

How Students Experience Academic Writing: Mindfulness in the Composition Classroom

RESEARCH PROBLEM

This study is interested in the problem the academy faces in required, lower-division writing courses, where many students have negative feelings about academic writing. The recent movement to bring mindfulness into the composition classroom has indicated improved student writing, but how can it affect the way students *think* about writing? This unconsidered facet leads to an important question: How do students experience academic writing when contemplative practices are implemented into lower-division writing courses? To approach this question, I am currently integrating mindfulness exercises into my first-year composition course, with the intent to conduct a phenomenological qualitative inquiry to understand students' experiences in such a course.

"I do not feel very good about my own academic writing... because I find it difficult to be engaged in my writing. Overall I really dislike writing..."

"I really do not enjoy academic writing...so my heart isn't in the writing..."



RESEARCH DESIGN

I am currently piloting the following contemplative curriculum in my first-year composition course.

Reflective Reading

Mindful reading, according to Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, entails "quiet reflection, which requires mindful attentiveness, a letting go of distracting thoughts and opinions to be fully in the moment with the text. It requires patient receptivity and an intention to go further, and it moves the reader into a calm awareness, allowing a more profound experience and understanding" (*Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*, p. 113). This reflective reading may produce more effective writing, as Matthew Parfitt explains, "To respond to a text in a meaningful way, a writer must first listen carefully to what the text is saying" (*Writing in Response*, p. 21). For the initial reading of each major text, I ask my students to practice this reflective reading in class. When they are finished, I then ask them to write a reflection of what they understood and how they felt about the text. Exercising this mindful reading allows for a deeper understanding of the text, hopefully leading to improved writing and a more valuable student experience.

"My initial [reflective] reading of Carr's text...did affect the way I feel about writing this second essay...I felt like I understood it."

Reflective Writing & Freewriting

These contemplative writing practices allow students to benefit from the following capacities: "seeing and hearing things as they are, bearing witness to life; being in the moment, even when remembering the past or imagining the future; no[t] judging others and oneself yet exercising discriminating wisdom; holding multiple perspectives while being open to the new; and practicing kindness, compassion, and patience" (Barbezat & Bush, p. 123). These are all attributes that not only enable good writing, but can also harbor valuable writing experiences. The reflective writings ask students to write personal reflections concerning their experiences and feelings about writing, and they usually begin with a brief prompt. I ask my students to compose a writing reflection at the beginning of almost every class, and these responses are used as data for this research project (as seen in this poster's pull quotes). The freewriting exercise is not

"I think that the reflective writings have helped [me] be more real in my writing. Before I would write things that I thought are what the teacher wanted, but now I'm more real with myself and what I write."

unique to contemplative pedagogy. Rather, it finds its roots in expressivist theory. Popularized by Peter Elbow, freewriting entails writing whatever comes to mind, without stopping, for a set period of time (*Writing Without Teachers*, p. 3). I ask my students to use this prewriting technique in class during the drafting process. Both practices provide a way for students to alleviate stress, apathy, and self-criticism about their writing.

"My experience with reflective writing and freewriting so far this semester...has made me feel that writing is more important. I feel I write more positively..."

Writing Meditation Workshop

This mindful writing practice asks students to meditate with the focus of the writing task at hand. This may allow students to connect with what they are writing, become aware of their writing thoughts, and be receptive to their own feedback. According to Barbezat and Bush, "Meditation before, during, and after writing sessions can develop a healthy relationship with thoughts, so that the student becomes aware of a thought rather than identified with it, attached to it. Once identified with the thought ('My thought!'), the student has a hard time letting go of it or modifying it, whereas awareness of thought ('How interesting—a thought is arising') creates space around the thought in which to critique it and then to develop it, use it, or let it go" (pp. 123-4). I ask students to participate in this writing meditation workshop the day they submit their second rough draft. First, I guide my students through a mindful breathing meditation, ending the meditation with an invitation to set an intention for their writing process. Next, I ask them to release their intention and mindfully review their draft. I then ask them to return to their intention to deliberately review their draft. Finally, they are encouraged to reflect upon their writing meditation. The hope is that this workshop allows students to create awareness through mindful breathing, mindfully review their draft to be receptive to their feedback as it emerges, and intentionally read through their draft with a writing goal in mind for revision.

"The [writing] meditation...surprisingly helped. It brought me to a calm enough level to actually want to write and work on my essay."

"I found this [writing meditation] to be very helpful...When you read your essay in general, you get overwhelmed with what to change and with what not to change. Having a specific intention though was much easier and productive."

PRESENT DISCOVERIES

As this semester-long study has only been in progress for six weeks, I have not yet collected enough data to reach any solid conclusions about whether the mindfulness practices in my class have affected the way my students experience academic writing. However, thus far in my research, I have received mostly positive feedback from my students. As can be seen in the data (illustrated in the pull quotes), my students are receptive to the contemplative practices they have engaged in so far, and I am noticing an increase in positive student attitudes regarding academic writing. However, the reflective readings are not receiving as positive of a response as I had hoped, so I may need to reconsider my approach for that practice.

"[Meditation] makes you feel positive and at peace. I found it helpful because I wasn't looking at all the negative things but instead looking at [my writing] as a whole."

POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE

It is crucial to acknowledge students' attitudes toward writing, just as it is important to address students' writing capabilities. However, this issue is often left undiscussed because those in the field of composition studies are mostly concerned with improving student writing skills. But, what good is a student who can write well if he or she does not enjoy, or has a negative view of, writing? Furthermore, how can a student be expected to improve his or her writing abilities when he or she holds such an attitude toward the subject? Thus, it is important to observe students' attitudes toward academic writing, in hopes that the stigma may be diminished.

"Mindfulness and meditation both...embody the same...idea...about taking control of your mind in a healthy way in order to use it to its fullest ability."

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES

An anticipated outcome of this study may be further acceptance of contemplative practices in the field of composition. Furthermore, the possibility of its integration into lower-division writing courses, as supplementary to the official pedagogical philosophies of the university, may be considered. Lastly, a call to teachers to implement and assess contemplative pedagogical practices in their own classes, via qualitative teacher inquiry, may be beneficial for further consideration of bridging contemplation and composition. The ultimate hope is that students may come to understand, appreciate, and feel at ease with academic writing.