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Words Within

Creativity, Flow, and Body

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Abstract

This work discusses embodiment and creativity through use of the body engaged in movement. Although there is a tradition of writers and thinkers who use embodied movement meditation to find inspiration and flow in thinking and writing, this flow is seemingly missing in school writing practices. How, then, is creative flow connected to movement? What implications arise for the relationship between body and creativity for writing teachers? Turning toward these questions, this paper explores the lived experience of movement meditation and creativity, particularly for teachers of writing. First is a description of the phenomenon, followed by a brief review of some of the literature. Then follows an explication of the method and discussion of emergent themes related to creativity as rendered in a phenomenological study of movement meditation and teachers of writing. Finally, the paper considers implications for pedagogy and future research.

Keywords creativity, teaching, writing, moving meditation, embodiment, phenomenology

Words Within Me

On an early fall morning, paralyzed by writer's block, I lace up my running shoes and head to the river trail for an easy jog. Fog rests above the water, not yet burned off by the late September sun. I start slowly. My footfalls create a rhythm in the soft gravel as I find my stride. I startle a fishing heron, and it flies away, squawking. Deer bound down the path ahead of me, and squirrels rustle in the leaves. My breath deepens and muscles relax as I begin to settle into the space of my body in motion, path unfolding before me. My pace quickens, and I run, both focused and unfocused. I think about this article, on which I have been working. My chattering mind grows silent, and then the block clears. New thoughts surface, bubbling up like water from a spring. Ideas emerge. Words form and become ordered. I am revising, re-seeing, as the block dissipates. This is writing that does not look like writing, a moving meditation that unblocks my stuck thinking. Thoughts churning, I finish my run and head homeward, returning to my desk and computer. My fingers move across the keyboard, words pouring through me urgently. I do not even bother to take off my shoes.

As a writer and runner, I have come to know this phenomenon of body motion connected to writing flow intimately. When I am blocked, I can find release through movement. When I speak to others about this phenomenon, some of them indicate that movement is connected to flow for them as well: "I write when I swim," one tells me. "I go for a bike ride when I'm stuck," says another. Walking brings relief for yet another writer. I wonder: how does body movement release stuck thinking? What connections exist between creativity and body flow?

I find movement, especially running, to be a reliable way to release stuck thinking. After a run during which I experience flow, I scramble for my notebook and pour out words, filling pages in near effortless surge. Intentional movement, or movement meditation, such as running, walking, or yoga, may open creativity for me as writer, thinker, and researcher: first, body motion causes stillness, creating clarity and emptiness. Once this happens, I am filled, or fill myself, with insight. When the movement session finishes, I empty my thinking upon the page, clearing the way for new thoughts, understandings, or revisions. Through body flow, I find creative flow; this phenomenon, based in my interest and practice, leads me

to phenomenological wondering, as van Manen (1997) suggests. I wonder: in what ways may a body in motion open a flow of thinking for a writer as she walks?

In contrast, however, as a high school teacher, I taught writing to big boys in small desks who, in spite of their ability to move fluently through cross-country courses or between plays on fields, were utterly stuck when it came to writing. "I can't," they might say, "I don't know how." Or worse yet, "I have nothing to write about." Now, as a college composition instructor, I find my students face similar ways of being stuck. They tell me they do not know where to start, or that they do not know what to say. My work with preservice teachers, too, reveals this same stuck-ness; my students, future teachers of writing, also find themselves blankly facing the blank page. I know that, for me, the best way to write is to set myself in motion: body flow opens a thinking flow. However, the standard classroom environment may not permit the kind of meditative motion I need to write; my less experienced students are body bound to wordless anxiety. From this dilemma more questions surface: how does movement stimulate the flow of thoughts and words? What happens and what insights are gained when teachers of writing move? What can teachers do to help students move and, in doing so, write more freely? *What is the lived experience of moving meditation for finding creative flow in thinking, writing, and teaching?*

Turning toward these questions, this article, based in my dissertation work (Morris, 2013), explores the lived experience of movement meditation and creativity, particularly for writing teachers in secondary classrooms, like those who participated in this study, and for other writers and teachers of writing seeking to understand embodiment as connected to writing.

Moving Toward Creative Flow

When I begin to explore the literature, I find parts of the path I wish to walk. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1996) creative flow involves immersion in activity, producing feelings of success and competence; flow is characterized by engaged awareness, lack of distraction, time distortion, loss of self-consciousness. Flow is what I experience when I run; writing inspired in a session of movement also produces the characteristics of flow. How, then, is body movement for flow represented in the literature?

Various works connect movement and inspiration, touching upon the role of the body in stimulating creativity, finding that movement leads to increased reflective thinking, self-awareness, and introspective analysis: as a meditative tool, movement facilitates self-knowledge, deep thinking, and problem-solving (Andrews, 1978; Brown, 2009; Lynch & Scott, 1999; Perry & Sacks, 1981; Solomon & Bumpus, 1981). Recent experimental research connects walking and higher scores on creativity tests (Oppezo & Schwartz, 2014). Popular magazine articles and general interest texts explore this phenomenon of movement for connecting to thinking, as well (Fleming, 2010; Jabr, 2014; Kay, 2007; Ratey, 2008).

Some posit that humans' first creative stirrings came out of the capacity for movement. McDougall (2010) describes movement as tied to inspiration, stating, "Running was mankind's first fine art, our original act of inspired creation. Way before we were scratching pictures on caves or beating rhythms on hollow trees, we were perfecting the art of combining our breath and mind and muscles into fluid self-propulsion over wild terrain" (p.92). Perry and Sacks (1981) connect movement and imagination in their work with runners. Brown (2009) links body movement to play, which generates wonder and stimulates the imagination. Solomon & Bumpus (1981) discuss the clearing away of mental chaos that can be found through running, allowing new insight to emerge. Berger and Mackenzie (1981) find movement "conducive to introspection as well as to thinking in general" (p. 104). The clearing effect of movement, as characterized in these works, allows new insight to emerge, helping thinkers to turn inward, to reflect in patient practice, to tap into the current of their own understanding. This notion may be familiar to many of us: we may take walks to clear our minds, we may pace in difficult situations, we may stretch to relieve tension and refocus. These actions, though intentional, may not take on same qualities as the practice of movement meditation: regularity, intentionality, and purpose. How, then, is meditative movement different from other movement?

More than a series of actions, movement meditation is a way of knowing, a bodily process for engaging with and understanding the world and self, fostering "modes of being in the world, a synthesis of mind and body" (Schilbrack, 2004, p.13). Certain writers assert that moving meditation brings people closer to themselves and pro-

vides a sense of wholeness (Lynch & Scott, 1989; Rohe, 1978; Sher, 2006). Artress (2006) discusses meditative labyrinth walking as being a three-part process, in which mental clearing away gives way to insight, which then is carried back out into the world. Movement meditation can call one back into oneself, center one's awareness in body, mind, and the surrounding world. Moving meditation can merge reason and creativity, igniting senses and imagination, providing an inrush of insight. This connection between intentional moving, thinking, and inspiration is relevant to my questions, but leaves an incomplete impression. What does the literature reveal about the relationship between movement, creativity, and writing?

Body movement has long been tied to thought. The Peripatetic philosophers walked a colonnade, thinking and lecturing: "In English the word peripatetic means 'one who walks habitually and extensively.' Thus their name links thinking with walking" (Solnit, 2001, p.45). Ancient Greek thinkers moved to "translate order into action," and "it is reported that Socrates, when asked how he kept his mental faculties so acute, replied, 'I dance every morning'" (Andrews, 1978, p.134). Researchers have discussed writing as connected to flow of ideas (Gendlin, 1996), of inspiration (Emig, 1983), and of body (Sher, 2006). With "body as a touchstone," writers move toward meaning in the flow of thought (Perl, 2004, p.4). The notion of creativity born in intentional body motion leads me to the notion of a tradition of writers immersing themselves through body motion to find their words.

The novelist Joyce Carol Oates (1999) discusses the tradition of walking writers in an essay on writing and running, citing Thoreau's, Dickens's, and Wordsworth's writerly walks. Solnit (2001), lists a history of walking thinkers, writers, and philosophers, including Hegel, Kant, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Rousseau, Bertrand Russel, John Stuart Mill, Coleridge, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Husserl, and others. Lynch and Scott state "Thoreau, Plato, Einstein, Wordsworth, and Lao-Tzu sauntered through woods and over the hills to achieve mental clarity, fresh, original thoughts, and epiphanies to help replenish their souls and sustain their imaginations" (1999, pp. 177-178). When drafting *Being and Time*, Heidegger "retreated to the Black Forest," thinking and writing "on long walks along its wooded paths, in glades and clearings, skiing down its slopes…" (De la Durantaye, 2007). Like me, these writers moved for the purpose of

writing, they listened, and the words came. It makes sense, then, to wonder: how can this tradition translate in teaching and learning to write? What happens and what insights are gained when teachers of writing move?

Moving Toward Meaning in Writing and in Teaching

On a different morning, I meet with four high school English and writing teachers, from the same high school, who self-selected to participate in this phenomenological study exploring the lived experience of moving meditation for finding a flow in thinking and writing. Alyx, Annalee, Holly, and Traci (self-chosen pseudonyms) arrive in a shady gravel lot near the top of CaCapon Mountain. The sky is bright blue, and the leaves are beginning to turn into autumn shades of red, gold, and brown. Crickets chirp in the high grass. Summer is ending, and a new school year is beginning. Journals in hand, we set out, each of us moving across wooded park paths and through her own thoughts.

Together, we engage in thoughtful walking, an "intentional act closest to the unwilled rhythms of the body, to breathing and the beating of the heart […] a delicate balance between working and idling, being and doing. It is a bodily labor that produces nothing but thoughts, experiences, arrivals" (Solnit, 2001, pp. 23-24). These thoughts, experiences, and arrivals are meaning-making, born in the body, generated from the energy of steady motion and deep, easy breath. As Alyx walks steadily across the ridgeline, Annalee jogs gingerly along the steepest path toward the mountaintop. Holly and Traci move down a different trail toward the center of the park, and I head upward into the laurel thickets. We pace our progress with the soles of our shoes and stop to write as words emerge. When I arrive back at our meeting place, about an hour later, I see three teachers in and around the pavilion where we will talk: Holly reclining on a rock in a patch of sunlight, writing, Alyx and Traci at a picnic table, both writing. I perch on a bench and open my journal. As I begin writing, Annalee bounds into the clearing, journal in hand, finds a comfortable seat, and also puts pen to paper. We stay this way for some time and then reconvene to talk, as has become our practice.

Alyx, Annalee, Holly, and Traci write for and with their students, providing models, making connections, and using their own writ-

ing as exemplars. They enjoy writing for pleasure, professional, and pedagogical reasons: they write with their students and teach writing for creative as well as evaluative purposes. In addition to writing and teaching together, these teachers socialize together, and, perhaps more significantly for this work, they exercise together. They walk on the track near their school, or they run and train together, providing motivation and support. Their shared awareness as writers, teachers, and engaged bodies provides apt conversation for exploration of related lived experience. As co-conversants, I have enlisted them to explore the question: *What is the lived experience of moving meditation for finding creative flow in thinking and writing?*

Over several months, these conversants and I engage in sessions of approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour of quiet walking meditation in wooded settings, followed by or including 30-45 minutes of solitary journal writing followed by open-ended (and recorded) conversation. I have generated thematic renderings of life-texts gathered from these journals and conversations. I have identified shared perceptions and allowed questions to grow from commonalities and intersubjective understandings; these have led to phenomenological interpretation. Thematizing allows me to "get at the notion" of the meaning of the experience of movement meditation for finding a flow in thinking and writing and give shape to this phenomenon, even in its shapelessness; thematizing "fixes or expresses the ineffable essence" and "describe[s] the content of the notion" of what is there in a phenomenon (van Manen, 1997, p. 88). Although many themes (including nature, wholeness, solitude, practice, and others) have emerged from phenomenological thematizing in this work as a whole (Morris, 2013), this article explores creativity interpreted through the lived experiences of walking, wondering, talking, and writing with teachers engaged in moving meditation.

Creative Flow: Teachers Moving Toward Meaning

Creative flow emerged in practice and interpretive rendering over the months of this study. We have wandered wooded paths, surrounded by birdsong and the sounds of rustling leaves. In tune to the rhythm of our walking, words have surfaced, and journal pages have filled. Time has stilled, engagement has deepened, and self-consciousness has diminished, much as Csikszentmihalyi (1996) describes in his work on flow.

Losing Self and Time

Writers in flow, we become "lost in the process of writing," and feel "merging action and awareness through the image of the flowing ink and the flowing of ideas" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p.119). Flow arises through interaction with the environment and surfaces in our bodies, so understanding "speaks in us rather than [we speak] it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1995, p.212). In this way, creativity emerges bodily, as "We never come to thoughts. They come to us" (Heidegger, 1971, p.6). Thought bubbles up from inside, a physical sensation of "drawing, as of water from a spring" (Heidegger, p.73). We walk, we think, we write in a state of flow experience, part of which involves lifeworld shifts in sense of time and self.

These teacher-conversants feel lived senses of time and self specifically. Holly in particular addresses lived time (rather than clock time): "sometimes the change in light is our only indication that we've been walking for a while and should head back. I think there's definitely a connection between the relaxing, calming effect that walking has on me and losing time." While walking, Holly gets lost to find herself, transcends time to unwind words. Annalee, too, finds herself losing sense of time and self while walking, expressing that she tends to "focus in" when running.

With this feeling of distorted time comes intense focus, as Csikszentmihalyi (1996) suggests. Traci comments that every thing seems amplified and vivid, "even the noises. […] you hear the birds, you hear the bugs, you hear all those things. […] Out here you see the... the lily pads, and the way they're arranged. […] just stuff that you don't see elsewhere...." Traci observes colors, too: water lilies "pink, pink and purple, and bright like that." Holly notices that "our steps ended up synchronized," and she points out that "nature actually is quite loud—bugs, frogs, footsteps—it's never totally silent. It's almost like you don't notice the separate sounds until you really stop and listen, though." Walking enables slow, deep listening: unraveling sounds, differentiating details, we may find ourselves in synch with the lifeworld and other creatures in it.

Alyx discusses deep engagement, immersion in activity, stating "I was creating something and I lost myself in it." Intentional movement allows Alyx to lose time and self in creativity. She reminds, however, "I want to be clear that there's two different [senses of] 'losing yourself' at play here. There's losing yourself

in the moment, and then losing yourself as a person, as an individual." The creative loss of self-consciousness Alyx describes is not losing one's-self. Rather, she is lost and found, disengaging to engage. Participants speak about the lived experience of creative flow and its perception of time and self. Their writing reveals another layer of meaning, however, in terms of the creative flow meditative walking generates for these teachers: a poetizing of experience.

Finding Poetry

Focusing while walking, the teachers in this study notice more, relax into movement and meaning-making, writing, and observation. Although I do not prompt them to do so, each writes poetry. For these teachers, as for the transcendentalist walking poets, the movement of the body "makes composing poetry into physical labor" (Solnit, 2001, p.272). An impact of walking outdoors can be intensified creativity, according to Louv (2005), who provides a list of people who found inspiration in nature, including Joan of Arc, Jane Goodall, John Muir, Mark Twain, T.S. Eliot, E.O. Wilson, Thomas Edison, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Beatrix Potter (pp.91-92). In these teachers' journals, the rhythm of walking opens a parallel rhythm of words, producing poems.

Holly reflects on a toad, wondering whether it

> ...is simply
> content
> to sit in the cool shade
> of the autumn leaves and
> enjoy life.

Annalee and Traci write "found poems" in which they noticed vibrant colors, sights, and sounds. A found poem arises from collections of words, images, or impressions to create a cohesive impression of a moment. Alyx, too, experiences creative, poetic flow, describing, inspired, the colors of a relationship:

> Our moments, memories,
> shine bright pinks,
> vivid blues,

exuberant oranges...
like beams of light
they call to me.

The world calls, and these walking writers respond with poetry.

Poetry, according to Heidegger, projects us deeply into surroundings and connects us with others. As such, "Projective saying is poetry: the saying of the world and earth, the saying of the arena of their conflict and thus of the place of all nearness and remoteness of the gods. Poetry is the saying of the unconcealdness of what is" (Heidegger, 1971, p.71). Poems, for these teachers, reveal the world in authenticity and creativity, in intersubjective truth, brought about through body flow.

The simple act of moving meditation – walking with intention, journals in hand – seemingly opens a creative flow that allowed these teachers to write poetically and reflectively. They have thought and have written about teaching, too, considering implications for learning and engaging their students in creative movement, allowing deeper consideration of our question: *What is the lived experience of moving meditation for finding creative flow in thinking, writing, and, perhaps most importantly, teaching?*

Creative Wholeness: Pedagogical Implications

Being a teacher, for these participants in these moments, means seeing students in wholeness, being themselves in wholeness, and looking at the world in wholeness. Their journals are products of intentional, reflective movement, and they reveal the noticing that shows this connection-making. Movement meditation is one way to take care of oneself, to become silent, centered, and whole in a busy, chaotic world; the "me time" of body practice connects them to themselves and enables them to care for students in wholeness. Alyx expressed this well, saying:

> ... So we take grammar out of instruction, and we look at the writer holistically and look at all the kid is doing. [...] Physical health versus mental health, and you as a teacher, you as a person. I think it's all interconnected and we need to pull back and look at the big picture and sort of go from there. […] So first we have to take care of

> our physical self, and after that I think things just kind of fall in place.

Alyx cares for herself to serve others; she teaches grammar in context to better teach writing. She steps back, looks around. She addresses the world as a whole, students in wholeness, cares for herself in mind-body wholeness in order to better care for others. She stops teaching lessons and starts teaching students.

In order for students to be successful, grow, and learn, teachers must not just inform them, but care for them in safe spaces, fostering confidence and creativity. One way to do this may be through time spent moving in nature, using all their senses, learning by doing. Louv (2005) cites studies showing the kind of trial and error and unstructured time possible through bodily play in nature helps us overcome fear, build confidence, and problem-solve in ways that involve "making and collecting meaning" (p.87). Physical and mental self-awareness can allow creative meaning-making. In response to this notion, Traci takes students outside to walk the cross-country course when studying transcendentalism, Holly allows students to read and write on the lawn, Annalee encourages walking for thinking and writing.

Education, Leonard explains, "provides not just cognitive meaning but a way of walking, sitting, standing, and relating to the world," a "guidance in being, rather than merely doing" (2001, p.249). By being writers embodied, as models for their students, Traci, Holly, Annalee, and Alyx show students how to be writers. Likewise, "learning isn't something we can do for (or to) our students. Learning requires an act of initiative on their part. We can only create conditions in which learning can happen. Reflective practice that produces writing can help those conditions by encouraging students to ask questions, to notice and wonder and connect and inspire," and also "to stay wide awake in life (Calkins, 1994, p.484).

Writing is a kind of thinking, one that allows us to discover what we know and who we are. Similarly, intentional movement practice is a kind of thinking, one that more deeply connects us to who we are, so that we are more fully able to see our place in space and mediate our relationships with others: family, colleagues, students, teachers. As Alyx suggests, taking care of one's physical self better enables all other kinds of care. When things "fall into place" and

teaching becomes "guidance in being," as well as "condition creating," then teachers may experience a sense of wholeness and alertness—of person and of practice.

This movement through self-consciousness, past being stuck, "the ability to get past our social personas" according to Reid (2002), is "an important component of flow—the mental state associated with peak athletic performance. By liberating ourselves from concern about what others expect of us, we are better able to focus on what we are actually doing, and to be who we really are'" (p.29). Not only is a flow state associated with athleticism, but also it manifests in moments of peak creativity, as Csikszentmihalyi (1996) shows. Teachers who creatively honor students in wholeness help them move through frozen fear and become creative agents.

Teaching as embodied beings is creative, too. Van Manen asserts "Researchers and theorists tend to forget that pedagogy is an embodied practice and that pedagogical research and theorizing, too, are pedagogic forms of life" (1997, p.139). Teachers are bodies who teach student bodies. Likewise, because we cannot separate researcher from research, teachers who are also researchers see through the lens of pedagogical need.

Moving Beyond: Future Directions

I have begun this work by wondering about the connections between my mind and body when I move to find creative flow; I have continued this work through a brief review of the literature on movement and flow, and I have collaborated with teachers of writing in movement practice to explore the question: *What is the lived experience of moving meditation for finding creative flow in thinking, writing, and teaching?* Still, I do not have a clear answer, but I am moving toward richer description.

Bradley calls for descriptive research to investigate the power of movement for learning because it "takes place in a multi-modal, highly sensory, creative, and generative context for learning, and it also requires practice, reflection, and refinement of skill. Dance education research can, should, and must demonstrate that when children move, they learn. We know this; we see it every day. We can't prove it except by living it, reflecting on it, and writing about it in depth" (Bradley, 2001, p. 35). As a practitioner of movement for my own learning, I know that when I move, I learn, I compose. In my

research writing as well as in creative writing, I draw from my physicality as a source. To maintain focus, I must live, embody, and be grounded by my questions. Merleau-Ponty asserts "We ourselves are one sole continued question, a perpetual enterprise of taking our bearings on the constellations of the world, and of taking the bearings of the things on our dimensions" (1964b, p.103).

Phenomenology places me directly in a process of myself, lived experience, philosophical inquiry, and the world, in that "First an idea interests me. Then I put it in my head and allow it to germinate for a while. […] Next, I try to organize this raw material. Attempt to discover its essence, its true meaning, what it is all about" (Sheehan, 1998, p. 14). I must live in my questions, since "If you would write the truth, you must first become the truth" (Sheehan, p. 14). I must also recognize the incompleteness of my interpretation because "writing is never easy. And no matter how well done, never to one's satisfaction" (Sheehan, p. 15). I live, reflect, exchange ideas with others, and write about this lived experience, not only to enhance my own understanding and practice, but to expand the understanding of others: those teachers who explore these questions with me, and perhaps my readers, as well.

Interpretive phenomenological knowledge "is not subjective; it is intersubjective" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p.10). As such, the teachers with whom I explored these questions and I generated an intersubjective awareness of movement as a source for writing together – as teachers and writers. I have endeavored to describe this phenomenon as reflective lived experience – this includes the lived experience of the philosopher-researcher and that of others. Phenomenological research work fixes, contextualizes, and represents *Dasein* – Being, or more accurately translated, "being there" – in a way that engages us, reader and researcher alike. It is open to interpretation, and serves to "awaken a sense of wonder about the order of what is ordinary" (van Manen, 2005, p. 49). This sense of Being, *Dasein*, acknowledges the past, present, and future; it is contextual and relational. It is life as it is experienced; it is knowledge situated and contextualized in the particular: in this case, four teachers of writing and myself, walking and writing together. Like body motion and practice, inquiry, teaching, thinking, and writing are always open to revision and refinement. There is still more to learn.

Given this, it is important to acknowledge that this work is always already incomplete and leaves me with more questions rather than answers. Future directions may move toward the lived experience of other particulars: of student writers, other teachers, with other kinds of movement practice, in other settings, with other pedagogical tools. Even as the question frames the research, it also shapes the researcher. As such, I continue to dwell in my question and continue to wonder: *What is the lived experience of moving meditation for finding creative flow in thinking, writing, and teaching writing?*

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