

# INTERCHAPTER ONE: USING “BODY BLOGS” TO EMBODY THE WRITER’S IMAGINATION



I have never heard of the mind-body experience in my life but at this moment I still feel like writing is a brain thing and not a mind-body thing. There are only two things that you need to write: your brain, and a *hand*.

—Student blog response

The first step in developing what I am calling the embodied imagination is encouraging student writers to think of themselves as writing yogis, writers who self-consciously embrace their materiality and approach their writing bodies and the writing process with mindfulness. In the chapter, I explored how we might weave together the contemplative philosophies of yoga with materialist feminism to theorize the presence and domain of writing yogis. In this interchapter, I move theory to practice. What I outline in the following pages is one attempt to get students both to contextualize their writing experiences in terms of their bodies and to conceptualize their bodies as agentive points of mediation between a culture that seeks to mark them in particular ways and a personal, material reality awash with experiences and feelings that can be used to speak back to that culture, particularly through the creation of embodied, situated knowledge. Using a composite account from a series of recent first-year writing courses (referred to here in the singular), I detail the ways feminist contemplative writing pedagogies can make the body visible in the writing classroom and examine the practical consequences of such visibility.

In this course, I developed a double focus on our bodies both as the subject of inquiry and as integral to the writing experience itself. Not only did I want students to investigate the corporeality of the writing process, I also wanted them to imagine the ways they made sense of the world as primarily embodied and, thereby, to complicate their notions of experience and personal knowledge. I hoped that my students would begin to see how their material realities and corporeality helped construct notions of how they understood the world and the ways they created meaning in their writing; I wanted them to become attentive to their fleshiness and to adapt their writing process to admit in elements of feminist

contemplative pedagogy, which is receptive to the student writer as an embodied whole. That is, I hoped students would begin seeing themselves as flexible writing bodies, as writing yogis.

I believed that investigating embodiment as a field of study as well as a lived condition would recursively strengthen these abstract and concrete endeavors, lending a pragmatic balance between the two. An investigation into the importance of our flesh itself represents a cultural and theoretical shift in writing studies, making our once untouchable, unacknowledgeable bodies the focus of the writing classroom in ways that do not seek primarily to textualize them. Instead, the cultural body and lived body are here fused into one, at once complicating our rhetorical notions of reading and writing as well as our field's understanding of "the personal" in ways I related within my last chapter. Claiming the personal *as* the "particular and specific embodiment" (Haraway, 1991c, p. 190) that makes meaning-making possible frees a space in which to think about the material-semiotic entanglement of the fleshy body and the cultural body which come together under the full rubric of embodiment—without essentializing this term or reifying the writing body.

In order to work toward a positive and integrative hermeneutic of corporeality, my first challenge lay in helping students reconnect to their bodies in the classroom, bodies that they had been programmed by years of education to ignore when doing academic work. The opening quote in my epigraph to this chapter humorously yet seriously highlights this learned ignorance by pointing to the irony of my student Nikki's ability to articulate the importance of mind *and* hand to the writing process and yet fail to connect the two. By the time we get them, our students have learned to disconnect their intellectual pursuits from their personal bodies, unless they are in physical education classes where the body cannot and need not be pretended away. From the hard plastic chairs in which they are to sit passively, to the rules students are accustomed to follow prior to their college classes (and even in some classes at this level), such as waiting to use the restroom until after class or not eating during class, students have been cultured to ignore and control their bodies when attending to the development of their minds. Prior to concluding that writing was solely a mental endeavor, Nikki, the student quoted in my epigraph, shared a response in her blog that was telling of how student bodies are endlessly trained to "behave" in educational settings. She noted:

Class is one of those things where my mind is awake (for the most part) and my body just wants to do something, finding the only occasional relief when I raise my hand to answer a

question. My brain is processing the information that is being said in class while my body is like “I want to move around” and normally responds with my foot tapping. Although, by the end of the first class my brain has had enough for the day as my body is excited to finally move.

Here, the primary body expression my student imagines acceptable in the classroom is the docile one of raising her hand. Aside from calling up Foucauldian images of passive bodies, Nikki’s controlled language is telling in the ways it submerges the tug-of-war between body and brain at the same time that it describes it. Her reliance on the “although” that begins the final sentence reproduced in her response belies the ease with which she controls her body, underscoring the involuntary nature of her foot tapping. Also worth note in this response are the action verbs—do, raise, move—that she uses to describe her body even when she is ostensibly telling her reader how her body must remain passive when her mind is “processing information.”

Because her brain soon wears out from this processing, she capitulates to her “excited” body after just one class. Even though her body belies her, Nikki has been so well trained that she concludes in a later blog her belief that writing is a purely mental endeavor—the quote in my epigraph—even though she seems to recognize some unfulfilled link between the mental body and physical body in both responses. First-year composition instructors can easily support these learned views by conducting classes in ways that encourage students’ passive bodies, such as when we don’t spend time openly discussing how our bodies are implicated in the writing and learning process, and when we dismiss the constructive role of the lived body and experience, often a knee-jerk reaction to sidestep the labels “expressivist” and “essentialist.” Even so, there are pedagogical means by which we can recover these losses without trapping ourselves within uncomplicated views of language or culture. I am particularly interested in the ways contemplative writing pedagogy, particularly when informed by feminist principles and practices like yoga, can be such a means. Here, I detail the ways I proceeded with small steps toward that end goal.

To work against this learned reaction to dismiss the body and to begin investigating and valuing embodiment within the context of my class, I constructed a series of “body blogs” that asked students to consider how their bodies were implicated in their writing and learning processes. Known to my students at the start of their blogs were the ways we would eventually build off early writings with a sequenced yoga practice integrated into our class, a practice meant to actualize their initial findings and speculations and to move them toward

non-dualistic notions of the mental body and physical body within the context of the writing process. I explore this integrated practice of yoga and writing in Interchapters Two and Three. The pedagogical reasoning behind these blogs was fairly simple: if ignoring our bodies is learned, then it can be unlearned as my own development as a yogi suggests. Of course, this “unlearning” is a slow and gradual process that students may initially find strange since it flies in the face of their previous relationship to their bodies as learners.

As my course unfolded, I had numerous concerns about how to go about such a process of “unlearning” in ways students would find productive; I did not want them to feel they were simply riding a hobby horse of their teacher’s; I wanted them to find a personal stake in our journey. I was especially worried about students’ negative reactions to a body focused-class. As this experimental course of mine was also a first-year writing requirement for my students, the first of a two-semester sequence at my university, they had no prior knowledge of the course prior to being assigned to my section and were simply placed into my classroom to meet general education requirements. Even if students found themselves drawn to our investigations, I was worried that their interest would wane as they began to discuss their classroom activities with peers and friends enrolled in other writing sections structured around topics and exercises they might view as “safer” or less disruptive of their preconceptions of a composition class. Finally, I was concerned that students would resist sharing information about their bodies, information they might view as private or too personal.

Ultimately, this final fear was baseless, as I have found most students eager to discuss and analyze their bodies—something they hardly get to do reflectively in the context of other courses and, often, in the context of their personal lives. In the latter case, students are often too busy *being* a body to think much about what this means, as I’ve discovered in my conversations with them. As with other invitations to explore the significance of personal experiences, students are often excited to talk about themselves and engage in a discussion that puts their lives in dialogue with our course themes and texts. Nevertheless, I always do put in place safeguards for reluctant students, including making certain blog posts private (shared just to me) and allowing students to discuss bodies other than their own. These individual blogs were supplemented by public posts on our course blog and, of course, collaborative, real-time classroom discussions.

## BODY BLOG PART 1

The only way I felt I could address the first two concerns regarding student resistance to our topic was to plunge in from the very beginning of our class so

as to make the investigation into our bodies a steady element of the course. I introduced the first body blog in the first week of class and explained its importance by tying it to the thematic content of our first unit, “Narrating Bodies.” I planned this unit to introduce embodiment as a legitimate topic of study in the writing classroom. In it, we read works that put in question our ability to narrate our identities outside the framework of our flesh like Shelly Jackson’s *My Body: A Wunderkammer*, Bridget Booher’s *Body Map of My Life*, Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Story of My Body* and Alice Walker’s *Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self*. This unit allowed me to set the stage for our course-long investigation of embodiment and to give greater weight to my students’ individual, course-long blogs; we were simply finding our own ways to document our writing identities, keeping our field of study, writing, in mind and applying the insights of our authors to our own bodies and writing processes.

The first blog asked students to identify their writing selves, to talk about themselves as writers, characterizing their motivations and habits, and asked them to reflect on how they approached writing. Students were to use their answers to begin thinking through how their bodies shaped their writing habits and habitats. Questions I invited my students to consider included: “What kind of environment do you prefer when you write? When do you like to write and in what positions do you put your body? Do you sit up, lie down, eat, play music, watch TV, etc.? What kind of sensory experiences do you have as a writer, and how do you feel as you write? For instance, if you get stressed, do you notice your leg tapping up and down, or do your hands get clammy? How do your body and mind play off of one another as you write? Does your nose seem to pick up all food smells within a mile radius when you write, distracting you? Or do you get so absorbed, you lose the desire to eat?” Because this response was the first step of many toward encouraging my students to think about themselves as writing bodies, I also requested my students venture a few guesses as to *why* they might work in the ways they described and what they thought about our project of investigating the body-mind connection as writers.

As a corollary part to this blog, I asked my students to complete a more general reflection on their writing experiences, both formal and informal. This is a fairly common assignment in our field, but one with which many students, astonishingly, seemed to have little prior experience. Many students commented upon the fact that they had never before been asked to think about themselves as writers. One student summed up the class’ collective surprise by saying, “When given the chance to write about myself as a writer, I was taken aback at first. I’ve never thought about my writing before ... [but] just purposefully did it for school.” Having used versions of this general reflection for years in my writing

classrooms, I was surprised at their collective experience since metacognition is crucial for writing students' improvement since it engages them in setting goals, tracking accomplishments and weaknesses and generally finding a stake in their writing beyond simply earning a passing grade. If nothing else, students' surprise at being asked to reflect on their writing is a reminder that we need to signal why we assign certain kinds of writing; it may be that my students were asked to reflect in previous writing assignments but that the goals and the language of reflection were hidden within the framework of some larger project.

Keeping these aims in mind, this general reflection also asked students what they thought qualified as "good" writing in college, how that might differ from high school expectations, and what their writing goals were for our class. Not only did this standard reflection provide me a sense of my students' previous writing experiences and them a sense of accountability for their learning in my class, but it also gave us a platform for the main part of the assignment. I instructed those students who could not yet answer how their bodies might be implicated in their writing processes to complete this second reflection first, before thinking through part one of the blog. Many students, even those who had made observations about their writing bodies prior to the blog, found this building-block approach helpful as it allowed them a type of "embodied remembering" experience wherein their initial speculations of how they positioned their bodies and the conditions of their preferred material writing environments were triggered, proven and even built upon.

Not surprisingly, the written responses to the first blogs overwhelmingly described writing as an onerous task to be put off for as long as possible. Many described the writing experience as one of procrastination and eventual pain. At this stage, students had a tendency to approach the notion of being a writing body with disbelief. In fact, I noted students' tendency to rely on an adversarial language of battle to describe their attempts of controlling their bodies when writing. The metaphorical usage of battle as a conceptual map for relations between the body and mind itself points to the ways in which the meaning we make is grounded in our material realities as bodies in the world.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, it propels a conceptual dichotomy between the mind and the body, seeing them as warring factions, specifically in that the reasonable mind must dominate the unruly body.

For instance, one student wrote, "My mind knows that I NEED to sit down, focus, and write a paper, but my body is bored (tapping leg) or hungry and they are in constant battle to win me over while writing a paper." Another female student, Jamie, accounts for this "battle" in her blog's figurative language, equating her flesh with the death of her creativity or writing ability: "Writing for me is

solely a mind thing. If I start trying to bring in other senses I'm *done for*, because I automatically get absorbed in whatever sense I'm thinking about and then the writing goes out the window, so to speak. I try not to be aware of the rest of my body while I write because I, clearly, get distracted" (emphasis added). Yet another student describes the way his body betrays him when writing: "I will always get antsy when writing school assignments . . . so assignment papers are a very painful experience. This is why I dread them so much." It seems at this point students are ready to blame the battle wounds that show up in their papers in the form of undeveloped ideas, disorganized structures and wandering sentences on the ways their bodies disrupted the functions of their perfectly capable minds; viewing these as discontinuous allows them to maintain the Cartesian split between their bodies and minds and to construe weakness as an element of the flesh.

Because they did not view their bodies and minds as continuous or as companion composers of meaning, students at this stage had a hard time connecting the details they shared about their composing habits and embodied writing experiences to their understanding of the writing process. As a result, after detailing the ways their bodies move, bounce, channel their mental energy and fidget when they get tired, my students overwhelmingly concluded their responses with statements referencing how their bodies were *not* part of the writing process. For example, the student above, Jamie, who admits she is "done for" if she thinks about her body while writing and claims writing as purely mental expression states in the same blog that when she writes, she "move[s] around a lot. Like now for instance, I am currently rocking my chair back and forth . . . Also when I write I like to hear the click of the keys as I type, I need that auditory sense to be able to type or it just feels weird . . . Also when I write I start bouncing one of my legs." And, it is immediately after this sentence that details her body's energy that Jamie claims, "Writing for me is solely a mind thing." That listening to the clicking keyboard keys means she finds comfort *and* creativity in the sensory experience of the writing process doesn't occur to my student in this response and neither does the ways she obviously channels the rocking and bouncing energy of her body, as synched with her mind, to achieve the goals of her writing session. This lack of corporeal self-awareness is further confirmed when Jamie admits in her conclusion to this blog that she is "hyper aware of other bodies when I write. One of my pet peeves is when somebody is reading over my shoulder while I write or type." Other bodies are even more accessible to Jamie than her own. Writing herself into a similarly complex position, Nikki conceded that the body blog

assignment has allowed me to realize the small things my body does while I am writing. Something that I do when I



write is that my right leg bounces up and down as if it were on a spring board, especially when I get particularly into what I am writing or I am somewhat stumped. Also I tend to hit two of my teeth together when I am thinking about how I am going to structure the next sentence. I'm not sure how to describe what I am feeling when I write, possibly because when I do write it is as if the computer is sucking up all of my emotion (which in most cases is what I want). I get inspired by a lot of things, but one thing that makes me write on a consistent basis is my short temper. I get mad ... extremely mad very quickly and in order to prevent taking it out on some innocent bystander I let my anger out on a piece of paper .... In all honesty before this blog, I have never heard of the mind-body experience in my life but at this moment I still feel like writing is a brain thing and not a mind-body thing. There are only two things that you need to write: your brain, and a hand.

I use the end of this particularly interesting student response as my epigraph to this interchapter precisely because it sums up the contradictory messages these blogs revealed. Students at this stage had plenty to share about their material writing environments and bodily habits but couldn't go so far as to conceptualize or imagine themselves as writing bodies. While she notes the ways her leg bounces and teeth tap together, for instance, Nikki cannot see writing as more than a "brain thing." In short, she, along with her classmates, still found it difficult to claim their embodiment. I chose to include a full version of the above response to show how this was so, even as many of my students seemed to know something fundamental about the workings of embodied narratives, which start at the level of our feelings and emotions. Above, Nikki articulates this felt understanding when she explains how her emotions are a crucial part of the invention stage of writing so that her body literally brings her to the page.

Nikki's response articulates a popular view of emotion as inspiring us to write, even if she cannot yet see how *emotion* is another movement of her body like her chattering teeth and bouncing leg. Hindman claims emotion as a central motivation or "mover" of embodied writing in her article, Making Writing Matter. Hindman, like my student, states that her emotions often propel her to write, taking as case-in-point her sudden and overwhelming anger at hearing her experiences with alcoholism rhetorically-codified and academically-neutralized by conference presenters in ways that denies her embodied experience



of being an alcoholic (2001, p. 103). It is this anger that propels her to write *Making Writing Matter*, a reflection on the embodied nature of writers and the prose they produce. What these professional and student examples together point out to me is that when we tap into our visceral reactions, we can expect to open the door to feeling as well as thinking processes. But unlike Hindman, who has the authority to introduce contrastive readings via her professional position and public writing forum, Nikki does not (perhaps *cannot* just yet) view her emotional or visceral response as necessary, healthy or potentially constructive. Even if writing does allow Nikki to channel her anger from a physical expression of violence, she wishes to be devoid of feeling; she wants the computer to “suck” up all her emotion. While we can easily read the writing process she describes here as embodied, Nikki’s motivation is to feel *less* like a vulnerable body (a liberating move against the tide for Hindman) and *more* like an empty channel, highlighting her wish to control her body as opposed to tapping into it and any accompanying feelings in order to cultivate patient awareness. The comparison between my student and Hindman highlights how, when we view the body as separable from the mind, we take up the cultural baggage that casts the flesh as that which makes us vulnerable instead of that which enables positive action.<sup>9</sup> Contemplative pedagogies, of course, do the opposite: they “addres[s] the whole human being ... [reaching] far beyond the conventional goods of learning such as an informed citizenry or an intelligent workforce” (Zajonc, 2010, p. 90).

## BODY BLOGS PART TWO AND THREE

If the first blogs were to gauge my students’ initial reactions to our investigation of their bodies as central to writing and meaning-making processes, the second and third installments of the body blog were geared toward my attempt to help students work toward an understanding of embodiment in line with those found in Hindman and extended by the feminist writings of Haraway and popular yogic texts like Iyengar’s *Light on Life* and *Light on Yoga* (1965), approachable modern tomes of ancient philosophies updated for modern audiences. Embodiment seen from Haraway’s feminist lens, as earlier stated, is neither about a “fixed location in a reified body” nor about “the body as anything but a blank page for social inscriptions” (Haraway, 1991, pp. 95-197); rather, it is about the relationality and co-constitutionality of the fleshy, material body, a presence whose situated reality cannot be exhausted by discourse, and the semi-otic body, situated and located by means of our discursive mapping practices. Because these mapping practices are constantly changing and our bodies are in

constant flux as with the rest of the material world, embodiment is never static and cannot be essentialized within this feminist-contemplative picture.

Showing the kindred nature of feminist theorizing and yogic philosophies, Iyengar, founder of the yoga method that shares his name, says much the same in his own writing about the dynamism between the individual body and the world. Iyengar states that the lived body cannot be conceived of as separate from the material world, both of which are “constantly changing so that we are always looking at nature from a different viewpoint” (2005, p. 7), as our bodies and environments constantly shift, change and adapt. The body I want my students to claim in and through their blogs, following such ideas, is the lived body, which is understood through material dynamism as connecting us to the larger material world of which we remain, through our flesh, an inextricable part. Embodiment is both a social mapping process, signifying and marking our social interactions, *as well as* a material reality. As a result, experience is a way of naming our embodiment, which can never be fully exhausted by discourse since our bodies retain agency both within and beyond our discursive conventions. These body blogs put these ideas in action as they ask students to think about the ways they experienced their bodies as writers and felt the consequences of both their interiority and exteriority unfolding into and onto each other as so many layers of phyllo dough.

To tap into my students’ existing knowledge of the reality of their lived bodies, I asked them in the second installment of the body blogs to answer the question, “Beyond writing, how do you otherwise express yourself as a body?” I wanted them to think through the daily movements of their bodies and the kinesthetic knowledge their bodies held when viewed through the lens of the activities in which they actively participated. Central to my whole project was getting students to view body expressiveness as tied to critical writing. I explained to students that “activities” within this context could certainly include sports such as running, exercising, playing tennis and could also include such actions as playing instruments, talking nature walks and even primping and prepping our bodies for the day by doing hair, makeup or dressing.

Given that it has only been in the past decade of my own life that I’ve become interested in physical activities like running and yoga, I was keenly aware that some of my students may not be involved in team sports and might, as a result, feel they had nothing about which to write. I wanted to stress that we all have a connection to our bodies and hoped my students would accept my open invitation to take the prompt in the direction they felt adequately addressed their body movements, as uniquely situated as each body from which they sprang. No matter the direction, I asked my students to consider questions

such as, “How does your body express itself in these activities? How do your body and mind work together? Or, how do your thinking and movement fit together in these activities? Can you give specific examples (take time to detail them)? How might your body sometimes lead your mind in those activities (my favorite example here is how we often just drive without thinking and wonder later how we ever got to our destination). You should also think about what have you learned about your body and its expression from these activities. As you re-read your writing here, what have you not thought about before about being an active body-mind that this blog is making you explore?”

Not surprisingly, the most active athletes in the class relished the opportunity to discuss their activities and kinesthetic knowledge for this blog. And what surprised me the most was that so many of my students were involved in university teams as well as intramural sports. Others were similarly committed to playing instruments or continuing activities, such as running or swimming, performed as part of a high school team, which remained a crucial aspect of my students’ identities. Even if they did not compete at the university level on structured teams, my students described their physical activities as central parts of themselves and their weekly schedules. Everyone agreed that this blog was the easiest to write because it was the closest to their daily experiences and allowed them to share bits of themselves that would normally remain hidden in a writing class.

Lacy, a student swimmer showed a great level of proprioception in her second body blog response:

Nothing beats the feeling of my muscles working, pulling deep into the water, propelling me forward. The complete physical aspect of the sport is so enticing to me when my brain feels like it might explode. However, swimming is not only a physical sport, but it is a mental sport as well. Swimmers have to be totally focused, especially in practice. Practice is the time to think about the technicalities of the stroke. “Is my streamline tight enough?” “Are my elbows high enough to catch the maximum amount of water?” “Am I kicking the right distance off the wall to maximize my momentum from the turn?”

For Lacy, the physical strength necessary to succeed at this water sport must be accompanied by a great body awareness, so great that she must rely on her body’s intelligence to maximize her winning potential, which comes down to fractions of a second as she explains later in the same response. Lacy’s description nicely points to the ways she uses a version of the embodied imagination to feel her

body's spatial positioning: only by learning how her arms feel and which muscles tighten can she sense how high her elbows are when she is in the water. Mindfulness of her body and its placement and desires is necessary for her success as a swimmer, and she can only achieve this level of awareness when she sees herself as a whole piece, as body and brain working together to achieve future goals and embrace present realities. Lacy's classmate, Will, a golfer, describes a similar experience of embodied awareness on the green:

I play golf very often, as much as six days a week during the summer weather permitting. My body has the movements of my golf swing deeply engrained. However I often make minor changes or tweaks to my golf swing as needed to improve it or put it back into place if pieces have moved around a bit . . . . Pieces are never in exactly the same place, as many things can affect the way you set up to the ball. And any change in the set up will change the swing. I have found that even the clothes I wear can affect the way I set up. For example, I have discovered that I more easily get into proper set up position if I wear pants compared to when I wear shorts. My theory is that the pants give me the feeling of having a slightly lower center of gravity. But if my body and mind weren't connected, I would never remember from day to day how to hit the ball . . . . I am trying to connect my body and mind in golf more by trying to be better able to visualize my swing and learn to play more by feel and instinct, which is hard to do when you are given all this time to think about what you are going to do before you do it.

This response is exemplary in its detailed description of how this student's body and mind work together when playing golf, which is why I quote it at length. The way Will works toward the importance of visualization for his sport and how he pins the successful expression of his swing on the integration of his physical body and mental body are examples of insights I hoped some students might stumble upon in these blogs. Will not only imagines himself as an integrated whole as a golfer, which will hopefully encourage a transfer of meaning so he will eventually see himself as a writing body, but he also articulates a version of the embodied imagination I proposed in my introduction and expanded in the last chapter.

Will continues to describe his attitude toward change as a competitive golfer on the university team. He notes particularly the ways imagining changes and

differences *as* embodied, as impacted by materiality and rooted in the real, gives him a freedom of expression he cannot capture solely in language:

When making changes [to my swing], I have discovered it's easier to make a visual of the change and feel it compared to trying to put it into words. Our bodies have a harder time interpreting words than images and feelings of movement. But what is maybe the most important thing in golf is making sure your body and mind are aimed at the same target. For example, if your body is aimed the pond, but you are thinking about the green left of the pond, chances are you are going to hit the ball towards the pond .... This really makes me wonder how the mind-body connection is present in all activities.

For Will, the imagination is situated quite literally in the body and impacted by it. As he states, his swing is shaped by his body's positioning, no matter where he hopes the ball will land. In this way, he knows to be sensitive to his flesh and to respect his sport's engagement of *both* his body and mind. Mindless fragmentation of his being is detrimental to his success as a golfer and, he will soon learn, to his effectiveness as a writer. So perceptive about his remarks is his focus on how feelings and sensory images are just as meaningful in the process of his practice as fully-formed verbal thoughts and words. This student is already versed in the ways that imagining ourselves as embodied necessitates an understanding of situated thinking and feeling as mutually constitutive and reinforcing. Will testifies to the ways the body as signifier cannot exhaust the meaning of materiality which exceeds even language.

Of course, not all students' prior experiences lend for such for such easy transfer. For some students, the body-mind connection is much more troubled at first and presents a confusing paradox. Caleb states that

[As a musician and guitarist] I guess I can never really be one hundred percent certain if it is in fact my mind telling my body what to do because sometimes I feel like my body has a mind of its own. Wow, I find it ironic the way I just worded that because it seems to have disproved my point. Everything is much more complicated than people would think things to be .... When I hear a song I log it mentally in my head and then I pick up my guitar and start playing. Sure, it takes a few tries for me to get a song down correctly, but I learn to play it pretty fast and I haven't forgotten a song that

I learned yet. My fingers just happen to go to the right place at the right time and it works. I think it's something that happens unconsciously at first, and then I realize what is going on and I work with it.

Caleb, a guitarist, understands on a felt level that his body is at work in his learning to play new songs, as his “fingers just happen to go to the right place,” but he still seems disconnected from the process. While he might recognize his body as an epistemic origin, he doesn't have the conceptual maps to understand how this might work, likely because our learning culture often doesn't provide these. As a result, Caleb “feel[s] like [his] body has a mind of its own,” and he says he doesn't understand this mind—even when he follows it after a while, after realizing “what is going on” as his fingers move on his guitar strings. This description is fascinating for its revelation of how much body awareness and attentiveness to his corporeal orientation could help Caleb unify his fingers' energy and intelligence with his mind's desire to learn a new song. With mindfulness of his body, Caleb might be able to understand the playing of music and the composing of writing from a new, contemplative and visceral perspective. And this might help him appreciate why his body moves in unpredictable ways at times:

Unfortunately, I feel like the body, even though it is connected to the mind, acts on its own sometimes. I think that some of the time the body reacts to things before the mind comprehends what is going on. For example, when I'm bored in a class or in anything my body shows that boredom even when my brain knows that I shouldn't be slouching or anything. My body moves on its own even if I tell it not to and to pay attention. Things happen that I can't control sometimes .... [My body] moves in ways that I can't understand, yet it also helps me in my music and in other areas. Having the two connected is better than having them as separates.

Caleb's continued meditation on the body reminds me of the first lessons I learned in my yoga classes about respecting the body by asking less for control over it. Exchanging connection for control helps us to channel the body's energies in pleasing and productive ways, eliminating the frustration we might otherwise feel. While Caleb knows such connection is ideal from his experiences playing, he is unsure how to facilitate it and sees his body as disruptive in more formal learning environments, beyond the limits of his control. Of course, we

may begin to wonder if this is more a result of restrictive learning environments that are not guided by embodied-contemplative educational principles which would have students learning how meaning is made with and through the body, by focusing its energies.

After asking for the first two blogs and noting in my students' responses equal measures of understanding and confusion, I then asked students to bring together any insights they might have made in the process of completing this assignment and to forward any interesting, new questions, bringing both to bear on their writing. The third body blog's guiding question was, "How can you become a better writing by using body-mind skill sets you already have?" I explained to students that the blogs were meant to get them thinking about how their bodies might play a larger part in our thinking and expression than we normally realize. By building off the last set of responses, I wanted them to analyze the irony of imagining themselves as bodies during certain activities in which they were encouraged to see themselves of a whole, integrated piece but not during others, such as writing.

I didn't want students to begin to reify their bodies or account for every movement in the writing process as bodily; rather, I wanted them to discover the agency of their writing bodies in partnership to their minds, to see their intelligence as a union of both. In all, the final blog entry asked students to reflect on the ways the body and the mind are connected in interesting, inter-related and interdependent ways. Building on the guiding question, the full, detailed description for this blog read: "To finish your final installment, bring your insights from the first two blogs together. Read them over and revisit your thoughts and feelings. Discuss your initial responses in the first two installments. Anything you'd change now? Any new insights you'd like to bring to bear on them? Think specifically about the body-mind awareness you may have discussed in blog two in terms of your physical activities. How could you draw on this awareness to become a better writer? Can you apply some of the same techniques, say, that make you a good swimmer or baseball player, etc., to your writing process? Be specific and give examples/details. Can you learn anything about listening to your body as you write, either metaphorically (ie., in terms of calling upon personal experiences in essays) or literally (ie., in terms of endurance)? How you might bring more awareness to the process of writing? What parallels can you make? Where do the two not seem to fit? Where are there tensions and why might they exist? What may you realize now that you've completed the body blog that you didn't before?"

An overriding theme in students' responses to this final comparison of body blog installations one and two is that of body appreciation and a budding corporeal awareness. To quote Nikki, the student I open this interchapter with, is



to echo the rest: “I always believed in the concept of the body being far less important than the mind. But after some thought about the subject, I have come to the realization that the body and mind are equally as important in making up an individual ... and that affects my writing.” That these blogs helped students like Nikki begin to think of themselves holistically, as one piece, was crucial in their beginning learning process for our class. Not only would they appreciate the lessons of our units on disability, eating, body image and identity more from this point on, but they would now be ready to investigate the physicality of the writing process through other embodied acts such as yoga. While obviously not the final step in accepting themselves as writing bodies, my students were now questioning the ways they saw writing as “mind work” and why they divided this kind of work from body work. They began to wonder with renewed appreciation the ways their other classes locked their bodies out. And, they began to inquire how this new knowledge could change their experiences of the writing process and the ways they approached writing assignments from this point onward.

For instance, Lacey, the swimmer, found new meaning in the drafting process; for her, understanding her writing body as a viable player in the meaning-making process meant respecting the ways that body-based skills take time to develop. She notes, “I really think that now I should begin my assignments when I get them assigned because I feel that I will now need to revise many of my papers and writings before they are due and that time is limited if I begin the assignment the day or night before.” Instead of procrastination, Lacey believes she should start to apply her “swimming stamina of being able to be focused on one goal” even when the finish line is nowhere in sight because her “body is at stake.” Given that we all want our students to spend more time and effort in their writing and to take their drafts through multiple, global revisions, this is an important discovery this student may not have made if she weren’t invited to apply the body skills and knowledge she already has to the writing process, helping her begin a process of demystification that encouraged motivation. Not to be overlooked is the way reconceptualizing the writing process as visceral helps such students actively engage their bodies in it rather than trying to ignore them, which may prove to be distracting. Because she had previously conceptualized writing as a process distinct from swimming, Lacy noted, in fact, that when “normally when engaged in writing, my body is tired and bored.” Learning to respect her body and investigate why it was bored (in part because it was ignored) helped this student create new writing rituals that resulted in less painful writing sessions and recognize the need to give himself ample time for writing breaks, cutting through her habitual procrastination.

This student notes that using this “swimming stamina” will allow her to apply

a new measure of focus to her writing as well. Lacy states, “That way when I write I am only focused on the subject of the paper and not who is on Facebook or who just texted me. For example during a swim race I rarely ever think about anything except my stroke, turns, and winning the race or beating my most current time.” Noting as well the overwhelming nature of being constantly surrounded by technological distractions as he wrote, another student, Steve, agreed that he learned through the blogs that slowing down his writing process would help promote focus and increase the quality of his writing in turn. Steve claimed he could apply lessons of focus and interconnection to his writing, drawn from his experiences playing baseball. Steve reflects,

One principle I can maybe apply to better my writing is to slow down. As I mentioned in my earlier blog, when I’m playing well in baseball (or any other sport for that matter), everything seems to slow down for me. I feel like I have more time to react, and therefore am able to better affect my results . . . . If I were somehow able to slow my mind down and pick what minor details are important, while maintaining focus on the larger issue, I feel like I could improve my writing significantly. Often I am too straight to the point, and I rush to get down my ideas and prove my thesis. I need to slow things down, like I do in baseball, and put some of the smaller things that I admire into my writing.

Steve might be hinting at the ways our minds and bodies work together in what has been called physiological coherence. In activities like sports and many disciplines of contemplation like meditation, the body, heart, brain and nervous system synchronize with one another, which can lead to improved attention often perceived as a slowing down of time and described as being “in the zone.” At these times of body-mind harmony, students may experience increased performance and a decrease of stress and anxiety because of a “regular heart rhythm, decreased sympathetic nervous system activation and increased parasympathetic activity and increased heart-brain synchronized (the brain’s alpha rhythms becomes more synchronized to the heartbeat) (Schooner & Kelso, 1988; Tiller, McCraty & Atkinson, 1996; quoted in Hart, 2004, p. 31).<sup>10</sup> This knowledge can be applied to the reverse as well. That is, when students don’t feel this kind of physiological coherence, they might take a writing break in order to later return to the writing process later with a refocused mind—a valuable lesson. Mary vocalized this insight: “When you write, you can also listen to your body by learning when you’re tired. Writing when your body and brain are tired is a

waste because your work will come out sloppy and rushed. When I write and become tired or sick of writing, my hand or foot will begin to tap. If I know my body well enough, I can take this as a sign to take a break and finish my writing at another time.” This is a lesson of learning to work *with* as opposed to attempting to overwrite the body’s intelligence and of being mindful of our embodied feelings in the present moment, which is the practice of mindfulness. In their movement toward imagining themselves as writing bodies, students work toward more reflective and less reflexive understandings and negotiations of the writing process.

Finally, some students noted that their bodies could become sources of inspiration and energy for the writing process, drawing off the idea that the physical writing body can provide shape to writing through feeling and the motivation to write. Jamie, challenging her previous belief that her body has no place in her writing so that to accommodate it would surely “do her in” noted, “Often times when you are assigned a writing assignment about an event in your life, you need just look at your scars for reminders on what to write about.” In her later blogs, Jamie became interested in the ways emotion could be seen as a link to the invention state of writing, giving her an impetus to write: “In addition, I could also draw on the energy I get when I am feeling upset, angry, or stressed into writing. I would normally take this energy into a physical activity and feel like I could achieve the impossible because my mind just went through the motions of the activity ... my body goes hand in hand with my emotions.” It is no coincidence that students like Jamie are articulating a premise of contemplative pedagogy, or the need to respect the visceral nature of feeling and the ways the heart can be a bridge to the mind and body.

While more a start than an end, these body blogs asked students to investigate seriously their writing identities and personas as necessarily embodied. They gave my students a foundational understanding of what it means to write aware of both body and mind and how a focus on self-examination and awareness can help increase their productivity and enjoyment of the writing process. As students crossed the threshold of knowing they *have* a body to becoming aware of *how* that body impacts the meaning they make in their writing, they made adjustments to their writing processes in order to respect their flesh. They began seeing themselves as writing yogis who enacted the principles of the embodied imagination.

## BODY BLOGS IN CONTEXT

Through their body blogs, my students began their journey to take on new understandings of themselves as writing yogis. To further exercise their embod-

ied imaginations, we also read articles that acknowledged the importance of incorporating embodied experience as evidence into our writing, a common feature of contemplative learning which adds attention to personal presence and social transformation along with subject matter knowledge and rational empiricism. For example, we read Linda Brodkey's *Writing on the Bias* to talk about how our writing is "biased" by our experiences and ideas even when we don't use the word, "I," directly. Brodkey becomes a way for students to understand the basics of situated knowledge, or the ways their social and material locatedness shapes the meaning they write themselves to. She also helps me frame these lessons for transfer, so students understand that what they are learning in my classroom are lessons about the situatedness of knowledge claims and, therefore, of writing. They begin to understand that there is something fundamental about these ways of thinking about knowledge in all their classes across the many discourse communities they must join as students—even if stylistic functions of writing (as a means to build knowledge) acceptable in my class are not similarly so in their science or engineering classes. Putting Brodkey in play with our own quest to unveil the physical aspects of writing helps them see how the body becomes a marker for the personal in their writings. Because they've often questioned the ability to gain authority in their writing by simply leaving out personal markers like, "in my opinion" or first-person pronouns, generally, my students relate to Brodkey:

Brodkey wants her reader to see that ... sometimes the rules [of academic writing] need to be broken. I began to think about how much this was true, that it is important to deviate sometimes in order to explore new terrain to not only be successful in writing but in other aspects of life as well .... I have had a very successful golfing career because I broke some of the rules, tried new things, and was able to learn from them—and this [risk-taking] was the main reason in my growing as a writer this semester.

The personal and the body collide and mingle in this response. Students, as this example shows, begin to apply their knowledge of other body skills to the writing process, giving them a store of information based on the physical skills they import into my class, like golf. When put into embodied dialogue with what they know and love, suddenly writing becomes a physical process much like their other activities, allowing this student, in particular, to apply the lessons of risk-taking she originally learned on the green to her writing process and the meaning it generates. The degree to which this kind of transfer makes writing

more accessible for our students cannot be overstated. Either can the ways my student insists on developing a habit of taking risks because of this transfer, which opens her up for failure but also for greater success.

To advance these insights, we read articles by Nancy Sommers on how writing can happen while “standing,” away from the computer,<sup>11</sup> while cooking or completing other daily tasks. Writing doesn’t just move us, it moves, my students learn as they open and expand their definitions of the writing process to include the body. These articles make writing seem real to my students because they help demystify the process. The myth of sitting down to a computer allowing words to spill out from the fountain of genius is challenged, and students seem relieved. Despite the fact that the myth has never been the reality of their writing experiences to date, they often import these whimsical views of writing to my class. Anne Lamott’s (2005) *Shitty First Drafts* helps to break this stereotype too. And, Natalie Goldberg’s discussion of freewriting in *Writing Down the Bones* (2005) as a way to get your body to convince your mind to generate ideas helps students realize they don’t have to wait for their minds to do the leading; that their bodies can help them reach their writing goals too. We also read Joanne Cavanaugh Simpson’s anthologized article, *Multitasking State of Mind* (2009), which suggests that college teachers must help students learn to overcome the multitasking minds they’ve had no choice but to develop in our technologically-demanding world. The article looks for possible tools to achieve a transformation of mindless students into mindful ones and ends with the idea that bringing in a yoga teacher to our classrooms might be a good place to start. I tell my students that is exactly what we are going to do, of course. By this time, students are generally intrigued and ready to experiment with yoga—even if they are still nervous. In the next two interchapters, I explore how I introduce students to a yoga-writing practice, scaffolded by our body blogs. In the following chapter, I take time to explore first why feminist contemplative pedagogies give meaning to students’ explorations of embodiment in ways other pedagogies cannot as fruitfully explain or uphold.