in society. As an adjunct professor myself, I cannot in good conscience advise any of my students to “Be like me.” This does not mean that the mentor model of teaching is ineffective, only that it becomes less and less available to a majority of college teachers with each passing year due to the increasing adjunctification and corporatization of higher ed.

In another chapter of this section, Pamela Henney suggests that writing teachers would do well to view our students’ learning processes along the same lines as Method acting training. Henney argues that learning to write within a fairly unfamiliar academic setting and learning to Method act both involve a similar kind of whole-bodied rehearsing. In the case of writing across the curriculum, a student is essentially required to rehearse a performance of a new and unfamiliar academic identity in order to eventually be able to embody that identity at will and with enough ease to make the performance come off as wholly convincing in their writing. Henney writes: “The representational Stanislavsky’s Method trains actors to move from external mimicking to internal experiencing to foster believable, spontaneous, inventive, honest, ergo credible characters in performance.” I would argue that one of the primary factors that allows the college writing student’s movement “from external mimicking to internal experiencing” to take place is the presence of a real live mentor in the classroom (i.e. the teacher) to mimic, as well as the presence of peers who are rehearsing the same move, albeit using varying styles and arriving at different degrees of effectiveness.

When composition classes spend more time discussing readings or disseminating information than writing, we take time away from learning opportunities that are structured to help our students embody—and become enculturated to—new writing habits. What I am arguing for is a shift away from seminar style, discussion based composition courses to classes that devote more than half the time spent in the classroom to the actual, often painstaking work that students must undertake as writers, whether that work is writing, researching, reading and note-taking, outlining, revising, editing and proofreading, or collaborating with peers at various stages of the writing process.

The question then becomes, how do we effectively structure ample opportuni-

ties for affective learning through *whole writer* mimicry in our courses? One idea is to *flip* our courses inside out. Salman Khan, in a TEDTalk in Spring 2011, offers the concept of the *flipped classroom*, which is a way to structure class time so that students read, view, and even preliminarily discuss course materials (i.e. articles and books but also PowerPoint lectures and educational videos) at home and do their *homework* in class. Khan and other advocates for the flipped classroom argue that the internet and other modern technologies for the dissemination and discussion of information (e.g. Blackboard, streaming video, blogs, etc.) make it possible for today's students to get the individualized help they need to successfully handle obstacles—such as writer's block or misunderstanding what an assignment is asking them to do—during class time. Such help might come in the form of one-on-one clarification or feedback from a teacher/mentor, or in the form of hearing how several peer writers are tackling the same assignment in peer review. One concrete suggestion for how to flip a writing across the curriculum classroom is to structure at least one class period per week so that students have at least twenty minutes for quiet writing and/or research time (I allow students to use headphones if they find that noise helps them get to work), followed by another twenty minutes of free choice, during which time students can continue to write or work individually, put a call out for a peer review group, or ask the teacher for assistance. I agree with advocates for the flipped classroom that, by structuring the majority of class time as a space and time within which students are expected to *get to work* (Danberg), teachers can better respond to student questions, frustrations, and problems as they arise. By following Salman Khan's and others' ideas for the flipped classroom, we can provide ample structured practice space wherein students can develop better work habits and rituals around writing.

There is a joke by late comedian Mitch Hedberg that goes something like: "My smoking friends tell me I have no idea how hard it is to quit smoking. But they're wrong. I do know how hard it is to stop smoking. It's as hard as it is to start flossing." Substitute the words, "exercising" or "writing an essay" at the end of the joke, and many of us can relate to the sentiment, as well as to the difficulty many of our student's experience trying to establish positive writing and other study/work habits for themselves. Many students (and teachers!) have trouble *getting to work* (Danberg). And just as a coach requires her athletes to practice regularly and in manageable amounts, usually with peer athletes also in training, developing writers need structured and regular practice alongside peer and model writers in order to habituate themselves to the process of getting to work when writing is the work that needs to be done. I propose that getting to work in the classroom, over and over, will help to create and stabilize the neural networks necessary for the establishment and maintenance of a healthy writing practice out of the classroom. In other words, *doing* the acts of writing with structured support during class time is perhaps the single most important piece of help we can offer our students to habituate them, in their bodies and minds, to what *getting to work with writing* means.

To return to Henney's analogy to Method acting training, she argues that "It would ease the tension of appropriating academic discourse if FYC students could envision themselves playing the role of the author or writer—and if we as academics could envision students' role playing as rehearsal for an eventual embodied performance within their academic writing." When I imagine a Method acting student rehearsing their role, I imagine that rehearsal happening both alone at home *and* in the classroom, in front of teachers and colleagues. If it is important for us to envision our students in "rehearsal for an eventual embodied performance within their academic writing," and I believe Henney's analogy to be right on, then we must set aside a large chunk of our weekly class time for students to rehearse their new roles as academic writers and thinkers—both within and across particular disciplines—in the presence of and in company with their mentor (i.e. the teacher) and their colleagues (i.e. their classmates). Setting aside a large portion of overall class time for students to rehearse their new roles takes away enough of the sting of insecurity that comes with that kind of identity rehearsal to allow the embodied performance to come more fully to fruition.

Perhaps the neediest population for affective pedagogy is first-year community college students, which is a diverse population of writers who in many cases are not only becoming acculturated to college but also to the particular rhythms and demands of a student lifestyle more generally. Many first-year community college students are returning to school after years, and, like their peers at four year schools, many bring ineffectual or poorly developed study skills and getting-to-work habits to their writing and other classes. In an informal interview with me, Professor Bruce Need, a veteran and highly respected English teacher at Tompkins Cortland Community College in upstate New York, suggested that because of the particular needs that many community college students present, one of our most important jobs as teachers is to provide them with opportunities to get habituated to working with us, i.e. with a professor/teacher figure, to being in a classroom with classmates, to producing school work on a regular basis: in essence, to being and working in a school setting.

There are other models besides the flipped classroom to look at when considering ways of incorporating affective pedagogies that focus on whole-body learning. For example, there are rich lessons to be learned from psychomotor pedagogies, as noted by Casie Fedukovich in another essay in this volume. Yoga, martial arts, and other exercise and sport classes offer writing teachers different ways to think about how to structure learning experiences with a consideration of the affective (i.e. physical and emotional) needs of learners in mind. Scholars Nuhfer and Costa encourage teachers to look to areas of psychomotor learning, such as learning to drive a car, to reflect on their own teaching practices. They write, "The transition from beginning awkwardly to gaining control comes *only* from creating and stabilizing the necessary neural networks through practice. . . [the] responsibility of a teacher is to show the student how to practice effectively. . . . Only informed practice can produce mastery" (original italics). Nuhfer and



Costa nudge teachers to reflect on what kind of structured practice our students need to create and myelinate the neural pathways required for the kind of writing they will be asked to do across and within academic disciplines. As we reflect, we do well to keep in mind the affective rituals and habits that have grown to surround and stabilize our own writing practices (e.g. eating certain snacks at scheduled break times, sitting in a favorite chair, free writing for three minutes before diving into any project) just as a yoga teacher might model her own rituals (e.g. stretching certain muscles before beginning, or meditating a certain amount of time at the end of each session) for her students to adopt.

A third model for a composition course that embraces affective pedagogy is the art studio classroom model. Robert Danberg, in his seminar on “Teaching the Writer’s Imagination: How Can Creativity Be Taught?” proposes a consideration of any type of writing as a skillful art or craft that can be taught as other arts are taught. Danberg applies some of the core tenets, dynamics, and pedagogies that are foundational to studio art classes, and especially as they are articulated by the Harvard Zero Project, to college writing classes because he believes that both FYC and WAC courses are after a similar kind of learning. One major facet of studio classes that Danberg points out is that they tend to place more focus on doing the craft than on discussing the craft during class time. Similarly, the greater use of classroom time for writing—and researching, and editing, and collaborating—is one important feature of the affective pedagogy I describe.

Danberg’s work on the application of the studio model to composition classrooms draws on a compelling study published in 2007 by the Harvard Zero Project. That study, titled “Studio Thinking,” provides an in-depth articulation and explanation of the fact that the primary goal of any studio classroom, alongside the acquisition of concrete skills and techniques, is the attainment and sustenance of certain work habits, mindsets, and dispositions in its students. An important outcome of a studio-modeled college writing course, therefore, is that students learn more than how to work the tools and craft of writing. In a studio classroom, students also become aware, through reflective exercises and sharing their processes with one another, of how to consciously structure a work process for themselves. In other words, students learn how to *get to work* not only on the specific craft focused on in one studio classroom but also in other areas of their life where they want to hone their skills and knowledge.

One possible obstacle to a serious consideration of affective pedagogy is a perception that when we attempt to articulate our ideas about the affective realm, as Danberg puts it, “the ground gets soft” (Danberg “Rhetorical Thinking . . .” 143). A serious consideration of the affective realm and its ultimate inextricability from what many people think of as ‘solitary cognition’ relies upon an epistemology that has not been widely recognized nor granted much authority in our mainstream culture. The knowledge held by the emotional and physical (i.e. affective) experiences of our bodies is often not viewed as knowledge at all. But Catherine Lutz, in her anthropological study, *Unnatural Emotions*, articulates something of great

relevance to educators and students when she writes that “[emotion] retains value as a way of orienting us toward things that matter rather than things that simply make sense” (5). In other words, emotion is the ultimate arbiter of meaning and value. Expanding on Lutz’s ideas, I am interested in granting greater value and authority to different kinds of knowledge, such as, for example, emotionally informed knowledge and intuition.

In their article, “Intuition as Authoritative Knowledge in Midwifery and Homebirth,” anthropologists Robbie Davis-Floyd and Elizabeth Davis ask why and how intuition as a mode of knowledge has become so devalued in American culture. Their study explores “the phenomenon of midwives’ occasional willingness to rely on intuition as a primary source of authoritative knowledge.” The authors use the midwifery model of intuition as authoritative knowledge to call for a change in the way mainstream culture conceives of knowledge and the authority that accompanies it (260). I find no coincidence in the fact that midwifery, a female-dominated if not entirely female populated profession and one that is perhaps the most firmly rooted in female traditions, offers one of the most salient examples of a consideration of intuition as authoritative knowledge. It is important to note that accusations of being “touchy feely” and caring too much about our students’ lives are rooted at least partly in a patriarchal value system that simultaneously undervalues and genders as female the supposedly separate realm of emotions. Creator and Executive Editor of *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, James Rhem, writes that considerations of affect in teaching has long been an arena of research that no faculty “want[ed] to touch . . . [because] Caring was *soft*. Learning was *critical, tough, hard*. Caring was, sad to say, *unmanly*, and thus not intellectual” (2). In unveiling the sexist underpinnings of our long-held avoidance of affective issues in education, we make ourselves more open to receiving and using long-held wisdom as well as recent research on learning.

Some may argue that a focus on the supposedly private and subjective experience of our bodies and emotions in the classroom prompts a turn away from the social and ethical matters so heavily emphasized by critique-focused, *post-process* seminar and discussion models for composition courses. However, it is important to remember that anthropologist Catherine Lutz and other scholars imagine emotions as foundationally social, Lutz writing that “Talk about emotions is simultaneously talk about society,” due to the cultural construction of emotions and their inextricability from matters of politics, kinship, and community (6). Rather than prompt us to turn away from social and ethical *things that matter* to focus on supposedly private experiences of ourselves as affective and interiorized individuals, the affective pedagogy that I propose offers us richer opportunities to engage with and respond to the individual needs and motivations of our diverse student bodies. A turn towards affective pedagogy can serve to reframe recent concerns about the move to distance learning and help us create more conducive learning environments. I echo the calls by Rhem, Nuhfer, and Costa, as well as the call of many teachers and scholars in recent years, as I urge us to explore how



we as teachers might more intentionally approach the affective spheres of our courses in order to more effectively engage our students' abilities and motivations to learn.

## Note

1. It is important to note that the affective pedagogy I will describe and explore in this article differs from those pedagogies of the same name that enjoyed some popularity in the United States during the 1970's. Pedagogies termed "affective" in the 1970's most likely would be termed "therapeutic" in academic circles to-day. What I term "affective pedagogy" is not synonymous with what is currently termed "therapeutic education."

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