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Idleness, Diligent Indolence, and Embodiment: Creativity and the Composition  
Classroom  
Lindsay Illich

*It is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top.*

~ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (31).

In 2005, Barbara Tomlinson published the only full-length work in composition scholarship that analyzes what writers have to say about writing processes, *Authors on Writing: Metaphors and Intellectual Labor*, a metaphorical analysis of interviews such as the ones that began appearing in *The Paris Review* in 1953. Tomlinson's work has obvious and applicable value for further studies of writing memoirs by composition scholars, as well as a key limitation. One of her most interesting observations is the identification of a central metaphor for writing, "writing is mining," and the way this metaphor functions to highlight the embodied nature of the act of writing (i.e., the work or labor involved). Pushing up against this metaphor, which is largely a metaphor about the interiority of the writing act, is another system of metaphors, a system Tomlinson calls metaphors of *dynamic discursivity*, such as "the character as co-author" metaphor, which functions to highlight the social nature of the composing process. However, in the concluding chapter, Tomlinson admits that her study focuses almost exclusively on *active* metaphors, i.e., metaphors of *doing*, even though "creativity involves both active and receptive processes" (131). She concludes the book by reporting that even though she has seldom had "experiences of transcribing dictation, working in a trance, receiving the gift of ideas, or being a vehicle for others," that she remains "primed for them" (131). For "inspiration" she keeps on the bulletin board above her writing desk the following excerpt from an interview with Harry Casey

(K.C. from *K.C. and the Sunshine Band*):

"I didn't really write [that song]," KC confesses, eyes wide, his hand running through still damp hair..."Some spirit came over the whole room. I mean, my hands were beyond human control...Like an egg was cracked open and all this music came out." He shakes his head and says quietly, "Something much greater than me wrote 'Shake your Booty.'"(131)

Like KC, many writers affirm similar experiences. If writing were a grammar, some writers feel more like direct objects than agents of their verbs.

If we consider the rhetorical situation of the conventional composition classroom, we can begin to see how its constraints function to impede creativity. Composition is a required or *core curriculum* class consisting of an instructor (sometimes a graduate student, sometimes an adjunct instructor, rarely a seasoned professor or full-time faculty member, at least not in large or high-prestige research universities) and students numbering 15-30, who are usually in one of their first few semesters as college students and usually are taking full loads at the institution (at least 12 hours, although 15 is becoming a new norm for institutions offering a flat rate tuition). Many of these students also participate in extracurricular activities or hold down jobs to supplement their incomes.

Over the course of the 14-16 week semester, students compose 3-5 essays, all of which have specific assignment requirements, including due dates. Sometimes the topics for the essays are given. Sometimes a specific mode is required (narration, example, definition, process, etc). Even though modes have fallen out of favor in composition scholarship, they are still assigned in many programs, especially the high number of programs not directed or staffed by composition specialists. Composition classes are usually smaller than their core curriculum lecture-based counterparts,

and for this reason the classrooms are usually smaller, consisting of individual desks or tables, perhaps computers if the class is taught in a computer classroom. Even on workshop days, however, anyone passing by the classroom could look in and recognize the power structure at play by the design of the classroom: rows of desks facing toward the front, a lectern and chalkboard at the front of the room, perhaps "no food or drink" signs hung neatly on monochromatic walls. In some classrooms, like the ones I taught my first composition class in, the desks were bolted to the floor. From the hallway, you could see the doorways of dozens of identical classrooms stretched out in hive-like fashion around the corner of a building named (appropriately enough for writing classes) Blocker Building.

All of these elements contribute to the overall rhetorical situation of the composition classroom. The exigencies are multi-dimensional: the exigence created by the course's required status, the exigence created by each writing assignment (a *fabricated* exigence that students often comment on when I explain the concept: for example, when I ask what about this issue requires you to address it *now*, a student responded—*because I have a paper to write*). The persons involved, an instructor and students, including their roles and differences in power, are part of the rhetorical situation. After all, instructors issue grades to students, a fact that we as instructors sometimes forget while students never seem to forget it. The location, the classroom, as well as where the students write while they are away from the classroom, are also part of the rhetorically situated classroom, as the work of Nedra Reynolds has shown.

What exactly do I mean by creativity? The term is highly contested, as Wendy Bishop points out in *Keywords in Creative Writing*. Creativity is usually defined along two lines: originality and functionality. Since every writing task or problem has its own set of constraints, every act of composition constitutes an original solution to a

specific problem. Functionality is the aspect of creativity that is impeded by the rhetorical situation of the composition classroom. In terms of functionality, creativity means the creative pose, an attitude that fosters the act of composing. It includes a sense of ownership over what the writer is producing, a heightened level of engagement or motivation, and also the ability to complete a writing assignment to the writers' own satisfaction. In this way, *creative* isn't an antipode of *analytical*. The critical thinking skills that students develop over the course of their education are creative skills: the creative person is someone who applies "a logic, method, or set of techniques to a given domain of expertise" (Simonton 83).

Studies on creativity have identified five steps in the creative process: 1) a period of *preparation*, during which a person is "becoming immersed, consciously or not, in a set of problematic issues that are interesting and arouse curiosity"; 2) a period of *incubation*, "during which ideas churn around below the threshold of consciousness" and "unusual connections are likely to be made"; 3) a moment of *insight* or "Aha!" moment (like the instant Archimedes stepped into the bath and realized the answer to his problem); 4) a period of *evaluation*, during which a person evaluates the importance of the problem; and finally, 5) *elaboration*, which in the case of writing means the execution, the act of writing (Csikszentmihalyi 79). Even though this model has problems similar to the problems of "the writing process" as it has been described by composition scholars (mainly due to the prescriptive nature and linearity of the steps), the steps in the creative process provide useful starting points to discuss the problems with creativity in the composition classroom, especially within the *incubation* mode of the creative process, the most passive of the steps in the creativity model. Specifically, the constraints of the conventional composition classroom work in collusion to *undermine* three aspects of student writers' creativity as described by

writers in writing memoirs, all of which involve *incubation*: the practice of idleness, the practice of *diligent indolence*, and the practice of physical activity or exercise as part of their daily writing practices (in particular rhythmic activities, such as walking).

### **The Practice of Idleness**

The watershed moment for Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* occurred while she was doodling in the British Museum after having given up on discovering a writing topic: "But while I pondered I had unconsciously, in my listlessness, in my desperation, been drawing a picture where I should, like my neighbour, have been writing a conclusion. I had been drawing a face, a figure "(31). She goes on to say: "Drawing pictures was an idle way of finishing an unprofitable morning's work. Yet it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top." (31). Idleness, for Woolf, is the opposite of work; it is time spent aimlessly. Her observation was discovered in idleness not during the systematic approach to her topic using a heuristic system.

Woolf's realization that idleness yields ideas lays bare a contradiction: sometimes you invent when you're thinking and doing something other than *trying* to invent. A writing task is at hand, but it is laid aside mentally. In those idle moments *when you aren't thinking about the writing problem* (like taking a shower), the solution occurs, bubbling up from the depths. Of her own idleness and invention, Annie Dillard writes, "I walked to the water. I played the hateful recorder, washed dishes, drank coffee, stood on a beach log, watched bird," until she could begin writing. The process "could take all morning, or all month" (50). Like Whitmanian loafing, beginning to write sometimes means the writer must *stop* thinking about what needs to be done.

The necessity of idleness described by writers such as Woolf and Dillard corresponds to the period of incubation prescribed in the creativity models. It is the most mysterious part of the creative process, and partly for the mysterious nature of it, is considered the *most* creative of the steps. Csikszentmihalyi refers to the incubation step as a "dark" space because a person usually "does not remember any intermediate conscious mental steps" before arriving at a solution or idea (98). He quotes physicist Freeman Dyson on the relationship between incubation and idleness:

I am fooling around not doing anything, which probably means that this is a creative period, although of course you don't know until afterward. I think that it is very important to be idle. I mean, they always say that Shakespeare was idle between plays. I am not comparing myself to Shakespeare, but people who keep themselves busy all of the time are generally not creative. So I am not ashamed of being idle. (98-99)

Two things are important in this passage. First, busyness is opposed to idleness. Second, the author (a physicist) reveals a bias against idleness through his hedging in the last sentence. The last sentence reflects the cultural bias against idleness. He is saying, look, I know idleness is a pejorative concept, but I can justify idleness if it is in the service of creativity. In other words, the author believes idleness deserves legitimacy.

Here it is important to note that the demands of the composition classroom mirror the demands and values not only of the university but also of the demands and values of our culture (like the ones expressed by Dyson): efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness. Scott McCracken in "Idleness for All," notes that "[a]cademic life is part of a larger culture of work that values visible products and perpetual motion" (65). The student is always doing in the composition class—attending lectures,

studying for tests, writing drafts for papers, workshopping drafts of his or her peers, researching topics, preparing works cited pages, and "reflecting." As a teacher, I feel obligated to pack my syllabus with work because I believe we (the class) have a lot of ground to cover over the course of one semester. I don't want to *waste* any time. I want to see *results*. I want to see drafts, revised drafts, and responsiveness to my comments on students' previous drafts and essays. It is worth noting that Lakoff and Johnson identified the TIME IS MONEY metaphor as a root conceptual metaphor, a metaphor that even I draw on when thinking about things such as course design (*wasting* time in the classroom or *spending* time on a course objective, for example).

The well-intentioned teacher, however, manages to efface the creativity necessary for students of composition when busyness takes over the class. Take, for example, "prewriting activities"—invention strategies or heuristics designed, like brainstorming or thought-mapping, to elicit student responses. Prewriting, which encompasses four of the five steps in the creative process according to creativity studies, is a stage in the writing process similar to every stage of the writing process—*now do x and you will get to step y*. I have never recommended idleness.

Although process pedagogy insists that the writing process is recursive, it does not acknowledge that sometimes a writer must be *passive*. The writer, sometimes, should be *idle*, according to what other writers have to say. However, to suggest idleness to students would reveal the profound artificiality of the composition class: the fake exigencies, the due dates that reflect a university semester calendar (having a few essays graded before the drop date so students can decide whether to stay in the class or withdraw, for example), and the idea that if students attend to the procedures outlined in the writing *process* then a *product* is guaranteed (the final draft of an essay). The draft is due Friday, so hurry up!



## **The Practice of "Diligent Indolence"**

In an essay for the *New York Times Writers on Writing* Series, "Goofing Off While the Muse Recharges," Richard Ford describes his strategy for getting started on a writing project:

I simply choose to do it [writing], often when I can't be persuaded to do anything else; or when a dank feeling of uselessness comes over me, and I'm at a loss and have time on my hands, such as when the World Series is over. I would argue that only in this state of *galvanic repose* am I prepared to address the big subjects great literature requires: the affinities between bliss and bales, etc. (67, emphasis mine)

The phrase "galvanic repose" is key. *Galvanic* is associated with surprise and illumination. *Repose*, on the other hand, is a state of peace. Together, the phrase reflects an attitude of expectant idleness very similar to what John Keats described as *diligent indolence*: "How happy is such a voyage of concentration, what delicious diligent Indolence!" (1). According to Luisa Camaiora, Keats's concept of diligent indolence constituted the creative process. The "indolent mood" wasn't an "absence of reactions," but one in which "the essential factor is a capacity for reception, a receptivity as minute as it is far reaching" (183).

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin compares the "capacity for reception" to the concept of the hunt, specifically the mental attitude of the hunter, the writer (in our case, the modern student, to which he connected his metaphor):

The hunter must know about the hoof of the animal whose trail he is on; he must know the hour when that animal goes to drink; he must know the

course of the river to which it turns, and the location of the ford by which he himself can get across. (80)

In other words, the hunter must be attentive *and* concentrate. The contradiction is possible because the writer can study the animal (the subject matter) and the environmental terrain (the creative process itself); ultimately, however, the hunter must wait: "They are a product of chance, and have about them the essential interminability that distinguishes the preferred obligations of the idler" (Benjamin 802). Appropriately, as McCracken notes, Benjamin "connects the primitive hunter with the modern student" (73).

Allegra Goodman's essay, "Calming the Inner Critic and Getting to Work," another essay in the New York Times series, cites the hunt metaphor as an appropriate illustration of Keats's diligent indolence, and like Benjamin, describes writing as involving both attention and waiting. When the writer faces a block, she advises the writer, "to think and think some more, and then go out and read and look and listen some more," which is where the world is "teeming with life" (71, 74). She admits "no guarantees," but makes a successful hunt far likely if a writer waits where "stories congregate," a nod to the fact that knowledge of the creative process is necessary, one that will only manifest through practice.

Beth Kephart's son, who appears in "As Her Son Creates his Story, a Mother Waits for the Ending," is shown in the middle of his "hunt for a surprise ending" for his story (133). He stalks the yard, "trails" up and down the hallway. Kephart notes the melancholic air of his hunt, a mood Goodman acknowledged in her admonition to writers: "Do not sit and mope" (71). The frustration is the emotive force of the writing hunt which must be embraced, only tempered by the experience of having been on the hunt before, and having been successful, as Kephart reminds herself and her readers,

"when the air carries a scent and through the silence one hears the chitterings of language" and the writing "blows in" (136).

Though none of the writers I analyzed called this part of their creative processes *meditation*, diligent indolence shares with meditation some key attributes. To meditate requires time and a relaxing environment. It requires deep breathing and relaxing one's muscles. Finally, one must be able to simultaneously focus his or her attention while focusing on nothing, a characteristic of meditation that is most like diligent indolence. Keats's "Ode to Indolence" reflects this meditative state:

Ripe was the drowsy hour;  
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
Benumb'd my eyes, my pulse grew less and less,  
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.  
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense  
Unhaunted quite of all—but nothingness.

In other words, the meditative state is one in which a person is relaxed but attentive. The idea of diligent indolence, like Camaiora notes, carries with it the idea of receptivity, of being ready for something to be given, a gift in Lewis Hyde's word. Writing in *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Hyde qualifies the creative work of art: it is "a gift, not a commodity" (xi). Because a gift is given and not earned, an artist "is happy to labor all day with no hope of production, nothing to sell, nothing to show off, just fish thrown back into the sea as soon as they are caught" (148). The gift of the work of art, however, is "lost in self-consciousness":

To count, measure, reckon value, or seek the cause of a thing, is to step outside the circles, to cease being "all of a piece" with the flow of gifts and become, instead one part of the whole reflecting upon another part.

We participate in the esemplastic power of a gift by way of a particular kind of unconsciousness, then: unanalytic, undialectical consciousness.

(152)

Although his book doesn't discuss the *how* of artistic creation, it is clear for Hyde that the creative process requires the kind of "letting go" that is produced by conscious unconsciousness, by diligent indolence. A commodity is produced by labor, but a gift is received with grace.

In the composition classroom, there is no time for thoughtful waiting or hunting for ideas or the inflowing of gifts (as Hyde's and Woolf's river metaphors suggest). In addition to the due dates for essays, there are often intermediate due dates: a day when you must settle on a topic (my students write topic approval memos), a date when an annotated bibliography is due, as well as the date when drafts are due for peer review. All of this is to say: we are driven by the clock and the calendar in composition classes. As much as we preach some version of process, we are all product-model babies, encouraging our students not to wait but to *just do it* in the most commodity-driven, corporate-industrial way.

Also, because composition scholarship has long shied away from expressivism, practices that may foster the creative pose have received little attention from scholars. However, in light of the descriptions of writing by professional creative writers, it seems that at least *some* of the insights provided by the expressivist orientation, especially those that cultivate focused attention, clarity, and a mental if not spiritual practice, need revisiting, such as the dada moment in composition discussed in Geoffrey Sirc's *English Composition as a Happening*. Two rare exceptions that have focused on meditative practices in composition scholarship include James Moffat's "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation" and Donald R. Gallehr's "Wait and the Writing

Will Come: Meditation and the Composing Process," make the connection between writing and meditative practices. In "What is the Sound of No Hand Writing," Gallehr describes the use of secularized Zen koans in his writing classes. Instead of going in depth into meditative practice with students, Gallehr focuses on the "mind clearing, concentration, and holistic or intuitive thinking exercises" that he believes "to be essential habits of mind in any field, including, for example, baseball" (101).

### **Idling Bodies**

The practice of meditation as it is related to the practice of diligent indolence also adds to an understanding of the creative process that is discussed by many writers in essays and memoirs about writing, the relationship of the body (and specifically bodily motion) to invention. While Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* describes the effects of idling through Oxford and its powerful effect on her, experiencing a specific kind of reality that only seems available through walking, other writers such as Annie Dillard and Donald Hall are more specific about their need for the body to be engaged in their writing practices. For them, writing is an embodied practice, bound up with bodily rhythms, momentum, and muscle memory.

The importance of Woolf's ramblings on the roads of Oxbridge and London are part of her exercise of experiencing reality and ultimately, experiencing harmony with nature. Recalling Emerson's mention of a warm October in the opening of the essay "Nature," Woolf recounts a harmonious encounter with nature by walking:

The spirit of peace descended like a cloud from heaven, for if the spirit of peace dwells anywhere, it is in the courts and quadrangles of Oxbridge on a fine October morning. Strolling through those colleges past those ancient halls the roughness of the present seemed smoothed away; the

body seemed contained in a miraculous glass cabinet through which no sound could penetrate, and the mind, freed from any contact with facts (unless one trespassed on the turf again), was at liberty to settle down upon whatever meditation was in harmony with the moment. (6)

Like Emerson's "transparent eyeball," Woolf's body was a "miraculous glass cabinet," having the effect of clearing away all the material obstructions that would prohibit the mind from composing, able in Emerson's words to "see all," a state of mind in which "mean egotism" vanishes. The implication is that the self gets in the way of invention. Her "harmonious" encounter with nature suggests a subjective state, one in which the experience of nature is mediated by the meditative attitude of the writer. She does not claim an objective perception of reality; rather, reality is perceived as a spirit. Rather than staying in one's own room, Woolf is admonishing writers to go out into the world (in this example, on foot) and experience the sounds, sites, and smells that the road has to offer. For Woolf, the idle ramble through nature is beneficial to the writer because of what it has to offer, what the writer can see and experience when they are *on the road*.

For Annie Dillard, the body's energies must be fired in order to write, much like an engine or a rocket. The acceleration or momentum to which she is referring is also illustrated in a story she relates about the writer Charlie Butts, who fakes momentum by creating errands for himself, all in an effort to gain a sense of impetus in which the rush of the body overrides his own self-consciousness about what he's writing (2). Upon returning to his house after errands, he "hurries in the door, and without taking off his coat, sits at a typewriter" and writes until "he notices he is writing and seizes up" (15-16). Dillard's account emphasizes the physicality of the practice of writing, one

not unlike the body performing exercises that require a warm-up period or a car that needs to idle before cruising the highway.

Donald Hall, rather than discussing the methods he uses to gear up for writing, describes the bodily effects of being fully absorbed in the writing process, what he calls *absorbedness*, the state Charlie Butts tries to maintain in order to write. One description of the experience of absorbedness appears in a later chapter of *Life Work* in which Hall describes scythe mowing, an activity during which “one surrenders oneself to the guidance of object and task, where worker and work are one” (86). The “studious sweeping crescent” of scythe mowing “is a rhythmic motion like dancing or lovemaking” during which “the body remembers” in the same way it remembers “riding a bicycle, skiing, casting flies,” a memory that is “ecstatic” (86). It is muscle memory that actuates the loss of identity or presence in a place and the loss of time, like a musician playing a memorized piece of music or a pitcher sending the ball to home plate. Writing, which the mention of lovemaking makes clear, is erotic. It is an embodied practice. Like Peter Elbow, who Hephzibah Roskelly and Katherine J. Ronald note as making this connection between body-ness and writing through his metaphors, Hall concentrates his metaphors “on the mouth, the skin, and the eyes, all sites of emotional, erotic, and physical satisfaction and tension” (215). It is the connection to the mouth that Hall believes is the most overtly physical aspect of writing: “When you write a poem, you’re not hammering out the sounds with a chisel or spreading them with a brush, but you’ve got to *feel* them in your mouth. The act of writing a poem is a bodily act as well as a mental and imaginative act” (*Paris Review* 18).

Another suggestion made by Marianthe Karanikas in “Spiritual Empowerment in the Technical Writing Class,” is an activity that highlights breathing and

concentration through the act of eating, an exercise that writing teacher Renee Gatsis uses. As part of an assignment to write an advertisement and a *Consumer Reports* article, students bring to class their favorite foods. After carefully eating the items, "mindfully, one mouthful at a time," slowly and with deliberate concentration and breathing techniques, being aware of "the experience of biting, tasting, chewing, and swallowing in the moment it happens," students draft descriptions of the foods (164). Karanikas notes that this kind of focused activity "can help students not only to be better negotiators but also to think and write more clearly" (166). Students in composition classrooms are still bodies, still in the sense of inactivity, but also still in the sense that they *are* bodies, rather than an abstracted notion of the body such as in the phrase *student body* (as Crowley mentions). When we ask them to invent, they are still bodies--tired from lack of sleep, some unable to pay attention, and some simply unaware, like I was, of the relationship between the body and the act of composition.

Another consideration that needs to be explored further in scholarship through the lens of body studies is the fact that many of our composition students are newly displaced bodies, meaning that most are in new environments—new cities, a dorm room, a new campus. Many writers discuss the importance of an established place for writing, whether it is the home or home office, a cabin in the woods, or a library carrel. The most important part of the writing place was the level of comfort established by routine, a *habitus*, as Peter Bourdieu described it (see Nedra Reynolds). Many composition students are facing more than just the challenge of writing assignments; they are coming to terms with their own bodies in new places and the establishment of new habits and routines.



## **Conclusion**

Perhaps it may be that teaching writing as a skill means that creativity is effaced. First, the artificiality of exigencies in the writing classroom produces the mechanisms of a metaphoric writing factory where students are machines. Second, teaching writing positions teachers in a role that at least institutionally requires them to claim expert authority in subject matter and teaching methodology, even when the field of composition lacks consensus about best practices (for which it prides itself, in my opinion). But when writers write about their experiences as writers, we see texture and difference. Woolf is not Dillard, and neither is Dillard, Hall. On a given day, Dillard is not Dillard. Their “accountings” of the writing process belie the situated-ness of the writing process, not only the socio-historical situated-ness, but also situated-ness of mental processes and the body. Their work demonstrates a cultivation of idleness as a practice in the composing process, especially practices that foster embodiment and reconnect the body with the composing process. In theory, composition scholars having been working on these ideas for years (Reynolds, Hawhee, Fleckenstein), but embodiment has not materialized as practices that are teachable. Perhaps the best we can do is resist the disciplining of our students’ bodies through calendars and clocks, to share with them the accounts of composing (like the much anthologized “Shitty First Drafts” by Anne Lamott), and to encourage them to cultivate their own practices of mindful idleness.

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