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## Writing Yogis: Breathing Our Way to Mindfulness and Balance in Embodied Writing Pedagogy

### Cover Page Footnote

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## Writing Yogis: Breathing Our Way to Mindfulness and Balance in Embodied Writing Pedagogy

*“Your practice is your laboratory” –BKS Iyengar, Light on Life*

*Om, shanti, shanti, shanti. (Om, peace, peace, peace)*

*“To grow as a writer is to grow as a person”—Student*

**Christy I. Wenger**

“All right, everyone knows what to do,” I say. “Be sure to sit up straight in your chair and plant your feet firmly on the ground, letting that connection give you a sense of stability and rootedness, like how you feel in tree pose.” Some students shift with these words, but many remain still, already practicing the attentiveness we’ve been cultivating over the past few weeks. They have learned that being relaxed and being attentive are not separate states but can be coupled for greater awareness, and they are using their bodies to achieve this harmony.

“Now, close your eyes softly,” I tell them, noting with pleasure that a handful of students had closed their eyes well before my verbal prompt. “Bring the lids together, touching but not squeezing them, so you feel the horizon of your sealed eyelids. With this action, let the pupils of your eyes begin to migrate slowly toward the back of your head.”<sup>3</sup> I look out and see my twenty writing students with their eyes closed, waiting patiently for my next verbal cue to continue our classroom practice of mindful breathing, also known as *pranayama* in the tradition of Iyengar yoga.

“Scan your body for tension and release it. Allow your shoulders to drop away from your neck and observe your tongue. If it is pressed up onto the roof of your mouth, relax it down onto the floor of your mouth. Let the inner walls of your throat spread away from one another, so you feel the hallway of your throat becoming wider and wider. Tune your ears inward, and begin to listen to the sound of your own breath.” For a few moments, I pause to relax and listen to my inhalations and exhalations, collecting my thoughts and readying myself for my instruction and our imminent class discussion. With some effort, I let go of everything beyond the present moment of sitting in front of this class, my eyes closed, breathing with my students. As I hear our breaths mingle, I feel bonded to my students and peaceful, removed from the rush of morning meetings and lesson planning that began my day.

“Pay attention to your breath, the inhalations and the exhalations, without trying to change them,” I say after a long pause without opening my eyes. “Now, based on how you are feeling today, choose which breath is right for you. If you are tired, work on our three-part inhalation, sharply inhaling to your lower, middle, then upper ribs. Pause after each inhale and once you reach the top ribs, release your breath in a steady exhale. If you

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<sup>3</sup> The verbal prompts I’ve reproduced here are faithful to the same I used to guide my writing classes in meditative breathing. They represent an amalgamation of standard yoga exercises advocated in such books as *Yoga: A Gem for Women* (2002), those taught by my own yoga teacher and based on the traditions of Iyengar yoga.

are stressed and anxious, begin to deepen your exhalations, so they become longer than your inhalations. See your inhalations as “small” and your exhalations as “big.” You can try inhaling for three slow counts and exhaling for five slow counts, if this helps. If you are feeling fairly balanced already, simply concentrate on smoothing out your inhalations and exhalations, making them soft and quiet.”

“Allow your inhalations to give you energy and your exhalations to expel all the worries and stresses of your day. Find peace in your breath.” I look for peace in my own breath as I give students a few moments to find a similar calm in themselves before guiding us back to regular breathing. “Let your breathing return to normal, but keep it smooth and calm. Keeping your eyes closed, pay attention to your feelings of peace, awareness and steadiness. Resolve to carry these into the rest of your day. The peace you feel now is yours to return to at any point; you just have to remember it and work toward it once again. Similarly, if you have found focus and awareness now, you can find them again within.”

I end the breathing exercise by asking my students to invoke a goal they are ready to embody: “Now, take a minute to set an intention for yourself. Your intention could be grounded in the learning goals you have for our class or for all of your classes. It may even encompass your social and academic lives. What do you hope to accomplish today or this week as a writer and a learner?” I am silent as I set my own intention and let students set theirs.

“Now that you have set it, remember to revisit your intention later today and perhaps even later this week. Use it as a guide for your behavior and a checkpoint for yourself. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes.” I ask my students to freewrite for a few minutes as a way to continue our observation of quiet mindfulness and to begin directly applying it to our writing. In her freewrite, Megan questions the form of her developing essay on body image dilemmas for young, female athletes; she isn’t happy with the argument she has produced. She writes of her intention to listen to her “gut” regarding what changes she needs to make to her essay’s form instead of too easily allowing other readers to sway her choices, a problem she has documented before. Jimmy sets an intention to find a central focus to his wandering thoughts, to put them “inside one of these focused breaths,” and Adam promises himself the freedom to explore his ideas instead of just sticking with the first one he has. Adam notes that this is a social goal, too, since he tends to be stubborn in his writing and his daily living. After a moment to find our voices, we begin the day’s lesson with renewed energy and focus, plunging into our classroom work with mindfulness.

### **Harmonizing Breathing and Writing**

I share a version of guided *pranayama*—the Sanskrit term for our meditative, focused breathing practice—I’ve used in my first-year writing classes in order to provoke new ideas about how we might engage our students’ writing bodies in our classes. Western conceptions of the body have tended toward devaluation and dismissal of our flesh. Jane Tompkins’ early call in “Me and My Shadow” to embrace the personal and embodied dimensions of our writing have since led to treatises on embodied pedagogy, including Jane Hindman’s “Making Writing Matter” and, recently, Kristie Fleckenstein’s *Embodied*

*Literacies*.<sup>4</sup> While no two embodied writing pedagogies are exactly alike, they are all united by the common purpose of engaging the body in education by self-consciously attending to the somatics of learning and the physicality of writing.

As far back as the 80s, James Moffett drew our attention to the ways Eastern practices like meditation could sustain the development of somatic awareness where our own cultural practices fell short. My embodied experiences have also led me to situate embodied writing pedagogy not only between Western binaries but also among Eastern practices, specifically yoga. Yoga and embodied writing pedagogy harmonize well because both take the body as an epistemic origin so that embodiment becomes the means of knowing, feeling and making sense of the world and not just a physical enactment of social forces. In gesturing toward the East, I am echoing the calls within Judith Beth Cohen's and Geraldine DeLuca's recent articles in this journal, to actively seek out the connections between writing pedagogy and yoga practice.<sup>5</sup> Cohen argues that the most obvious connection between the two is the focus on process and movement, and DeLuca inhabits this fluid process in her article as she documents the difficulty of accepting her limitations as a yoga student and discovers a parallelism in this humbling exercise that she can draw upon as a writing teacher. Through her struggling practice of headstand, *sirsasana* in Sanskrit, DeLuca learns the pedagogical value of "radical self-acceptance," or of accepting where she is in the present moment instead of trying to push away the parts of her reality she'd rather not face (28). In doing so, she challenges the commonplace that forward motion is the only way growth in our writing and teaching of writing can be measured.

My opening points to the ways I intend to use this essay to explore an integrated yoga-writing pedagogy that teaches students to embody the writing process with the breath. Like those before me, I am drawn to yoga (which includes the exercises of both postures like headstand as well as focused, meditative breathing), because it is, like composition, a praxis or an applied philosophy. Because it is a practice of doing, much like writing, yoga harmonizes well with the tenor of writing rhetorics, especially embodied writing pedagogy with its shared interest in bodily hermeneutics. From this convergence, I will argue that developing writers' "emotional flexibility" by teaching them to engage their feeling bodies through the practice of *pranayama* can not only enrich their felt experience of the writing process and the physical ease and comfort with which they write, but can also attune them to the materiality of knowledge making. Students who use *pranayama* as a regular composing ritual begin to appreciate the body as a site of learning and to understand writing as a somatic experience that occurs with and through the flesh. And students who self-consciously engage in these embodied writing practices develop, in turn, a greater metacognitive awareness of the writing process, reflected in their writings *about* writing. In other words, as students breathe their way into writing, they place new value on observing the writing process as it unfolds, documenting and analyzing the felt

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<sup>4</sup> Tompkins calls for us to give up the pretense of the disembodied and impersonal voice in our writing and accept the real body, "the human frailty of the speaker...his emotions, his history" that supports the writing persona as well as the "moment of intercourse with the reader—acknowledgement of the other person's presence, feelings, needs" (175).

<sup>5</sup> Jeffery Davis' *The Journey from the Center to the Page* is also an interesting, popular source on this topic, advocating an infusion of yoga practice into the creative writing process.

experience of composing, which helps them become more generative and reflective writers. Particularly, students' increased mindfulness and flexibility results in developed focus and advanced coping mechanisms to deal with the negative emotions of the writing process.

To give sufficient space to students' vocalizations of their feeling bodies, as represented in the reflective, metacognitive writings they produced during our class, I will not focus primarily on students' final products, which is a task for another essay altogether; instead, in the pages that follow I am interested in students' attitudes and approaches toward the process of writing and how these change when they self-consciously embody their writing practices. Yoga teaches us that being on the path is what is important; the focus is always on the practice of a pose, a meditation or a breathing sequence and not simply the outcome. Even so, there will be organic moments where students' reflections will lead me to their papers if only to underscore their changing ideas about writing. As will become clear, students' own reflective writings serve as a testimony that a focus on process doesn't preclude an interest in the texts our students produce.

### **Emotional Flexibility**

Daniel Goleman has served as perhaps the best-known popular theorist of emotions in education and the workplace through his theories of emotional intelligence, defined as "master[ly of] the emotional realm" (xiii). Goleman claims lineage from Howard Gardner's theories of multiple intelligences, but faults Gardner for focusing on cognitive elements in his categories to the exclusion of feelings. Goleman describes emotional intelligence, calling it a subset of Gardner's personal intelligences, as an individual's awareness of her own and others' emotions toward the ends of self-control and the management of emotional encounters with others (xiii). While Goleman may have successfully revived talk of emotion in discourse about education,<sup>6</sup> I'd like to argue here that his term is too problematic for inclusion in embodied writing pedagogy. Positioned within patriarchal capitalism, Goleman's term lacks attention to difference and diversity and is fixated on singular self-control of emotions, which are consequently feminized; he thereby constructs emotional intelligence as a site of masculinized social control where the gains lie in "creating 'smooth' and efficient worker relations" (Boler 61).

Instead, I suggest we trade talk of emotional intelligence for "emotional flexibility" since the former tends to denigrate emotional awareness to the level of a commodity which can be deployed for capitalist gains. Because it refuses lineage from such troubled terms and springs instead from a tradition of yogic mindfulness that parallels feminist theories of connected and situated knowing, emotional flexibility is more hopeful and

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<sup>6</sup> In approaching emotion through new ideas of flexibility inspired by yoga, I am hoping to address the problem Worsham articulates in "Going Postal" that we will continue to struggle with emotion's inclusion in our pedagogies until we refuse to allow it to remain "beyond our semantic availability" (240). A novel means of talking about emotion may give us the impetus to once more work through its effects in our classrooms and may provide us a constructive language to share with our students.

is self-conscious of embodied difference.<sup>7</sup> Unlike emotional intelligence which works within a genetic range bestowed upon us by fate or divine will (Goleman xii), I understand emotional flexibility as a skill that can be cultivated, taught and learned—just as flexibility is taught and developed in the yoga studio. Indeed, by utilizing contemplative acts like *pranayama* as writing tools, my students grow to become yogis of their thoughts and emotions. That is, our classroom practice of mindful breathing helps my students develop emotional flexibility they can use to become more generative and reflective writers who are strong and resilient in the face of negative emotions and thoughtful and compassionate in their attempts to understand and utilize the meaning potential of feeling in their composing processes.

Our feelings, whether inspired by the ideas and memories about which we are writing, generated by the writing process itself, or produced by our body's responses and organic intelligence, energize our writing. I like how the founder of the yoga tradition that bears his name, B.K.S. Iyengar, puts it: "The very word, inspiration, meaning both to breathe in and to grasp a feeling in the form of an idea, expresses the way the brain is charged during inhalation" and reminds us of the body's role in meaning creation (*Light* 75). Iyengar accounts for what we might call felt knowledge after Sandra Perl's exploration of felt sense, or the "body's knowledge before it's articulated in words" (*Felt* 1). If Iyengar accounts for the ways invention is embodied, he does so by linking breath and emotion. According to yoga, focusing on the breath, *prana* or life force and energy, makes us attentive to our feelings (and thus able to reshape them) and stabilizes our mind by bringing it back into dialogue with our body, connecting us to the rest of the material world, in turn. In the simplest terms, *prana* situates us. And because *prana* is never still but rather flows between all material objects, this situatedness is dynamic. If situated knowledge, at its best, is attuned to the ways our social and material placement locates us in the world in particular ways, then *pranayama*, or the practice of focused breathing and awareness, represents how we both surrender ourselves to our environments and also how we exert ourselves on these environments as we filter them through our bodies, changing them and ourselves in turn.

Flexibility is the ability to bend without breaking; similarly, when applied to our emotions it is the ability to balance the weight of our emotional responses and the need to accommodate others'. Yogis can only stretch as far as they can maintain balance; stretching without minding our own positioning will cause us to fall over. Mindful breathing helps us become aware of this need for balance and can teach us how to attain it through our bodies and exercise it in our mental and physical activities. To find this balance, or to become emotionally flexible, we must learn to pair the movements of extension and expansion. Iyengar explains that extension requires attending to our inner space and expansion requires reaching out to others and the unknown (*Light* 33-34). The literal core of both acts is the center. Respiration is a prime example of the coupling of extension and expansion, learned at the level of our bodies. During inhalation, our lungs expand and we

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<sup>7</sup> Here, I am thinking of Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledges, or the material-discursive meanings we create from our experience. From a yogic point of view, the commonality of our materiality gives situated knowledge a relational orientation that establishes it as a method of connected knowing. Connected knowing, defined in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, values the historical, social and experiential and is characterized by its stance of openness, a continuous deferral of closure, and by the recognition of our need to join with others (Belenky et al, 113-23).

bring the outside world into our body, allowing it to affect us, often in ways we may not initially predict. As we take in a breath, we literally and metaphorically take in and process the new, or that which we label as “other” because it exists outside of ourselves. If “[i]nhalation engulfs the whole body, expanding from center to periphery” (*Light* 75), then extension occurs in turn: “During exhalation, the tide recedes, drawing back toward the center” (*Light* 75-76). For as we exhale, we move inward to our center, refocusing on the self, even as that self has been changed and shaped by the new breath circulating within our inner body until it too is released, and the process begins again.

Mindful breathing, or *pranayama*, becomes a practice and a tool for teaching emotional flexibility in the writing classroom because it asks writers to pay attention to how the body feels and what the body does in order to develop writing habits that apply the strength and flexibility of the yogi to the writing process. Simply put, flexibility is achieved when writers can practice both self/inner- and other/outer- directedness and balance the two moves in their composition and their composing processes. Here, the body is used as a hinge for new ways of *thinking* about writing and new ways of *doing* writing, or actually engaging in the process of composing. Instead of brains in vats, student writers in this paradigm are best understood as body-heart-minds who use their physical beings as writing laboratories, or as lived sites for the practice and research of the writing and meaning-making process, enacting the expectation invoked in my epigraph. Mindful breathing thereby becomes an integral practice for instructors who want to forward embodied writing pedagogies that seek to rejoin the meaning-making potential of both thinking and feeling as they come together in the physical writing body. Imagining and enacting writing as a situated and embodied process by attending to the breath specifically invites students to think about how the body is integral to the composing process and how the relationship between thought and emotion shapes the words and meanings writers create.

### Working Toward Emotional Flexibility

Encouraging students to approach their writing processes as embodied through the practice of *pranayama*, known to target the subtle body of emotions in yoga, helps them attend to their physical and emotional responses to writing. Mindfulness starts, after all, with the practice of paying close attention, a skill we deem necessary for successful writing. While we already insist writers apply such attentiveness to their subject matter, using the skills of close reading and analysis, we might also include increased awareness of the feeling body as the writing subject and the material origin of meaning. One way to respect the body as a source of knowledge is to become more aware of and responsive to our feelings as writers—“gut”/ ideational, psychological and physiological.<sup>8</sup> *Pranayama*

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<sup>8</sup> Along with the tradition of yoga, I refuse the closure of neatly delineating between cultural affect, psychological emotions or physiological feelings. This is not an uncommon view. Education theorist Meghan Boler (1999) echoes this tradition with her comprehensive definition of feeling as “in part sensational, or physiological: consisting of the actual feeling—increased heartbeat, adrenaline, etc.” and “also ‘cognitive’ or ‘conceptual’: shaped by our beliefs and perceptions. There is, as well, a powerful linguistic dimension to our emotional awareness, attributions of meanings, and interpretations” (xix).



asks writers to develop this corporeal orientation and trains them to attend to feeling via the breath.

Mindfulness of and concentration on the breathing process can teach students valuable, practical lessons they can immediately apply to their writing. In particular, students learn through breathing exercises that effective writing sessions begin with responsiveness to their current feelings, which may position them as more self- or other-centered at any given moment. Only they can target which breathing patterns will balance their emotional states, which is why the choice of breath documented at the start of this essay is so important. On an immediate and instrumental level, the choice of breath gives students a reason to become aware of their current feelings and energy levels and how these relate to their receptiveness to the writing process and their openness to learning and to others.

For instance, when the class I follow in my opening narration first attempted *pranayama* together, many students assumed that they were anxious simply *because* they were in class, so they used longer exhalations to calm themselves. They chose their breath based on what they anticipated feeling as opposed to listening to their bodies. As a result of using calming breaths when they were more tired than anxious, some of my students complained of sleepiness after our inaugural *pranayama* practice. As my student Johnny stated, “I found the breathing calming and relaxing, but almost too much to the point where I was lulled to sleep. I came out of the exercise feeling relaxed, but also with a strong urge to go to sleep.” After a few more attempts, Johnny learned to “check in” with his feelings before choosing a breathing pattern. He noted in his blog that he stopped using long exhalations by default and began, instead, to analyze his feelings and scan his body. Johnny started working with the three-part inhalation to create energy and, therefore, engagement with his environment. After listening to his body, he found that was what he most needed. In navigating the consequences of his choice, Johnny learned two lessons: first, that he needs to pay attention to his body if he hopes to be an effective learner and writer; and second, that understanding and navigating his feelings is part of the work he must complete to this end. His breath became a means for this.

Johnny’s experiences should also remind us that remaining open to new ideas is a task a peacefully attentive mind can handle with greater acuity than a foggy, sleepy one. Johnny’s classmate, Ryan, reiterated this conclusion in his blog, stating that the three-part energetic breathing gives him “ideas for writing, or simply refreshes me after hours of writing. After [breathing] breaks, I feel energized and usually have better ideas more readily than before breaks.” Ryan links these “better ideas” to “the positive energy. . . the deep inhalations did give me . . . Now I’m not going to lie to you, it wasn’t a miracle cure. I didn’t suddenly burst out full of energy, ready to conquer the world. But it did help.” While not a “miracle” this “positive energy” was indeed a motivator. Ryan called up energy through his breath, channeling *prana* to give him the excitement, endurance and ideas he needed for writing.

In his comments, Ryan is likely referring to the effects of physiological coherence, which has been shown to result from contemplative practices like meditative breathing. Citing several researchers (Schoner & Kelso, 1988; Tiller, McCraty & Atkinson, 1996), Tobin Hart observes that “Correlates of physiological coherence include a regular heart rhythm, decreased sympathetic nervous system activation and increased parasympathetic

activity and increased heart-brain synchronization (the brain's alpha rhythms become more synchronized to the heartbeat)" (31). In other words, the effects of the physiological coherence brought on by *pranayama* include the calming energy of focus as opposed to the jittery energy of caffeine since attentive breathing harmonizes the body and drops levels of anxiety. As Ryan's and Johnny's testimony highlights, students often begin to appreciate *pranayama* from a practical orientation rather than a philosophical one; the energy that mindful breathing gives them is a quality of our practice they value immediately—once hooked by practicality, deeper meanings have time to take root.

For instance, as Johnny's corporeal awareness grew from practicing *pranayama*, he realized along with Ryan how breathing could not only help him monitor his states of feeling, but how it could also help him reshape those feelings. Johnny began to question the role of his entire body during our breathing exercises, and after a few weeks, he relates increasing success in using *pranayama* as a writing ritual to how receptive he is to his full being and not only his breath while performing it:

As we continued . . . my goal has been to channel the exercises into becoming relaxed and energized at the same time. While I tried to adhere to all the instructions of the breathing, with the first practice during class I found myself still coming out the exercise more sleepy than I had entered . . . With the last two practices I have felt myself become more and more relaxed and at the same time energized . . . I think I can attribute it to paying particular attention to my posture during the breaths . . . Before I think I would allow myself to unintentionally slouch, or relax in the chair, contributing to my continued sleepiness from the morning. While focusing extra on my posture, I think I have been able to gain more from the exercise . . . Writing after, I not only felt relaxed, I felt balanced.

My student's comment about posture is important for the ways it links the breath, body and mind together as they form his states of receptivity and rootedness. In slumped postures that allow the body to turn inward, Johnny found himself feeling so rooted he wanted to distance himself entirely from his environment through sleep. But when he concentrated on opening his body while focusing on breaths that continued this action, he felt energized and more connected to the community of our classroom and receptive to the learning process. These actions can explain why he feels a sense of emotional balance that he can take into the writing process after our practice.

As his teacher, I could see the effects of Johnny's growing mindfulness taking place in his blogs. Johnny's blogs at the beginning of the semester, those that correlate with a breathing practice that drew him further inward, were much more focused on pleasing himself as a writer. For instance, he states in these his intention of "getting out [his] true thoughts" as a writer and learning to have "no reservations about what I am writing." Later, as he attunes himself to his body and learns better emotional balance, Johnny's blogs contain more interest in audience and state his attempts to make his papers "easier to read for the reader," while still remaining interesting to him. While some of these growing concerns may be attributable to the workshops and peer reviews that were a part of our class, Johnny is also certainly embodying new attitudes about writing that grew as a result of composing with *pranayama*.

By the conclusion of our course, these lessons of balance and harmony permeated

not only students' practical applications of the breathing exercises but also the ways they thought about the writing process. In a final class reflection, Mark noted that prior to our class he was reticent to open up to others. He accounts for the new openness he felt at the conclusion of our course as an effect of his embodied awareness of the writing process developed through breathing exercises that engaged him in the acts of expansion toward others alongside extension toward his center.<sup>9</sup> Mark notes, "I can sense that in some ways I've grown more open . . . .Yoga and breathing meditation have helped my focus . . . . Hopefully both have made me a better, more intelligent person." The growth my student accounts for is holistic; in learning to balance his writing body and the outside world, he has grown flexible enough to respect his own ideas as well as to remain open to his audience and environment. The flexibility learned through yoga thus "becomes more than a physical attribute; it is transformed into a living metaphor" (Cohen 15). Mark senses that this growth is a gain for his "intelligence" which would give greater authority to his writing as well as his character or *ethos*, making him a "better" person and therefore, we can conclude, a more believable and persuasive writer.

Most interesting in Mark's reflection is his simultaneous attention to his developed "focus" on the self and the writing task at hand, as well as his openness to others and foreign ideas. By noting both together, my student is actualizing the complementariness of extension and expansion. He goes on to state in the same blogged reflection, "The learning that has occurred so far this semester because of our practice [of yoga and writing] has driven me to not take ideas and experiences at face value." This observation testifies that he applied the lessons from our breathing practice to his writing. The strongest writing Mark produces, according to his blog, dialogues his "own ways of being" with new ways of thinking.

Mark embodied this discovery with his final class paper, which he chose to write about deviance on campus. In his first draft, he argued that while underage drinking was an activity in which many college students participated, students who abstained would not be automatically socially ostracized for their decision. He spoke from his own experience of occasionally abstaining at parties when he had a big test the following day (he drank at other times). In talking with classmates about his ideas, however, Mark encountered another student who passionately disagreed with him since she had indeed felt excluded because of her decision to abstain entirely from underage drinking. While Mark entered my class disdaining the practice of peer review because he felt his peers could in no way help him write a better draft, by the end of our class he sought out an interview with the student who disagreed and, without my prompting, used her as a source in his paper. He also asked me if the two of them could peer review with each other (I usually assigned pairs). Mark's final draft was a powerful mediation between his original arguments and

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<sup>9</sup> It may be worthwhile to note that while I talk with my students about centering and rooting in themselves as well as shifting outward toward others, I rarely use the terms extension and expansion in the classroom. While these terms are extremely helpful to me in my research because they allow me to work through the importance of these acts while drawing on the discourse of yoga, they become less helpful in demystifying writing for my students. I try to use as little of such jargon as possible with my students. For me, it is more important that they can engage in these acts and express them in simple, everyday language than it is that they can express themselves in the same discourses I use in my professional writing.

his classmates' dissenting opinions. In it, he reflected his classmates' opinion that he didn't encounter ostracization when abstaining because he was already accepted as a "drinker" in his social circles: "I discovered that the barrier . . . was due to the bond alcohol creates between drinkers." Led by his breath, Mark didn't simply learn the power of using experience as evidence in his academic writing; he understood the necessity of analyzing his own experiences and putting them in dialogue with others' in order to build the most socially and personally responsible knowledge, knowledge that respects multiple "ways of being." As this example illuminates, these acts of emotional flexibility are metacognitive acts, acts of thinking about thinking, about writing, and about being in the world.

Mark's classmate, Megan learned a similar lesson though her integrated practice of *pranayama* and writing. Unlike Mark, Megan worried almost exclusively about her imagined audience. In early blogs, Megan wrote that it would be a sign of growth if she could begin to incorporate her own experiences and ideas in her writing and worry less about pleasing others and accommodating anticipated criticisms from her audience. After a semester of using *pranayama* to motivate and sustain her writing and increase her mindfulness, Megan did learn to become more responsive to her own concerns as a writer, according to her final, blogged reflection on her changed attitudes toward the writing process:

This semester, my views on what it means to grow as a writer have drastically changed. Prior to [our class], writing was about pleasing an audience. Now, I have been searching more for what I care about and WANT to write about. I've also been focusing a lot more on my writing for exactly what it is. There's less comparison to the writing of those authors we read in class, and more comparison between my old writing style and new style. I think this is perhaps my greatest realization, because to grow as a writer means not to grow in the world as a writer, but to improve upon oneself and climb your own ladder...I think that emotionally, I've got a lot more relaxed about writing through breathing, and that is growth.

Indeed, Megan's mid-semester writing marked a transition point for her as she found a link between the breaths she used to give her calm and confidence for her composing process and the voices she incorporated within her writing. For a mid-semester revision assignment, she wrote a triple-voiced narrative instead of a traditional, claim-driven argument because she felt it better represented her ideas, even if it might be shocking to her audience—including me, her teacher. The essay that resulted was an extremely powerful one that narrated the extreme pressure female athletes face to stay thin and yet remain strong, a paradox my student explored with an academic researcher's voice and intermittently spoke back to with two additional voices: her own personal voice, which examined the changing thought process and confusions of a growing teenager, and a voice of popular culture as depicted by singer Rhianna's song, "Question Existing." The song both asks and genders the question of what it means to be judged for performance and image and champions living for oneself. The paper Megan produced thus embodied for her a lesson of claiming an authoritative voice so that I'd argue that while my student might not be able to write a multi-voiced narrative in her biology class, what she will have learned about rhetorical flexibility and the link between form and content will transfer to other classes, making her writing stronger there as well.

Every new language gives us new ways of thinking, and yoga does this for my students who are able to revisit and “resee” the writing process as embodied by framing it within the terms of their bodies, emotions, movements and breaths. But what they gain isn't simply a new language, and what we gain as teachers isn't simply some Sanskrit to include in our professional writing. Instead, these acts help us to talk with students in new ways about what it means to develop a writing practice, how they might cultivate awareness of themselves as writers and meaning-makers, and what the physical process of composing entails. That is, the embodied practice of *pranayama* urges students to plan generative, body-conscious methods of approaching writing and learning tasks. It gives them a method of monitoring themselves as they move through their writing. It provides a supportive system of evaluation that interests them more in intrinsic growth than extrinsic success, particularly in the form of grades. This shouldn't be surprising since *pranayama* is a means of metacognition itself. It engages writers in learning to develop a conscious relationship to cognitive and emotional states that allows them to reflect on and to redirect their patterns of thought and feeling.

### **Breathing In Focus, Breathing Out Negative Emotions**

Breathing not only teaches us balance by unifying the energies between self and the world, but also helps us to concentrate on the present moment and to be attentive to our embodied needs in it. Meditation, whether on the breath, an intention or a mantra, has long been known to increase our powers of focus and concentration. As Iyengar states, “[w]atching the flow of the breath also teaches stability of consciousness, which leads to concentration...The power of concentration allows you to invest your new energy judiciously” (72). By paying attention to our breath, my students learn to focus the energy of the physical and mental body, which can result in more productive writing sessions wherein they feel more able to cope with the distractions that surround them. The greater their powers of attention, the more likely they will be motivated to continue writing, and the less likely they will be blocked by stress or anxiety.

Because students do not always arrive on time to class, and because we start with our breathing exercises, we've had to learn as a class how to deal productively with the interruptions not only caused by other loud classes heard through the thin walls of our room, but also by classmates entering the room after we've started. When we first started our breathing exercises, my students would open their eyes to see who had entered; later in the semester the majority remained focused on their breath, a demonstrable effect of their learned attentiveness. Not responding to the distraction is an act of agency and of choice that many students never considered prior to the class. Our age of multitasking and my students' almost absolute reliance on technology hides the choice. The cellphone call may go unanswered and the blinking Facebook message ignored. Sam noted in her blog that before our class, she never thought about the importance of focus during writing, but that now she understands it and attributes her success to our practice of *pranayama*: “I would have never guessed that yoga...could help a person focus as much as it has for me. My new writing habits are definitely more productive than the ones in the past, like watching TV and Facebooking.” Part of what students are learning during these classroom moments is the difference between beholding what happens around us (noting a late classmate, letting

it go) and attaching to these events (opening our eyes to observe the classmate) (Hart 30; 32).

Students can apply these lessons to their own bodies as equally as to other bodies and their environments. Because breathing rejoins our body and mind and urges them to work together for a common purpose, it is a helpful practice for writers who find their own bodies sources of distraction when attempting to focus—a common problem. One of my students, Steven, said this:

Through the last few weeks, I have been able to concentrate in English a lot more because of the breathing exercises. At first, I had a lot of trouble concentrating. My nose always itched, or I had to cough . . . . But after the first few times I learned to tune this out and concentrate . . . . I am amazed at the changes . . . . I now see writing as a lot more physical and I can really jump right into it with the right combination of breathing exercises and habits. I always look forward to using these methods while I write papers.

Deciding what distractions are enabling versus those that are disabling is a strategy students tell me they often use to stay focused on their writing when working in loud dorms or heavily-populated libraries on campus. Even the library, where many of my students go to escape from the noise, is distracting for many. Some of my students were worried about peer judgment if they used *pranayama* in these public spaces: “I didn’t like doing [breathing exercises] in the library at first, where I write most of my papers, because there are a lot of people there. I don’t like closing my eyes, thinking about my inhalations, when others are around.” The usefulness of the breathing exercises, however, tended to win out over the fear of peer judgment: “I don’t mind anymore, I just do it; I figure no one cares if I close my eyes for a minute. I mean there are people taking naps in the library, so really a breathing exercise isn’t that weird or out of the ordinary there.” The sheer number of students who reported performing *pranayama* in the library and other public spaces on campus testified to me just how much they valued the practice. *Pranayama* also encouraged students to re-evaluate the moments of the writing process when they weren’t breathing. Another of my students, Cindy, noted in a blog entry that she took to listening to classical music on her iPod as a way of maintaining her mindful and peaceful state after completing breathing exercises. Cindy states that she “learned how important it is to develop and maintain focus this semester and to be aware when focus is lost. I didn’t do this before.” As a result, Cindy had come to my class with much frustration over writing, which she was able to dispel through her breath.

*Pranayama* teaches writers that where the breath is, the heart will be as well. Cindy’s response illuminates how emotional stress pulls the body and mind in separate directions. These moments of appreciating the breath teach students that it is necessary to rejoin the body and mind. Iyengar tells us that “[t]he breath, working in the sheath of the physical body, serves as a bridge between body and mind” (*Light* 73). Developing skills to channel the breath in hopes that the mind will follow can help writers cultivate successful strategies for navigating the demands of the writing process, demands that are often emotional and anxiety-producing for our students (and ourselves). Breathing mindfully can create positive feelings and cultivate a quieted and calmed consciousness, ready to create and problem-solve. We know this instinctively as we unconsciously take deep breaths before

walking on stage, and we are even culturally reminded of the ways conscious breathing promotes focus when a friend encourages us to “just breathe” when we are in the midst of a trying situation, wondering what course of action to take.

Learning how to use the breath to refocus their emotional states is important for students who rush from one class to another, hardly giving thought to the ways their performance in one will impact their successful learning in other. For instance, leftover anxiety from a test taken in the class before mine can chip away at my students’ concentration, leaving them to fret more over the correctness of their answers on that test than to learn a new reading or writing strategy during our time together. One of my students noted that these stressors, “like [his] math test . . . fall away when we breathe at the start of class,” allowing him to apply a fresh mind and calmed emotional state to our classroom work. “After each exercise, it’s like all my concerns for other classes evaporated for a while, and I could focus solely on English class. I feel not totally, but somewhat relaxed. It’s a good start.”

My student might be alluding to the ways *pranayama* helps develop mindsets that encourage awareness and acknowledgment of feeling in ways that are enabling rather than disabling. This is an applied skill of emotional flexibility. These “motivational mindsets” contain “scripts for dealing with competence-related setbacks” and “beliefs about the malleability of abilities as well as strategies and scripts for how to cope with inevitable setbacks associated with learning new and challenging things” (Roeser and Peck 129). Feeling itself is not unwanted in the writing process, since with feeling comes motivation. What *is* disabling is when negative emotions like stress and anxiety overwhelm the writer. Because emotional flexibility centers on balancing inner and outer pulls, it can help writers “avoid reactive attachment [to feelings and thoughts]...allow[ing] us to observe the contents of our consciousness rather than simply being absorbed by them” (Hart “Interiority” 33). In the end, overriding reactions to feelings doesn’t so much invalidate their importance as it allows students to better understand them, leading to emotional maturity. “For example, instead of just seething with anger, the contemplative mind may allow a little more space between the anger [or other emotion] and us. We might both have our anger and also notice it—‘Look at me being angry, what’s that about?’—rather than simply being lost in the anger. To notice, accept, embrace and thereby transform our anger may have significant impact on behavior” (Hart 33).

Intimate awareness of our feelings is therefore a key step in developing an emotional flexibility that will allow writers to develop coping strategies and motivational mindsets that help them overcome negativity. Highlighting how this process works by attending to the breath, one of my students shared the following story on his blog:

Today I was feeling really down on myself and felt as though I needed some type of pep talk. After going through the breathing routine . . . I actually was able to re-energize myself. Afterwards, the work that I had done was so rewarding that I feel motivated to continue writing. Sometimes if I get myself in a slump I need to remember that just one exercise can help me feel better, help me to be able to focus on homework, and to make me want to continue. This is what’s so good about the yoga I do, it has a day to day use . . . [making me] emotional[ly] and mentally flexible.

This student finds a source of resilience and “emotional and mental” flexibility through

*pranayama*. Meditation and yoga has indeed been shown to “promote the construction of attributions to malleable source of difficulty and adaptive source of coping, particularly when confronting setbacks” (Roeser and Peck 129). It is this adaptive coping my student alludes to when he uses breathing as a soothing and calming exercise, much like a private pep talk. As in the discussion of anger above, this student is able to step back from his depressed mood which seemingly leaves him devaluing his abilities as a writer to ask, “What’s up with that?” The conscious channeling of positive energy using his breath is an alternative to seeking out assurance from another, an act that may be stilled by embarrassment. This work to transform his mood increases his motivation so that my student feels emotionally-rewarded by the writing that follows.

These examples from our breathing practice show how yoga helps writers displace negative emotions and embrace self-compassion, which is a quality upon which the contemplative arts are built. In their article on the usefulness of contemplative pedagogy, Roeser and Peck argue that teaching students to exercise self-compassion helps them “take a kind, non-judgmental, and understanding attitude toward [themselves] in instances of pain or difficulty rather than being self-critical” (Roeser and Peck 129). Given that so many of my students describe the writing process as painful and emotionally dissonant, such an attitude is essential in our composition classrooms. My students’ testimonies embody the additional benefits of self-compassion for writers including greater feelings of confidence and competence and an increased, intrinsic desire for growth and improvement. Indeed, college students who exhibit self-compassion are found by Roeser and Peck to focus more on their learning and improvement as opposed to their performance in comparison to others. Roeser and Peck discuss how students who have developed self-compassion are more likely to approach setbacks with a positive mindset and to correlate academic failures less with their sense of self-worth. Self-compassion is specifically correlated to students’ understanding of moment-to-moment fluctuations in perception, taught by breathing exercises, and their increasing ability to become aware of habitual responses in order to redirect them, creating “a calm and clear mental context from which to act” (Roeser and Peck 130).

It is this calm and clear context my students describe:

I definitely used breathing exercises to help calm myself down. I get so stressed and generally I use crying as a release for the stress but in this case, it was breathing exercises that helped me to calm down and get my focus back when I got too overwhelmed. I think it worked...only one instance of tears!

And,

I used the breathing exercises to stay calm when things were not coming together as quickly as I planned. I knew that I was on the home stretch of finishing my portfolio so when I went to the library to finish up little things and compile it in the folder I thought it was only going to take me two hours, but it ended up taking me six. I began to get frustrated knowing that I had other stuff I wanted to get done too, but instead of freaking out and getting frustrated like I did in the past I took deep breaths in and tried to stay calm.



Breathing gives my students the ability to override their habitual and negative responses to feelings of stress and anxiety and helps them redirect the energy of their feelings in more positive ways.

Attending to the energy of the breath attunes us to the flow of our emotional states because it requires us to be in the present moment and to judge ourselves less harshly as a result. In the end, increased compassion and mindfulness results in growth. According to another student:

Using the breathing techniques, I think that emotionally, I got a lot more relaxed about writing, and that is growth. To be able to accept something as imperfect because it doesn't have to be perfect yet is growth. To be able to know that you can improve in the future, and to be able to find your own flaws and then smooth them over is growth . . . . Yoga helps to allow me to sit and concentrate and not need to constantly move. It allows me to sit. And write. And put my body into the paper. I can use all my senses to their fullest, and I can use myself and my ideas and my inclinations to truly write a good paper, one that shows my growth.

Acts of emotional flexibility are directly applicable to the writing process and can be learned through the practice of *pranayama*. Appreciating the breath “as it is” while learning to direct its energies toward where we want it to be is pragmatic in the writing classroom, in particular, because it teaches students that they must start where they are. Students who accept the duality of extension and expansion, learned first at the level of their bodies by means of their breath, more easily accept change and are therefore more likely to see writing *as* a process and complete multiple, global revisions. Students who can better cope with ambiguity are more likely to respond productively to their classmates’ opposing viewpoints and may be more open to multiple perspectives in other writings, more accepting of the situatedness of knowledge, and less likely to ignore such complexities in their own writing. Students who are able to use coping strategies with the negative emotions called up by writing will not only spend more time and energy on their writing, but will also take more risks in their writing, leading to increased learning. On the page, the paired actions of extension and expansion represent a fusion of the critical and the creative, which characterizes the most socially viable and personally fulfilling kinds of writing our students—and we—can produce.



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