

Performing Embodied Pedagogy: Listening to the Small Talk of My Injured Back

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Abstract

My poetic inquiry contemplates possible exchanges between educator and learner in a writing intensive university course designed to invite collaborative co-authoring of embodied, emotive, and informed reflective responses to ongoing life narratives and histories expressed/performed. I intend to open up my inclusive learning environment to feelings of belonging, a shared “performance of place,” (Kaye, 2000, p. 3) that supports risk-full exploration of embodied texts like those living in and expressing through the small talk of my injured back. I challenge self-made definitions of educator, learner, and researcher in dedication to critical, informed, contemplative practices around sometimes unexpected, multidisciplinary, transmediated places of embodied expression and emergent pedagogy.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; embodiment; multiliteracy; reflective practices

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I demonstrate my method of narrative inquiry by describing my embodied responses as I approach a new class of undergraduate students, future teachers. I critically reflect on my self-definitions of aesthetic expresser and educator through description of pre-performance postures and I listen to and learn from disquieting, embodied texts living in the small talk of my injured back. I continue my self-reflection as I describe a demonstration of my arts performance for my students, a video of my arts performance at an international conference that I introduce by playing a flute solo. As the video begins, my solo becomes a duet with myself shared in mutual spaces of learning. I invite students to be aware of possible audience/participant collaboration in our writing intensive course, exchanges of informed content, emotive, reflective responses to ongoing narratives of lives lived and histories expressed/performed. My goal is to elicit mutual feelings of belonging to an inclusive community that supports vulnerable expression with non-judgmental potential visceral reflection, embodied sense of place that may inform self-perceptions of educator and aesthetic expresser. Student narratives emerge from collaboration with drafts born from reflective responses to class texts, literature assignments, peer reviews, and instructor feedback, life-storytelling in multidisciplinary interpretations of dynamic themes that require students to explore places of vulnerability and risk. This type of collaboration sustains what Bakhtin (1929/1984) describes as “hidden dialogicality,” where “each present, uttered word responds and reacts with its every fibre to the invisible speaker, points to something outside itself, beyond its own limits, to the unspoken words of another person” (p. 197). Through poetic inquiry, I seek and critically consider the unspoken, visceral, pedagogy that negotiates and sustains my students’ emergent corporeal narrative histories through transformative interpretations and re-interpretations of multidisciplinary, arts-based expression.

My spine sighs with every step forward
a lower vertebrae speaks to me in familiar places
between fear and exhilaration
I sense an audience suspended
between silence
and
potential sound in my pre-performance preparation



Muscle-tugged to stillness

I breathe deeply in acceptance of my embodied discomfort

my inquiry of disruption

to the obvious, the expected, like a flutist preparing for a well-known solo

and the audience expecting a certain sound

I reach to my audience

to provoke sense of inclusion to sounds

silence

and embodied interpretation of possible pedagogy through my need to share with my new students my art(s) performance to encourage fluidity between performer and audience, to provoke participation, to question intentions, expectations, and interpretations not only of my sound but also of what they might voice in response. As in Cox's (2001) interpretation, "we normally imagine (most often unconsciously) what it is like to make the sounds we are hearing" (p. 205).

I review my purpose

through an already questioning body

anticipating forward motion towards audience exchange, inclusion

as invitation to embodied listening, new ways of voicing

Cox (2001) suggests this interpretation is more than mimetic, rather metaphorical, or suggestive of his or her own experiences with embodied perceptions that as Cox contends do not "belong to a single mode of physical experience" (p. 204).

I count my inhalation, which I send as aesthetically framed comfort to strains of shaped pain:

Breath yang in 1, 2, 3—hold to feel, open access to tightness from vertebrae to sacrum,

contentious space between pelvis and hip... and slowly exhale to 4, 3, 2, 1

Find natural breathing

I am my perfect self, the yogi says, life is breath and breath is life...

I invite life to my pressing heart and exhale tranquility into my pulsing hip
pressing...

Intension is change, I hear the yogi say.

In-tension, I observe my performative mode sink into familiar postures of the past, of sensitivity to other's energies, back straight, flute in hand, orchestra members all around tense with expectation, shallow breathing, waiting for the conductor's entrance.



I force focus to here and now, to my imminent introduction as instructor for a university writing intensive course. I do not find tranquility in my concentrated breathing when I pause before approaching the fusion and confusion in chat, chatter of students who arrive at my course between practicum semesters, high school English teachers-to-be. I search inward to my body's invitation to take on history of my professional development since my teacher training, strategies that support a corporeal knowing of developing and emerging postures in contemplative practices.

Be still, the yogi says, and in stillness there is wakefulness. In rest, there is rest-oration

I shift vision to students standing in groups with torsos bent forward, backs arched, legs tight-straight carrying their excited exchanges about their teaching practicum.

I am awake
 to the pulse of this group of students
 the pulse of my corporeal history of injury, retraining, and re-positioning
 Inhaling in and around my ever increasing heartbeat
 Slow down
 Meaningful inhalation
 Seek deep listening with/in
 and with/out...
 I shift my bag's weight to fascia
 heavily knotted below my shoulder
 to open paradox of my embodied purpose
 where I am headed with places
 of interpretation and re-interpretation...and for these students...I hear my yogi self

Yoga is release of effort, expectation, efficiency, excellence.

My focus in on my left nostril and I feel warm air stroke my left nasal passage, fill my heart dome of energy and I visualize calm behind my heart to the soft protection between vertebrae. I want to re-form my fascia that could rest rigid preventing flexibility and alignment to gentle step into rhythms of my musician's body and this pulsating community of energies.

I move into five fused bones of my sacrum,
perfectly formed as no other's
perfectly tuned as no other's
sound-solid base of my spine
With re-vision I transform past sudden moments
of impact, harsh intrusion of metal and plastic
crashes of place and pace, car, care
speed, mistakes
softened memory, pliable shifts like gears, like keys
and I feel tonality regenerate in meditation and mediation
trans-mediation accepting places and spaces where I trust
my body's narratives in vividness to feel through performance
beyond judgement as my musician self to potential sound
my photographer's reinterpretation of shutter speeds sensing sun shifts
to perform again in a lens of embodied modulation
from key of E minor
E for effort
to A major



“A” for acceptance, awareness, alive-ness...my body's alignment

Our aesthetically sensitive environment, the shared places of acoustic sensation invites inquiry for both myself and my students in that “we are still, through perception and self-awareness, part of a single sonic environment” (Corness, 2008, p. 22). With that in mind, I share and encourage avenues of expression through acts of trans-mediation that invite multi-disciplinary textual expression through layers of arts genres. Coles and Barrell (as cited in James, Dobson, & Leggo,

2013) describe this approach for students as, “the power to allow them to look directly at one art form and try to capture its essence through the use of another”(p. 111). I demonstrate and elicit visceral responses to the preset-shared environment and potential embodied interpretation of personal history that evokes portals of critically considered pedagogy.

I think of a former student.

Her body moves through acoustic chaos
 long brown hair distorting tonality, concealing clear vision
 She looks sideways at me, a student defiantly shy
 I feel rhythm of humility confused with disappointment
 She is a professional photographer and will miss classes for work
 Suddenly in potential re-visioning, she becomes a tall, vibrant artist
 hair tied back to allow settling of sound, clarity of face-to-face exchange
 eyes aware, open and ready to mediate her artistry
 I suggest trans-mediation
 of photography and narrative to embrace her passion through words
 Embrace your art in expanded concepts of literary inquiry
 spilling over arts, connect your imagery in ways that make sense to you
 like flexible definitions of multi-literacy
 in descriptive, emotive language embodied
 in strong stance
 Reinterpret your narrative processes
 Well-observed, deeply felt, performed

My former student, the photographer/English teacher-to-be, carefully prepared well-oiled class photography slide show presentations as she stiffly, quietly, and cautiously formed narratives of distant and lonely description. Her passion like her self-defined identity as photographer/educator required care and attention, a reaching-through to words and feelings, synchronicity, embodied struggle to press in and through aesthetic posturing, intimate photographic art story-ing. Her posture was far from malleable and was slow to re-form, re-join, re-joy-s. I was committed to listen deeply and to provide feedback on drafts that invited my student to fall into her art and feel visceral responses that matter. I remind myself that deep listening de-limits expectation and judgment in aesthetic exchange and with care softens delineating borders within us and between inquiring voices of artist and educator. Snowber, a dancer and educator, suggests, “Listening to the underside of what is happening in a student’s life is a sacred act, one that must take form in the soil of mindfulness and loving kindness” (Richmond & Snowber, 2009, p. 4). My student finally shared a series of photographs of a friend who was seriously ill. Risk-full, she performed through a different type of aliveness. Form and design shifted from the obvious to the subtle, tonality was polyphonic in small details of a smile with shadows teasing light across a hospital bed. Richmond & Snowber (2009) write,

The gift of art in life is that it arrests me to pay attention to nuances and feelings that I may never have perceived, whether that is the resonances in poetic language or the colours of auburn and burgundy in a painting. Art awakens me, and once again, I am startled into the beauty of being alive. (p. 4)



Sound, voice, feeling, and thoughtful interpretation fused through layers of meaning in my student's narratives and with several script revisions, my feedback, and peer reviews, my student began to express through awareness of the textuality of her stories. Photo after photo she felt openings to perform her passion in textual depths, new postures sustained through images of embodied love. As Leggo (as cited in James, Dobson, & Leggo, 2013) suggests, "We are awash in a sea of textuality...where we try to tame the wildness of language" (p. 181). I facilitate re-visioning, re-hearing of possible emotive yet critically informed venues of commitment and vigilance to live and relive, perform, and perform again texts of pedagogy that influence teaching practice. Like Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I suggest this type of narrative inquiry evokes pedagogy and is both content to be analyzed and method to study.

At the doorstep to my new teaching assignment, at the foyer of my next performance, I feel acoustics of my audience through sound and movement and listen more with/in my embodied story before I ask others to access their spaces of contemplation. I refocus my inhalation to deep chest pulse, I visualize light in my heart centre and behind, and follow crackling electric release down my spine to my chakra of creativity, of prana, and exhale heart-tempo with my intention to share, to commit to my belief that pedagogy embodies performance and performance embodies and sustains pedagogy.

Healing is not performance, the yogi says, and I breathe between nodules that protect from chat, chatter of my vertebrae, and I invite sharing of our communal source of breath, invite co- opening

Before I introduce my musician self to my new students, I feel, as in moments before a solo, full depths of my intention

meet pulse of my heart centre to solid spine base

merge exhilaration with total orchestral ambience

and, suddenly fearful, I forget to count before my entrance. I panic and look for a cue.... I feel beyond the university doorframe and find direction from rhythms in excited voices laced with anticipation and expectation. I want to be back in the orchestra and suddenly hear a sweet

resonance beyond single sound, a solo in synchronicity of tone and pulse penetrating all players' timbre. I want to realize suddenly the soloist in perfect harmony... is me.

I am my perfect self, the yogi says, life is breath and breath is life (I invite life to my pressing heart and exhale rhizome tranquility to irascible small talk of my back)

Intension is change, I hear the yogi say.

I prepare in stillness and wait for a moment, a perfect way through discomfort in this new space to reach towards possibilities that teaching as performance includes audience synchronicity.

I wait.

Students glance at me and smile. I am already smiling, sensing synchronicity, and I raise my eyebrows and feel the invisible string at the base of my neck that gently pulls my crown skywards, my shoulders lower: my spine straightens by itself. I feel a pulse, a beat, information from the acoustic texture and my body senses internal rhythm like the science of synchrony. I think of science writer, Phillip Ball, who suggests that neurons and the subconscious have a hidden order and, by joining millions of neurons, emotion emerges in constant pulse and pattern (CBC, 2013).

Aware of humming vibration of emotion
I exhale into open spaces in muscle tension
Opening hidden order
spaces beyond the physical around me

What is your body telling you today? Find your heart centre, the yogi says

My back reveals
a silent key change to F
F for fear...
How long can I sustain this pose?
this lower vertebrae
this left leg stretched to its limit of fascia
reforming deep challenge to seek softness
in near pain, perhaps deep pleasure
I listen for a balanced embodied way
into sustainability, sustainable pedagogy
a lasting long breath in...
and slow release
I invite a listening to what can be imagined as music
What comes to mind and body response
when I think of Debussy
I invite listening
I hear the flute solo at the beginning of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*
and wait for meaningful silence from my expectant audience
I forgive and control my impulsive need to use words immediately, any words,
to be heard as I hear



I release the need to seek, look beyond,
 because the answers are always right here
 somewhere near us
 and I reflect on my next choice to express
 Pedagogy transmits sustainability and sustainability transmits and translates pedagogy

Live in your hearing mind, the yogi shares

I listen for a moment to the inhalation that seems to penetrate my neck below my left ear. I feel tense muscles turn right, then slowly left. Opening up to my vision, I notice a group of four students chatting like good friends. My heaviness lifts slightly and I smile again thinking of these students as an orchestral brass section so necessary for sustainability, vital for a solid core, a responsive, malleable but strong spine, constant, reliable rhythm for every rehearsal, every performance. But, I am not a conductor totally in charge of the ultimate impact of collective renderings of sound, the transmitter of the transmitted...sharing of individual narratives of knowing and living through our art(s); I am only a member of this orchestra as I was as first chair flutist, prepared for occasional solos, occasional synchronicity. I listen to the four girls and find humour in knowing that stalwart brass sections often immerse their intensity in an ocean of sound that seem to drown out flute-sound.

I sense my pelvis tilt forward to take over but I press my core muscles in and up. My ribs relax; my lips relax. I prepare to perform, shoulders finding peace; I lean forward, knees slightly bent to support my torso weight and I drop my bag on a table. I realize I am humming into the chatter that changes key to a soft minor murmur and I take my flute case out of my bag

as if my movements
 reveal a rising organic pulse
 layering through a waiting curious audience
 Synchronicity
 I feel eyes turn to me

My next performance seems to emerge
from small sinews around my sacrum lying out of balance left to right
I feel cold silver on my lips
close my eyes to concentrate on my third eye on my forehead between my eyes
my place of intuition
solid blue sky free from restraints like windows and walls
taste freedom of moving air in sound
perform into vulnerability
sense surprise when I carefully assemble my flute's sound
into realness of mutual gaze towards our self and 'other'
not the obvious
not the expected
not the passive view
I tumble into uncharted aesthetic gaze
as participant of inclusive choreography
of meaning
intersecting in dimensions of sound, movement, and space

I play my flute to my students; my torso falls forward and finds parallel space down my back
from earth to sky and I sense and send tremulous elements through concrete to my welcoming
feet. Slowly, I release each vertebra upon layers of inquiry lying peacefully on my lower spine, a
rhizome with pulse, vibration deep in the earth...imminent sound.

My fingers and tongue synchronize without thought. I close my eyes and imagine my body
balancing on the edge of the impatient ocean; I feel a green-salt-opaque rush as I dive, salt-full
and completely at peace, into the ocean. Have I found my pace, my place of deep listening
(Ramsay, 2009, p. 26)?

I offer a video of myself performing at an arts and education international conference. It begins
with me playing my flute and now I am in duet with myself. This offering invites my students to
be participant, co-authors as the classroom transforms into performative spaces not unlike multi-
site performances where dancer and researcher, Carol Stock (2011), describes a blending of
performer and audience as areas of intersection where "the familiar is re-imaged and re-
imagined" (p. 3).

I sit for minutes on edges of stretched possibilities in anticipation close to anxiety
like familiar yin poses of discomfort, not pain. I re-image loosening fascia healing
emerging clarity of expression
Unique style or voice
invites acceptance
stops seeking answers
creates spaces of knowing in risk-taking and trust

I play
my arms remain in tremors of anticipation
shared discomfort
perhaps I sense reverberation of embarrassment
unpredictable introduction of instructor/musician/photographer/writer

in the taking on
not just of our classroom
but our shared performance place or our shared “performance of place” (Kaye, 2000, p. 3) of
exposing, revisiting
un-accepting the accepted as we share our narratives
un-expecting the expected when we re-interpret
I play
I watch students respond to my vulnerable performance in stillness that awakens our venue
where pedagogy simmers
in transient co-authored passages
where my constant critical review of my teaching practices are sustained by imagery and sound
I play

In this venue, I will offer gifts to students such as Alice Munro’s (1978) *The Beggar Maid*,
where Munro intends to emerge into intercontextual performance spaces of words and feeling,
shared. I seek synchronicity not only with Munro’s intentions but also with her disclaimer for the
cover-up of truth’s emotion that damages uncertain beauty and, as a result, we have no choice
but to become open to interrogative venues, multi-sites metaphorically constructed

to expose the obvious and lay bare
performance of raw emotion
with our art(s) expression of life experience
Like yin yoga poses
I feel unravelling
I feel revealing
I play
I play

and think how Munro’s short story will assist me when I invite narrative response that feels the
pulse of pedagogy in every sound-full transmission of meaning into contemplative spaces
between literature and individual history

I will invite students to take Munro on
write about their Patrick, their Rose,
their lack of loyalty, blind love, years of grief, life of love

I will interrupt discussions of practical approaches to teaching English finding balance between
correcting mistakes and inviting unforeseen, unexplained expression where meaning is a process.
Lorrie Neilson Glenn (2013) refers to novelist E. M. Forester who wondered how he would
know what he was thinking until he saw the words (cited in James, Dobson, & Leggo, p. 173). In
my assignment requirements after a live Shakespeare production, a Vancouver Bard on the
Beach class field trip, I will suggest that students respond in a genre of their choice and some
will engage with predictable writing genre, perhaps sonnet form or narrative essay. I think of
another former student.

A poet/visual artist
responds through pen and ink
drawings on rice paper stained by that dark night rain
a document of her walk home

alone from a Hamlet production
an artefact of poetic renderings in three dimensional
words and imagery
merging fear
loneliness, betrayal

I play

I play my flute in danger of automatic synchronicity, co-performance without careful reflection. I thrive in the pulse of a common breath and seek to expose the danger of slipping into loose rhythm disassociated with our living histories

a force
it attracts us to
conforming areas of easy resting places
of expression
expectation and predictability

We are a community of writers/educators who have commitment to our ongoing, reflexive inquiry that Gouzouasis, Irwin, Miles, and Gordon (2013) define as fully taking on a way of being in the world and negotiating personal engagement in a community of belonging with commitment to creating practices that trouble and address difference.

My flute finds moderate pace of my place with easy intervals in mid-octave, sustained notes, and a challenge to consecutively sound an "A" six times without repetition of purpose, with a drive forward, a slight crescendo, and care (Ramsay, 2009). Students watch my video on a large screen, a film of me playing the flute; I create synchronicity, a duet. Then as voice over my text, my life writing as critical inquiry creates ensemble co-creating and my students become integral in the synchronicity of embodiment and expression in performance, of realization of new pedagogy.

Our performance is about everything that matters and everything that does not matter
everything honest
deeply contemplative
non-judgemental
I play



I am at one with the yogis breathing around me. I am at one. I think of a poem I recently wrote.

I play songs that remind me I am lost
on rock walls like solid bone, screeches of frightened pheasants
take flight when I exhale pain like
wild ponies racing with my heart
captured in imagery
by ancient ruins on top of a far off ridge
I am lost on dried dead grass prana without panic
without familiar signposts of my yin
and I wonder where we are

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