Report from the Field

Writing Beyond the Keyboard: Teaching Disengagement as Part of the Writing Process

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Introduction

Leander et al. (2010) problematized the "classroom-as-container" immobilization of learning. In the classroom-as-container model, actants from outside the classroom—materials, diversity, flows of information, narratives—are unable to permeate the walls of the building wherein the classroom is situated. Leander et al. (2010) called upon educators to unsettle the classroom-as-container, to consider the classroom not just as an immobilized place but "as a dynamic place-in-the-making," "a point along a complex learning trajectory" (p. 381). Education is transitional, and I extend this mobility of the classroom to that of writing, in that the composing process extends far beyond the act of keying words onto a screen inside of the classroom, or library or home or dorm room. Just as energies, materials, and personal experiences flow into and within the classroom, affecting students' learning experiences, so do they flow into and within students' composing processes. Because of this flow, writing is not just a physically mobile activity that can be completed on a computer or in a notebook in different locations but is a mentally mobile activity as well, occurring beyond the keyboard.

Brice Nordquist (2017) discussed the mobilities of literacy, explaining that "overlaps always exist among multiple material scenes of literacy and historical, imaginary, communicative, and virtual environments, and embodied experiences of these" (p. 94). Composing is not at all classroom-bound or even keyboard-bound but occurs in various environments. Personally, I have done some of my very best writing while driving. Something about the almost catatonic action of gripping the wheel while staring at the road for long stretches of time allows me a different space to create new ideas, make connections, and draw conclusions. Composing, for many writers, may also include hikes or walks, showers, lying down, or even activities that are purposefully hands-on, as Paul Prior and Jody Shipka (2003) described:

> A psychology professor reports to us that when she is revising an article for publication she works at home and does the family laundry. She sets the buzzer on the dryer so that approximately every 45 minutes to an hour she is pulled away from the text to tend the laundry downstairs. As she empties the dryer, sorts and folds, reloads, her mind wanders a bit and she begins to recall things she wanted to do with the text, begins to think of new questions or ideas, things that she had not been recalling or thinking of as she focused on the text when she was upstairs minutes before. She perceives this break from the text, this opportunity to reflect, as a very productive part of the process. (p. 180)

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These instances of writing can happen in fleeting moments as well. As Hannah J. Rule (2018) found in her study of the physicality of writing rooms, writers often purposefully pause in their writing to take a drink, reposition themselves in their chairs, or even pet their animals. Within Rule's case study, writers were asked to draw and photograph their writing rooms and "discovered bodily comfort practices (e.g., food, blankets, drinks, aesthetic objects thought to sustain engagement), the revealing nature of physical rhythms . . . and the need to feel connected in their space to the outside world" (p. 419), all of which played important roles in their writing processes. Furthermore, Rule's documentation of writing rooms revealed not only "composer's '*intentional* deployment of external aids and actors'" but also writers' "seemingly inconsequential or unintentional activity" (p. 419). Moments of stepping away from the physical act of writing become rituals necessary to the process itself. Whether these moments are fleeting or prolonged, unintentional or purposeful, just as the classroom is not a container, the writing environment is not static or immobile but fluid and dynamic.

In this report from the field, I term these moments that occur during non-physical writing as *disengagement practices*, and I define *disengagement* as writers taking a pause in the physical act of writing to instead engage in a different activity in pursuit of reaching a writing goal. Peter Elbow (1998) called this practice "letting go" or "relinquish[ing] your conscious grip on your material," arguing that "a kind of letting go is necessary for this deep cooking. Having a beer, taking a walk or bus ride, taking a nap or shower—these all serve some people as ways of letting go" (p. 40). Although napping, specifically, might seem to be a disqualifier of disengagement because of the unconscious state of the writer, Elbow noted that "when they wake up they often have the answer or the approach they need" to continue on in the writing process (p. 40). And indeed, such disengagement practices are often necessary in order to help writers reach what Eugene Gendlin (1981), an American philosopher, coined as "felt sense," which he described as an encompassing of everything a person knows about a particular subject at a certain time. Sondra Perl (2004) took up this term, describing it as "You are drafting a paper. After an initial struggle, trying this, trying that, jotting down a few sentences and then rereading them, you hit your stride. The words are coming quickly. Everything about the composition starts to feel right" (p. 3). If first-year writers understand how to practice disengagement, they can use it to reach this felt sense of the writing process in order to attain their goals.

Across the disciplines, critical thinking has "been considered to be a tool for knowledge construction and one of the essential skills for twenty-first-century citizens" (Lu & Xie, 2019, p. 969). Critical thinking entails students taking "charge of [their] own thinking with the purpose of improving it" (Lu & Xie, 2019, p. 969). In this report, I define critical thinking as a form of metacognition, specifically the process of reflecting on disengagement practices. Developmental psychologist and early metacognitivist John Flavell (1976) defined metacognition as "one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes" (p. 232), and Molly Bassett (2016) added that metacognition is in part an investigation of being and doing. This reflective knowledge of cognitive process is certainly interconnected with "taking charge of one's own thinking"; indeed, critical thinking in and of itself "is often described as a metacognitive process," encouraging students to "go beyond simply retaining information, to actually gaining a more complex understanding of the information being presented to them" (Dwyer et al., 2014, p. 43). By intentionally teaching disengagement in the writing classroom, instructors can encourage metacognitive development and thereby strengthen students' critical thinking.

In many first-year writing (FYW) classes, syllabi and units are often centered around the end products of writing. Even if a class doesn't require a substantial piece of writing, such as a research paper, it may still focus on finished products, with units marked as complete once students have turned in their literacy narratives; rhetorical analyses; creative pieces, such as short stories and poems; or even more career-oriented pieces of writing, such as cover letters. As writing instructors, we also have students turn in various drafts, and we teach different stages of the writing process, such as outlining, drafting in non-linear ways, and so on. However, we often neglect to teach our students about the importance of disengagement, about what to do when they feel they have encountered writer's block (perhaps we can also extend the definition of writer's block to a blockage of critical thinking) and, for the time being, cannot write any longer.

To help our students reach their writing stride, complete their assignments, and understand what they need as writers, we can teach disengagement as a necessary and conducive part of the writing process. Disengagement can benefit students both within the FYW classroom and beyond it, giving them a tool for writing that is transferrable to and across the disciplines. In this report, I discuss the disengagement practices of three of my current FYW students and then suggest FYW assignments for teaching and implementing disengagement.

Case Studies

To investigate the ways that FYW students already practice disengagement, I interviewed three students from courses I have taught. To get them both to reflect on disengagement practices that they already acknowledge and to unearth disengagement practices that they might not recognize, I presented them with the following prompts: 1) Describe what your writing process is like, from the time you are assigned a paper to the time you turn the paper in. 2) How do you brainstorm for writing papers? 3) Do you take breaks during writing sessions? If so, what do you do on these breaks? 4) Where do you write your papers? My reason for asking the last question is that, as has been proven by scholars like Rule (2018) and Cydney Alexis (2017), writers' physical spaces influence their disengagement practices. For example, a writer who works at home and shares a writing space with his or her children will disengage differently than a writer who works in a library. In the following case study, the interview transcriptions were gathered through email exchanges, and all students were given pseudonyms.

Student A: Farhan

Farhan, a FYW student majoring in engineering, described his writing process as being unique and calculated, with elements that certainly illustrate intentional disengagement. Farhan explained:

> I read the prompt on the first day and usually just start thinking about what I want to write. This usually happens when I am doing normal tasks such as doing the laundry or washing dishes. Almost always, I come up with my essay idea when doing one of these tasks and then I start to write my introduction. I then do the same process for my main points. Once all this is completed, I write my conclusion. This is around 5 days into the essay. I then take one to two days of rest before going back and reading the essay in its entirety. I solve any issues

or mistakes I have made and then I submit.

It should be noted that, in an effort to garner thoughtful, individualized responses, I did not give Farhan specific examples of disengagement, other than my own practice of going for a walk. Farhan recognized that doing tasks such as laundry and the dishes is an intentional part of his process, a step he needs in order to begin his very first stages of writing. It may be interesting that like the psychology professor in the Prior and Shipka (2003) article, Farhan maintains a thinking space by doing the laundry, a disengagement practice shared by a beginning and an experienced writer.

Student B: Amber

Amber is a biology major who works breaks into her writing process, using them to "typically do something that does not require much thought," such as petting her cat, going for a stroll, or playing a game with her family. Amber explained that these breaks might extend overnight, particularly for a long paper, with her planning to resume her writing the next day. While these scheduled practices of disengagement might, at first glance, seem unrelated to writing, they're all *doing something* to advance her writing toward a goal. Just as Elbow (1998) argued that napping, while an "unconscious" activity, has the capability to give writers "the answer or the approach they need" (p. 40) upon waking, so do Amber's periods of overnight sleep. I argue that these periods not only help Amber move along in the writing process but also call into question our understanding of what the writing process is; these necessary periods of disengagement suggest that the writing process is more expansive than our typical comprehension of it.

Student C: Anna

When I first asked Anna, a music major, to describe her process, she depicted what most might think of as a typical, linear writing process: She jots down some notes, creates an outline, writes down bullet points, and then expands the bullet points into paragraphs, which she reorganizes until they form a cohesive paper. Practices of disengagement were omitted from Anna's description, suggesting that FYW students may not see them as valid, necessary, or even a part of their writing process because when I then asked Anna if she takes breaks and what these breaks look like, it became evident that disengagement is indeed an intentional part of her process.

Anna stated that her writing sessions are somewhat short yet frequent throughout the day so that she doesn't "get frustrated or burnt out." These sessions may last between thirty minutes to over an hour, depending on how well Anna is able to focus at the time. She goes on to say that she listens to movie soundtrack compilations while writing, and this practice of soundtrack-listening creates built-in yet not necessarily pre-planned breaks in her writing schedule. Anna will hear a track that she likes and pause her writing to research the movie the soundtrack comes from. Anna noted that she also might take breaks by playing a game on her phone if she grows tired of writing and then return to the writing after a few minutes. While these practices of researching music and playing games on her phone might seem like acts of diversion, it is precisely these types of disengagement that help to sustain writing progress by avoiding frustration and burnout.

Anna's pre-writing and brainstorming process is similar to Farhan's. Anna stated:

> A lot of the initial brainstorming happens while I'm riding in the car or doing other mundane things during the day. I start thinking about and mentally preparing to work on a paper as soon as it is assigned to me. I will put the project in the back of my mind for a few days if I have a lot of time before the due date. If I'm more pressed for time, I might skip straight to my second stage of brainstorming. The second stage of my brainstorming/preparation process involves just sitting down and writing any and all ideas down in my notebook so that I can start my outline next.

Putting the project in the back of her mind is representative of Elbow's (1998) suggestion to let ideas "cook." Additionally, I found Anna's breaking down of her brainstorming into two stages to be particularly interesting because it adds to and fleshes out what I think of as disengagement: for Anna, this disengagement seems to primarily occur in the first stage of her brainstorming process, where she's allowing potential writing ideas to permeate her thoughts in a natural way while going about the normal tasks of her day. The second stage of her brainstorming process, however, might not allow as much space for disengagement because it essentially bypasses the "cooking" stage and jumps into the physical act of writing.

This idea of different stages of brainstorming extends my understanding of disengagement and strengthens my reasoning for advocating for it in the FYW classroom. Without time for disengaging, students might have to skip to this "second stage" of the brainstorming process where they simply sit down and write. Such purposeful freewriting is certainly beneficial and has credence. For example, Elbow (1998) argued that writers should "write freely and uncritically so that [they] can generate as many words and ideas as possible without worrying whether they are good" (p. 7). Dedicated time—often in segments of just five or ten minutes—to free write has been proven to be effective. However, Elbow (1998) also recognized that freewriting is just one part of the process and argued for the value of stepping away from writing. Most important is the danger of not intentionally stepping away from writing but instead bypassing time for disengagement, which may lead to becoming frazzled and overwhelmed, ending up feeling stuck, and being unable to move forward. FYW students might, like Anna, sit themselves in a chair, believing they need to immediately get to writing. This pressure may cause students to freeze up and not write at all. It is precisely this situation that we, as composition instructors, are familiar with when our anxious and stressed students come to us lamenting that they just don't know where or how to begin. Intentional disengagement may alleviate this pressure and thereby eliminate, or at least diminish, the problem of not knowing where to begin because students first set aside time to let their thoughts and ideas "cook."

The Curriculum

Although breaks in the writing process, such as the ones that Amber takes, are not particularly unique—very few writers sit down and write an entire paper in one session—they are intentional steps that are often overlooked because they are thought to be unimportant. Likewise, the "stage one" of brainstorming that Anna described may be grossly dismissed by some as simply putting off writing. With the following assignments, I take these steps in the writing process—disengagement during brainstorming and disengagement between writing sessions—and propose that they be integrated into a FYW curriculum. The goals of these assignments are to teach students that the writing process is more than just

the physical act of writing and to prompt them to reflect on their practices of disengagement in order to develop critical thinking that they may carry forward into their future writing.

Assignment One

An initial assignment might be a low-stakes prompt given at the beginning of the semester to introduce students to the writing process. This prompt might be open-ended and designed to elicit creative responses; for example, 1) If you could live anywhere in the world, write about that place and why you would want to live there; or 2) Write about your stance on a current issue you are passionate about. The prompt should be something that most students find accessible to answer and, ideally, interesting so that there is a greater likelihood of them engaging with it.

After giving students the prompt, it would then be important to issue the following requirement: For the next two days (or four days or however long the instructor wishes), students should not respond to the prompt in writing. Instead, they should come to class ready to discuss how they plan to respond to it. When the students return to class, the instructor can ask them the following questions: 1) What are your ideas for how you will answer the prompt? 2) How did you come up with these ideas? 3) What were you doing when you came up with these ideas? 4) Did anything or anyone else aid you in planning how you will answer this prompt? Because it is likely that students may not, at first, be thinking about the disengagement practices in their writing process, they may be unsure how to answer. At this point, after the students have had time to respond in class, it may be helpful to shift into a discussion of disengagement and give examples of it. Students may realize they have preferred disengagement activities, which they can discuss as a class or in small groups. As with the low-stakes nature of the writing assignment, class discussion should ideally be open and informal. A discussion that feels tense and uncomfortable—perhaps where an instructor will "cold-call" on students—is likely to make students hesitant to participate at all. Indeed, in one study of metacognition and critical thinking, findings suggest that "faculty control . . . decreased engagement and thinking because students became afraid to ask for clarification and express ideas when faculty dominated discussion" (Donaldson & Field, 2020, p. 15–16). Ensuring that the class discussion is low-stakes and safe is likely to encourage students to freely discuss connections between writing and disengagement in their own processes, further fostering an environment for developing critical thinking.

Assignment Two

A second disengagement assignment may be a longer piece of writing (though still low-stakes) followed by students' reflections on their process after they have submitted the assignment. For this reflection, students can be given a series of questions about their disengagement practices, perhaps similar to the series of questions I asked my former students in the case study above. Students should be asked to describe what their process looked like while writing the paper, and the questions should gradually become more disengagement-oriented, such as asking students if they took breaks during the writing process, what they did during those breaks, what non-writing activities they did while brainstorming, outlining, revising, and so on. Finally, the students can be asked to reflect on what activities other than physical writing they did that helped them to move along in their writing process. Here, students are encouraged to practice metacognition, explaining *why* they think those activities helped them to write. The purpose of this assignment is to help

students to begin thinking about their writing process somewhat broadly while allowing them to stop and reflect on their disengagement practices as important parts of their process.

Assignment Three

Toward the end of the semester, students can be assigned an essay to describe what they have come to learn about their disengagement practices. This end-of-semester reflection builds on the previous assignment by allowing students to see how these practices function within the entirety of their writing process; students may see that disengaging from the physical act of writing is not just something that writers do when they feel stuck or when they don't want to write but can be important to advance toward a goal.

Conclusion

Farhan, Amber, and Anna are students from different disciplines—engineering, biology, and music, respectively—yet they all discussed ways in which they disengage in order to move forward in the writing process. While these three were all students in a FYW course I taught, their disengagement practices are transferable beyond FYW. Teaching students to reflect not only on *what* they do to disengage in the writing process, but *why,* and *how* those practices affect their writing can encourage metacognition, which they can draw upon to be successful in other courses.

Disengagement might be dismissed as laziness or simple avoidance. Many writers feel guilty about taking breaks, believing they are simply procrastinating. While procrastination is an issue that many writers struggle with, it can be argued that FYW students, many of whom are already unconfident in writing, might be especially prone to procrastination and perhaps now more than ever due to unusual and difficult learning circumstances related to the pandemic. However, it is important to make a distinction between procrastination and disengagement: procrastination is putting off writing without taking steps toward a goal while disengagement is an intentional step in the writing process toward reaching a goal. As composition instructors, we can help students to distinguish between procrastination and disengagement, not only alleviating the guilt and anxiety they may experience when not actively writing but also enabling them to recognize the non-physical acts of writing as part of the overall process of reaching a writing goal. The effects of disengagement suggest that writing may be more expansive than generally understood, and therefore, disengagement should be incorporated into composition pedagogy and FYW curricula.

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