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Re-membering the body in English Education

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The preparation of this issue of *English Teaching: Practice & Critique* has offered me the opportunity to reflect on how the body has figured in my work and study, first as a teacher and later a researcher. Memory is as much a bodily re-experiencing of sense and feeling as it is a mental process. As I recollect back to my pre-service induction into primary English language arts teaching in the early 1970s, I recall that my training afforded no appreciation of the bodily nature of reading and writing or teaching for that matter. My classmates and I were apprenticed in the received wisdom and professional lore on how best to teach such things as letter recognition and phonics. I remember the feel of the bright winter's, Nova Scotia sun streaming through the wall of windows warming our prefab, barrack-like classroom, still in use some 25 years after Dalhousie University hastily constructed it to house the influx of post-war veterans. I remember the authoritative look and voice of the Sister of Charity who taught us the ins and outs of the current basal series employed in the province's primary schools.

I found our professional understanding of literacy and literate processes and practices quite changed when, some twenty years later, I took up graduate studies at Mount Saint Vincent University. The intervening years had given me a seasoned practitioner's feel and knowledge of what it was like to plan and teach English language arts from primary through middle to secondary school. In those intervening years, our field's research and scholarship had developed cognitive and socio-psychological theories and research on reading and writing. And, yet, most of these still focused on reading and writing and teaching as primarily mental processes. My old files are filled with papers illustrating through boxes and vectors how readers' brains come to make sense of texts.

Nonetheless, during these intervening decades, among some theorists and researchers, there was a growing appreciation of the affective and relational nature of teaching and learning to speak, hear, read, write, view and design well – literacy as a social practice or set of embedded social practices. Affect and relation happen through the body as well as the mind. This period provided many naturalistic accounts of textual pleasures and relationships with and through texts, that tapped into available realist, expressivist and critical literary traditions. These accounts illustrated how readers, writers and teachers (of a particular kind, mind you) identify as literate and are concerned with those who do not value reading and writing. Our reasons vary, but our emotional responses to "illiteracy" appear to be similar.

The American poet, Robert Bly, expresses in "Words Rising" these sentiments, "We are bees then; language is the honey." His poem offers a benediction:

> Blessing then on the man who labours
> in the tiny room, writing stanzas on the lamb;
> blessings on the woman, who picks the brown
> seeds of solitude in afternoon light
> out of the black seeds of loneliness.
> And blessings on the dictionary maker, huddled

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among
his bearded words, and on the setter of the song
who sleeps at night inside his violin case.
(Bly, 1988)

In the repetition, alliteration, allusion, imagery – the beauty of these words – we may resonate with Bly's love of language.

Equally, we may share the sense of failure evident in Bly's poem, "Snowbanks North of the House". In it he explores how things sometimes fail to connect, and remain out of our grasp like,

Thoughts that go so far.
The boy gets out of high school and reads no more books;
The son stops calling home.
The mother puts down her rolling pin and makes no more bread.
And the wife looks at her husband one night at a party, and loves him no more .
The energy leaves the wine, and the minister falls leaving the church.
The father grieves for his son, and will not leave the room where the coffin stands.
He turns away from his wife, and she sleeps alone.
(Bly, 1988)

Bly's poetry points to two ideas that underpin our embodied responses when reading and writing. One, as honey is to bees, texts provide engagement that brings pleasure. Two, this engagement is forged in relationships with the text and, importantly, with people who are significant to us. The breakdown in the relationships between parent and child or husband and wife is metaphoric for the boy, who upon leaving school reads no more. It is a kind of sacrilege. Bly's poem suggests the strength of feeling that can exist about literacy's importance. (But, always of a kind, to be sure.)

Interestingly, in this issue, Hilary Hughes-Decatur uses poetry to reflect on American culture's desire to reshape the female body and Lyn Kerkham uses *poiesis*, the process of "working on and with texts" to construct transcript poems from her data to explore the interconnected nature of bodies, landscapes and literacies. Importantly, all the papers collected for this issue reflected the locatedness of embodied literacies. Bodies are always someplace and reflect positions vis-à-vis others.

Published literate histories at this time frequently explored themes of pleasure and relationship. Two such popular Canadian accounts during this period were Robert MacNeil's *Wordstruck* (1989) and *More Than Words Can Say: Personal Perspective on Literacy* (Canadian Organization for Development through Education, 1990), a collection of essays by Canadian authors, collected through the CBC's Morningside morning radio programmes' ongoing discussion about literacy and education. MacNeil presents a picture of his mother reading him Stevenson's "Windy Nights". He remembers them reading at night, before the fire, as the wind blows around their drafty, pre-war Halifax home. He uses intimate language. Many of the writers in this anthology recount that their literary engagements grew out of relationships between

family members and a text. Neil Bissoondath and Harry Bruce relate similar stories of being read to by their mothers. Literacy growing out of familial relationships became for them a shared assumption that this is what "we" do.

Growing out of this relationship, many of these writers describe an emerging and sustaining relationship with texts. Morley Callaghan writes that he reads to "read something that not only stirs me, but gives back to me that unspoiled freshness of imagination that I had as a child" (Canadian Organization for Development through Education, 1990, p. 30). Matt Cohen describes writing as a kind of seduction. Sandra Birdsell writes of her experience with a young man named Tony, a confused street person, who stood outside her house late at night, under a street light, "transfixed, leaning into the text" (p. 13). Even when relationships fail, a person's connection with text may survive. These stories illustrate the physicality and depth of feeling associated with literate practices.

These accounts also make pointed observations about "illiteracy" and literacy teaching. Often they present a third face of textual engagement – power. Gordon Korman, a popular Newfoundland-based, young adult novelist at the time, wrote: "Too many of our kids don't want to read. They equate reading exclusively with work and school, something that is done only under duress, never voluntarily" (p. 130). In the *More Than Words Can Say* histories, how schooling thwarts engagement with reading and writing is a common theme, as it was in the academic literature of the time. Equally damning is how many of these authors have nothing to say about schools as playing a significant role in their development as readers and writers. Janice Kulyk Keefer tells that reading for her was "more than the 'Dick and Jane' world, which my schooling offered." She relates how reading Herman Hesse's *Steppenwolf* lead her to question her assumptions about the world. Her literacy history takes the discussion about engagement in reading and writing further. For her, literacy became more than the ability to read. Textual pleasure initiated conversations, which changed her life and her world (Canadian Organization for Development through Education, p. 118-120).

This idea that literacy moves from relationship and pleasure to empowerment is made by many of these authors. Michael Ondaatji views illiteracy as socially isolating. Doris Heffron sees it as being at the mercy of others. Harry Bruce compares experiences of reading in classrooms in Halifax's impoverished North and affluent South. The North End students, he concludes, were "not book lovers yet not illiterate". Marginalised economically and socially, they are marginalisd academically, as well. June Callwood sees illiteracy as something that, "'chain'(s) people to a life of bluff anxiety, embarrassment and isolation" (p. 36). Joan Finnigan recounts the story of meeting a feisty, little, teaching nun who taught in a rural Ottawa Valley literacy programme. This nun would tell her mainly adult students to "print your name large, you are a very important person."

This emancipatory stance toward embodied literacy practices that grew out of this period and was to some extent a response to under-theorised naturalistic approaches in our field called upon critical traditions in social theorising and research. Gramsci, in his ironical response to Mussolini's 1923 education reform, writes about learning as physical and alienated labour:

> The child who sweats at Barbara, Baralipton [mnemonic words used to memorise syllogisms in classical logic] is certainly performing a tiring task, and it is important he does only what is absolutely necessary and no more. But it is also true that it will always be an effort to learn physical discipline and self-control; the pupil has, in effect, to undergo a psycho-physical training. Many have to be persuaded that studying too is a job, and a very tiring one, with its own particular apprenticeship – involving muscles and nerves as well as intellect. It is a process of adaptation, a habit acquired with effort, tedium and even suffering. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 42)

Some school-teachers and parents may appreciate this emphasis on learning as labour, but maybe not Gramsci's sardonicism.

Critical literacy became an important area of inquiry for me as I began my graduate studies in the 1990s, as it did for my fellow Mount Saint Vincent alumnus, Vivian Vasquez. The papers in this issue share many of the issues raised by Hilary Janks and Vivian in their recent editorial for the May, 2011, issue of this journal, *Critical literacy revisited: Writing as critique*.

Critical and related accounts of embodied literate practices, like Gramsci's above, theorise the physical and material aspect at work in the formation of our personal and social dispositions. They document variously the processes of internalisation of available discursive and social structures, which are not only mental but are also corporal. For example, Bourdieu regards our various uses of language as a product of the dispositions we acquire in the course of learning at home, among our peers and at school, and so on, which are inscribed in our bodies, that he calls, hexis (Bourdieu, 1985); these practices are disaggregated in terms of ways of speaking and using language across social space. Writing of the economy of linguistic exchanges, he notes:

> Language is a bodily technique, and specifically linguistic, especially phonetic, competence is a dimension of bodily hexis in which one's whole relation to the social world, and one's whole socially informed relation to the world, are expressed. (p.86)

In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991), he presents an extended deconstruction of classed and gendered oppositions that are evident in the uses in French of "la bouche" and "la gueule" to argue that for the dominated classes, the adoption of the dominant language style is seen as a denial of social and sexual identity, a repudiation of virile values, which constitute class membership (p. 88). And, in *Distinction* (1984), he connects disaggregated language practices and dispositions with foundational social binaries that motivate important Discourses. Bourdieu argues that:

> [T]here is no area of practice in which the intentions of purifying, refining, and sublimating facile impulses and primary needs cannot assert itself, or in which the stylisation of life, i.e., the primacy of form over function, which leads to the denial of function, does not produce the same effects. (p. 177)

And, later,

> In language, it gives the opposition between popular outspokenness and the highly censored language of the bourgeois, between the expressionist pursuit of the picturesque or the rhetorical effect and the choice of restraint and false simplicity (litotes). The same economy of means is found in the body language, here too,

> agitation and haste, grimaces and gesticulations are opposed to slowness – "the slow gestures, the slow glance" of nobility, …to restraint and impassivity which signify elevation… (p. 179)

For Bourdieu, our bodily practices display fundamental socially structuring binaries, found in the opposition between, "quantity and quality, belly and palate, matter and manners, substance and form" (p. 179).

In keeping with our call for this issue, entitled *Literacy(ies) and the Body*, while only one paper employs Bourdieusian theorising (Hughes-Decatur), most call on other critical and post-critical traditions that have grown up in recent years. Notably, all of the issue's contributors are women. Many apply Feminist, Foucaultian and post-structuralist (Gee, 1990; Butler, 1993) perspectives to the pervasive, localised operation of discursive and disciplinary technologies, especially as they position students and teachers in relation to the particular role that English language arts plays in the apparatus of schooling (Hunter, 1988; Donald, 1992). It may have been interesting if we had attracted additional papers from other standpoint theories, including race and queer perspectives.

The issue explores a wide range of issues connected with embodied literacy: from curriculum (Kerkham) and pedagogy (Johnson, Wenger); new textual modalities (Doerr-Stevens); reading female teachers' bodies (Hughes-Decatur); to those of particular students (Enriques).

Lyn Kerkham's paper, *Embodied literacies and a poetics of place*, explores the interconnected nature of literacy and the body, and the relation between bodies, landscapes and literacies. She provides an account of the ways in which teachers' embodied histories, multiple identities and out-of-school lives relate to their environmental communications curriculum. Her case study shows how her informant constructs multiple selves in relation to the places where she lives and teaches. She uses the feminist poststructuralist notion of body/landscape relations to argue that literacies are intimately tied to bodies and bodies are always somewhere.

In "*I've got swag": Simone performs critical literacy in a high school English classroom*, Elisabeth Johnson draws on multimodal, post-structural and critical theory to examine a high-school English classroom exchange about editing a student publication. Analysing a young woman's embodied identity performances, Johnson illustrates how Simone, a tenth-grader, employed, adjusted and coupled modes of communication like speech, laughter, gesture and silence to perform critical literacy amidst discursive subjectivities the local media and school officials were busy producing for young writers. She argues that Simone's decisions to try on a variety of genres of communication, to shift from speech modes to embodied gestural modes, and to address particular audiences at particular junctures, evidence her identity as a critically literate person in school. Johnson concludes that teachers interested in critical pedagogy and ways to read participation might consider how gestures, body movement and shifts in volume are participatory, communicative acts that might provoke questions about authority and limits to classroom knowledge to re-think curricula, rules, and what they're willing to know about student identities in school.

Christy Wenger's paper, "*Feeling lore": The "problem" of emotion in the practice of teaching*, argues that teachers must acknowledge the ways our current pedagogical rules dismiss and control student emotion and thereby devalue students' emoting bodies, inhibiting the primary work of embodied writing pedagogies. She contends that if teachers hope to use these pedagogies to revitalise our classrooms and to attend to the body as an epistemic origin, they must recognise the shortcomings of the current, disdainful treatment of emotion, which is driven largely by our fear of the body and the separation of thinking from feeling.

Candance Doerr-Stevens' paper, *Limbs beyond the skin: Exploring the physical realities of digital composition*, discusses how prolonged participation and digital composition online intersect to forge material extensions of the physical body, or limbs beyond the skin. Based on postmodern theories of technology and the body, she argues that these limbs, while less tangible, merit serious consideration given their potential to engender physical reactions to virtual events. The data used to illustrate this forging of limbs comes from her study of student engagement with online role-play, in which fictional role-play events had physical consequences for real-world participants. Exploring the body as networked across online and offline contexts, Doerr-Stevens contends, provides a deeper understanding not only of youth engagement in the process of digital media composition but also in the design of curriculum that involves virtual settings for learning.

Hilary Hughes-Decatur, in her paper, *Embodied literacies: Learning to first acknowledge and then read the body in education*, examines the discourses that shape and change our perceptions and experiences of our bodies. She argues that the subject of bodies is under-researched in education; specifically, it has been over-buried by psychological and sociological studies and appears to warrant no further exploration. Hughes-Decatur concludes that mind/body dualism continues to permeate educational discourse.

Grace Enriquez, in her paper, *Embodying exclusion: The daily melancholia and performative politics of struggling early adolescent readers*, presents two case studies of students identified as struggling readers, concentrating specifically on their embodiment of those responses. She argues that considering the body as "a site for knowledge" and "an object of practice in students' and faculties' daily pedagogical lives" provides a fresh lens through which to view the social dynamics and experiences within classrooms (Hamera, 2005, p. 70). Thus, she illustrates how these students embodied identities as struggling readers, both in support of that identity and in response to the ways they were treated and positioned as readers. Enriquez argues that, instead of addressing so-called struggling students by first attending to their cognitive processes with texts, teachers might make more headway by first asking what a student is trying to do as a reader, what texts he or she is using to do that, and for or with whom – and then determining how best to support them in those efforts.

As counterpoint to these papers, Kath Grushka's paper, *The "other" literacy narrative: The body and the role of image production*, and Christine A. Mallozzi's paper, *Reading women teachers: A theoretical assertion for bodies as texts,* were chosen for this issue's Narrative pieces to take up the contested and dynamic nature of what it means to be literate. Kath Grushka argues that images are increasingly a primary means of communication and that they have been emancipated and

democratised in the post-literate age. Images are accessible and are being endlessly reproduced and manipulated on a scale never seen before. Seeing and being seen, or visibility as identity, is an important aspect of classroom learning and representation in curriculum. Grushka contends that the impact on body representations as identity constructs is integral to any pedagogy that purports to be relevant to the contemporary learner and interdisciplinary inquiry. More specifically, visual pedagogies are unique in their performative and material practices and are connected in profound ways to experience, meaning and the construction of self.

Mallozzi uses a personal narrative to ground three theories which create a base for understanding bodies as texts that are read. Ricoeur's (1971/2007) hermeneutic interpretivist theory of bodily action as text maintains that, during real-time events, an observer can interpret a person's action for meaning. De Lauretis's (1984) theory of imaging contends that people derive meaning from bodily images based on observers' expectations, the image itself, and the context, all which are driven by socio-cultural beliefs that are present before and during the reading. Gee's theory of Discourse (1996, 1999) weaves through the frame that is set by Ricoeur and de Lauretis and reveals the ways bodies affect and are affected by the social and cultural world. Mallozzi argues that these three theories, when viewed in concert around women teachers' bodies, establish the body as a text that is read for meaning.

Re-membering the preparation this issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique* has meant for me the re-collection of texts, events, and people. The issue has brought together teachers and scholars from three continents and an island nation and is intended to reach beyond these limits. The preparation was physical and mental, pleasurable and laborious. Hopefully, you will find affective connection and critical engagement in these papers. If there is any good in them it is the result of the effort of my two excellent co-editors, Stephanie Jones and Kerryn Dixon.

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