

ELASTIC ENGLISH: A MISSION FOR WRITING CENTERS

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According to Jordan Bates' "The 14 Mindfulness Teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Zen Buddhist Order," to be an engaged Buddhist, one must first be mindful of the suffering that fanaticism and intolerance create and, therefore, be determined not to hold idolatrous attachment to any doctrine, theory, or ideology. Jared Featherstone, among other writing center scholars, has explored the relationships between mindfulness practice and higher learning, primarily as a means of reducing anxiety and depression, though what this paper will focus on is mindfulness's relationship to "attention" (300), the guide by which I recommend writing consultants determine which techniques to employ in any given consultation, as opposed to the reliance on "any routine or 'typical tutorial' model" (Gamache 2). In other words, the consultant should be attentive, or mindful, of the suffering his or her views and methods can cause the student writer when the consultant imposes idolatrous or habitual views or methods or assumptions on another. Put another way, what we writing consultants must become mindful of is our need to be "elastic" in each step of the tutoring process so we find, through trial and error, an approach that is ever more effective than our last effort and invites relaxed openness and positivity. Ralph Waldo Emerson implies elasticity when he states, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment" ("Circles" 238). Henry David Thoreau concurs with Emerson's notion of "abandonment": "To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is a perpetual morning" (134). With similar enthusiasm for crucial mindfulness and adaptability, Walt Whitman sings in "Song of Myself," "O span of youth! Ever-push'd elasticity" (45.1). Not even gothic Edgar Allan Poe can disagree when isolating the foremost quality of post-mortem femininity: ". . . the majesty, the quiet ease . . . the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of [Ligeia's] footfall" (2). And if the object of one's monomaniacal obsession is instead a whale, the quality deserving the greatest celebration remains the same: the "subtle elasticity" of its tail, as Herman Melville professes, "Therein no fairy's arm can transcend it" (411).

Writers of the American Renaissance remind us that to achieve transcendence—empowerment of the self, in the context of the writing center—we must begin with an elastic self, by exercising the mind critically and creatively in every possible way around the perplexities inherent in rhetoric and writing. We improve the odds of communication when the avenues are mutually open; the same is true of learning and mindfulness. When consultants are mindful, open, and communicative and the breadth of our repertoire of rhetorical writing strategies—our "morning," our "youth"—is on display, student writers will potentially be mindful, open, and communicative in response. Potentially they will, as another likely consequence, acquire an enhanced awareness and understanding of, if not an appreciation for, the myriad strategies for revision, in addition to specific rules and conventions. I propose then that "Elastic English" become our common mission, if not ministry, as we consultants seek to improve the writer's ability "to build out of" the binding perplexities that Peter Elbow, in "The Music of Form," argues writing entails (638). All of us, to some degree, already practice Elastic English to enhance mindfulness in tutorials. Nevertheless, I wish to name it our mission to urge elasticity, not only for the purpose of reducing suffering for the writer and the consultant collectively, but also for increasing communication and reciprocal learning. The rewards help both of us to remain motivated, focused, and positive.

I look to the Transcendentalists for my conceptual understanding of "elasticity," for I find their respect for nature (or our surrounding elements) and the transcendent relationship a person potentially has with it (or them) actually approximate what the consultant and student writer experience in a tutorial, even if the "woods" of the writing center are merely metaphorical. We consultants and our writers always have the potential to experience the ideal transcendental state of "inspiration" and "ecstasy" ("The Transcendentalist" 243) as Emerson describes the positive ideal of nature, just as we often experience its "noxious" ("Experience" 298) and "tyrannous" ("Fate" 369) state—when tutorials fail to benefit both parties. "In the woods," Emerson writes in his essay "Nature," "we return to reason and faith . . . Standing on the bare

ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God . . . I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty” (39). This passage seems a fair depiction of the commonly experienced reality a consultant and a writer share—when the consultant’s nonjudgmental editorial eye becomes a transparent eyeball and connects with the nature of a paper and with the writer’s divine intentions for it. When the consultant sees into the page, or beyond it. When she has that equally divine insight and offers recommendations that are closer to prophecies they so well solve riddles. When the experience becomes a spiritual reward to both by honoring the goal and vehicle of language equally and so honoring both the consultant and the writer equally, if not for that moment preserving their highest hopes.

Thoreau posits that “Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system” (141), and I posit that the environment of the writing center rests, too, in the “outskirts of the system.” What we typically have, essentially, is a meeting, a happening, of two minds between virtual strangers outside the bounds of the classroom. The first mind, that of the pilgrim student, has heard the details and models and cautions of an assignment directly from a professor, while the other mind, in the role of mentor, if not prophet, must direct a Socratic dialogue to ascertain enough of that exclusive knowledge and then must, on a good day, intuit the rest. This meeting of minds in effect occurs where “Two roads diverged in a wood” (Frost, “The Road Not Taken” 18), so does the consultant view the student writer in the way Thoreau “caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across [his] path, [when he] . . . felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw” (257)? Or does the consultant rather ensure that the two of them together, “knowing how way leads on to way,” take the road “less traveled by”—the one “that will make all the difference” (Frost 14, 19)? It’s quite an intellectual and spiritual meeting, a joint venture in trust and trade, an intimate dependence on the kindness of strangers that includes a campsite dance, maybe even a feast, so that the dialogue is purposeful but lively and, therefore, satisfies, proves helpful, and even enlightens. To keep the ideal path directed toward “the difference,” consultants must continuously be attentive with that transparent eyeball, ever vigilant, ever mindful of the signs of connection and disconnection in the smoke of entrails.

Consultants who adopt Elastic English remain mindful of the need to guard against spoon-feeding the

student writer into unattached oblivion. I am mindful now of Jeff Brooks’ point of purpose in “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work” that “students write to learn, not to make perfect papers” (130). For the tutorial to succeed then, the student must become mindful, too.

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