

Watkins, Megan. *Discipline and Learn: Bodies, Pedagogy and Writing*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012. 229 pages. \$49.40. 978-94-6091-697-7. Print.

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Megan Watkins's *Discipline and Learn: Bodies, Pedagogy and Writing* seeks to theorize a notion of "pedagogic embodiment" in which teachers engage in practices that train the body for scholarly work, particularly writing. Watkins develops this concept using a year-long study of writing instruction in kindergarten, year three, and year five classes at two schools in Sydney, Australia. Watkins argues that progressive educational philosophy finds roots in mind/body dualism and Foucauldian notions of disciplinary force, producing teaching practices that ignore the role of the body in the process of learning and obscure the potential of teacher-directed disciplining of the student body to encourage a self-disciplining that is necessary for scholarly work. In the first section of the text, Watkins thoroughly reviews embodiment scholarship and challenges Foucault's assessment of discipline. In doing so, she argues that discipline has "an enabling potential" which can cultivate individual agency.

The second section of the book analyzes three sets of classrooms through which she compares the functionality and ability of students in a progressive, student-centered classroom to those of a more traditional, teacher-centered classroom. Her observations highlight the ways that less directed teaching methods and activities fail to enable students to achieve a disposition for academic work that is appropriate for their age and grade level. She specifically critiques progressive educational techniques of facilitation, group work, and praise by arguing that these practices fail to provide students with a "bodily disposition for literate practice" (163). Throughout the text, Watkins advocates for directive, instructional, and motivational writing pedagogies that affectively promote habituation of the physical practices that enable writing and then the desire to write.

Watkins, a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney, has a body of work that explores various treatments of embodiment, the role of desire in teaching and learning, and what she has called the accumulation of affects, a process through which teacher and student interact in the dynamic space of the classroom to grow and develop (“Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect”). Her research falls squarely within education, but her theoretical applications come from the scholarship of cultural studies and philosophy. *Discipline and Learn* is an iteration of her previous work in which she challenges current teaching trends away from teacher-directed classrooms that reinforce a separation of body and mind.

Though Watkins’ study specifically analyzes six elementary classrooms and does not draw upon writing studies scholarship per se, she draws from intellectuals who are familiar to teachers of writing and writing studies scholars at all levels. Watkins employs Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, and Spinoza, among others, to demonstrate the interrelatedness of mind and body, specifically in the context of learning literate practice, as well as a gap in our understanding of what lies between “what is done to the body” and “what the body does”(34). In Chapter 1 of the text, Watkins adeptly paces us through embodiment scholarship of Merleau-Ponty, Mauss, Bourdieu, and Butler, explaining their part in the advancement of the theorizing, but finding that ultimately there has yet to be any satisfactory work on how “conscious intent” and “corporeal competence” connect to “human practice” (34). At the same time, Watkins undresses Foucault’s treatment of discipline by illustrating that the educational research born of his theory trains its eye toward social constitution and “downplays the agency of individual bodies’ utilization of space” (28). She argues that pedagogy (not just philosophy) should be concerned with the mind/body relation, asserting that “this interface between structure and agency, mind and body is where theorization about the nature of pedagogic practice should be centered” (33-34).

In Chapter 2, Watkins begins theorizing by offering a “Spinozan reading of Bourdieu’s habitus” (53). She explains that Bourdieu’s

notion of habitus usefully acknowledges “the processes of social embodiment in understanding practice” as “essentially accumulation of bodily affects, which over time have sedimented into dispositions” (52). But Bourdieu deals in the impact of the body on the unconscious mind, and in moving habitus into the context of teaching, Watkins needs a bridge between body and conscious mind. Here she turns to Vygotsky’s theory of the Zone of Proximal Development [“students are more capable of successfully completing a task if they firstly receive guidance” (123)] and its emphasis on “teacher direction upon student learning” to propose her key concept of “pedagogic affect,” in which the human activity of teaching, a kind of social “disciplinary force,” that manifests in direction of the classroom environment and implementation of curriculum “affects students’ bodies and minds” (53-55). This forms the basis of her next argument for a particular kind of affect that is more successful in helping students to achieve “dispositions” for scholarly work that are embodied, conscious, and then unconscious over time, a process that enables students to increasingly sophisticated work, specifically writing. Watkins promotes teacher direction, constructive criticism (not praise), and regulation of the learning environment to create repetition, reflection, and constancy that will teach students to self-regulate, which, ultimately, will engender students’ agency.

She moves from the high abstractions of the first section of the book into a very concrete investigation of the historical and contemporary New South Wales Department of Education syllabus documents that set forth the pedagogic beliefs and values for the six classrooms she studied. After analyzing the discourse of these syllabi, Watkins offers detailed descriptions and comparisons of progressive-inspired and traditional-leaning classrooms at three grade levels: kindergarten, year three, and year five. She focuses on how each teacher’s stated educational philosophy, progressive or traditional, manifested in the management of her classroom and impacted how well students learned to write. Watkins describes the arrangement of classroom spaces, how movement occurs in

the spaces, noise levels, allotments of time, uses of group work, and curriculum implementation through exercises and activities.

With little discussion of her methods and methodologies, the research presentation does not offer much in the way of modeling for writing researchers. The findings are very clearly directed to fulfilling the prophecy of the first section of the book: Progressive pedagogy is not as effective as traditional pedagogy in habituating students to literate practices because it fails to provide students with direction, iteration, and repetition that habituates the body to literate practice. As an example of how discipline figures into the physical space of the classroom, Watkins compares the kindergarten classroom of the progressive teacher as a space designed “for ease and comfort more conducive to play than work” with several discrete work spaces to and from which students continually moved with little supervision (98). The result was numerous “frequent change[s] of activities, [such that] children were not settled in any one spot for very long periods of time” (101). By contrast, the kindergarten teacher with a more traditional educational philosophy arranged her classroom with a “panoptic quality” that made students “aware their teacher’s gaze was directed at them seemingly instilling a self-corrective to monitor their behavior” (117). Watkins argues that this teacher-directedness is an appropriate and necessary part of enabling children to develop self-discipline. To demonstrate the relative effectiveness of the two pedagogies, Watkins ends each detailed account of her observations with a comparison of student writings from the progressive and traditional classrooms. In each case, the writing produced by the students taught in the more traditional setting (teacher-directed, regimented, with exercises that repeated writing practices) demonstrated more improvement.

In one of the most compelling descriptions of the effectiveness of embodied pedagogy, Watkins depicts the bodily impact of concentrated periods of time on a regular basis on teaching writing. In the more traditional, body-attentive classroom, the teacher created an academic atmosphere with quiet, extended periods of time to allow for concentration and extended physical

work of writing. She repeatedly provided these opportunities, scaffolded with teacher intervention, whole class discussion, and sharing. By contrast, the more progressive teacher, who believed in giving students a comfortable space to explore their own innate abilities and desires, did not provide scaffolding and demanded no quiet time for concentrated effort. With student writing samples, Watkins demonstrates that student writing improved more significantly in the former class than in the latter. As most writing teachers would agree, “The complexity of [the writing] process necessitates the habituation of much of this technology” (149), which includes handwriting, spelling, punctuation, syntax, and textual form (148). Thus, Watkins argues, “The implications for pedagogy are that students need to devote sustained periods of time to acquiring these skills and to iteratively performing them to ensure they are habituated as bodily capacity” (149). It is not difficult to conceive of the need for concentrated time for writing in more advanced writing classrooms with older students who are habituating to genre conventions, digital composing practices, and critical thinking.

Watkins promotes pedagogy that is teaching focused, rather than learning focused, and her treatment of the progressive-leaning teachers reads harshly at many points in her discussion. But this is tempered by reference back to her analysis of the syllabus documents, which set forth the pedagogical imperatives for the teachers throughout the school district and to which the teachers are adhering, albeit with different tendencies and beliefs about the atmosphere that is most conducive to learning in the classroom. Insofar as these documents offer a form of teacher training and education, the district’s “[s]yllabus documents . . . place emphasis on intended student outcomes and fail to detail the pedagogy required to achieve these” (149). Watkins also offers a brief consideration of the socioeconomic factors at play, acknowledging that the progressive teachers “who embraced a more psychological model of learning” worked with a more ethnically diverse and less affluent work population of students than the teachers who were more “attuned to the corporeality of

learning” (196). But she quickly concludes “the students . . . were not only better writers because of their class background” but rather “were better writers than most of their peers . . . largely because of the capacitating properties of their teachers’ pedagogy” (196). This assertion comes a bit too easily and invites a more thorough analysis and exploration into the relationship between socioeconomic factors and pedagogical practices.

Watkins concludes with a reiteration of her main claims: “[C]ertain forms of embodiment can promote capacitation” and pedagogic affect is maximized in more-traditional, disciplined teaching situations (201), but it is her discussion of desire and an ethos of learning in the last chapter that may be the most valuable proposition of her project. Not only did student-subjects become “invested with a discipline that predisposed them towards writing” through pedagogy that attended to corporeality of learning, they became “invested with a desire to learn which was grounded in the attainment of knowledge and skills” (195). Watkins observes that many of the progressive, psychology-focused teachers viewed students as either having the desire to learn or not, failing to see that desire can be and is cultivated affectively in learning environments. For Watkins, classroom practices that promote discipline create an ethos of learning which, in turn, creates a collective desire to learn, to write, and to do both well. It will remind many writing teachers of students who seem disinterested, even resistant, to writing or writing well and it suggests that we are not powerless in fostering this desire through our bodily interactions in the classroom. Watkins’s parting words encourage writing teachers to explore desire as a “scholarly disposition:” “The desire to write is not simply a matter of motivation; it is predicated on bodily capacity, which, in the context of schooling, is only attained through ‘the living work of the teacher’” (201).

Watkins’ intellectual work and detailed analysis of her observed classrooms is impressive. But the text has limited utility if we cannot get on board with Watkins’s critique of Foucault and the logic of her argument for a positive disciplinary force that habituates the body toward learning and agency. Her study of

elementary age writing pedagogy and practices would be most enlightening for teachers of younger students. It might not seem to have much application for writing teachers of older students unless we can bridge the conceptual differences between the very physical quality of writing instruction in elementary school and the more cognitive nature of writing at secondary and college levels. Perhaps it does not translate for all, but it does open the door to further consideration of the role that habituation might play at all levels of writing instruction as we encourage more complex uses of language, use of writing to develop critical thinking, and development of creativity and style. Watkins herself hints at the connection when she notes that grammar and syntax are habituated and become unconscious, allowing cognitive space to be freed for higher order writing practices. There is also something about the way in which she considers desire that validates the teaching profession in a very satisfying way that acknowledges the emotional investments of teaching and learning and that proposes a construction of desire that is scholarly, empowering, and socially cultivated.

At the very least, Watkins' work encourages writing teachers to think critically about our practices and values, pushing us beyond the pedantry of learning outcomes, to some very heavy reflection on the affective potency of our own classrooms. It is also a rather provocative invitation to teachers to care for themselves and to permit themselves to work from the front of the classroom. And even if we do not agree with Watkins' ultimate theory about the enabling agentic potential of disciplinary force, we can agree that teachers have been devalued significantly in the "learning" process for a variety of reasons—educational and political—and that her work importantly shifts the focus from learning to teaching, which gives much greater value and significance to the work that teachers do.

Works Cited

- Watkins, Megan. "Desiring Recognition, Accumulating Affect." *The Affect Theory Reader*. Ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. Print.