

“Imagining Something Not Yet”—The Project of Public Writing: A Conversation with Paula Mathieu



Christopher Minnix

Abstract: In this interview, Paula Mathieu explores the rhetorical tactics and contemplative practices necessary to cultivate hope in a period of political tumult. Drawing on her scholarship on the “public turn” in Composition Studies, a term she gave us in her vital *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, Mathieu discusses tactics and strategies for teaching public writing and supporting the work of public writing teachers at a time when community partnerships and service learning are more susceptible to critique in political discourse. Mathieu traces out a synthesis between mindfulness and public engagement and underlines the importance of seeing the contemplative as productive and reflective of public engagement.

Chris: For many of us in the field, the understanding of hope and tactical rhetoric that you develop in *Tactics of Hope* was, and continues to be, revelatory, as it expanded how we understand not only the practices of public rhetoric but the efficacy of public rhetoric. Hope, as you have argued, “is the tension between reality and vision that provides the energy and motivation to keep working” (19). This special issue has asked contributors to think about what we might want from the teaching of public writing in our current moment. For many, this moment, one characterized by “fake news” and “alternative facts” might not seem the most hopeful of times for public rhetoric and public discourse. As public writing teachers, how might we cultivate hope during our current moment? What tactics of hope might we employ?

Paula: I was really glad to be asked this question. How do we cultivate hope? I draw on Ernst Bloch and his work because for him hope is not an emotion. I mean, there’s an emotional component to it, but it really is a combination of emotion, analytic reflection, and action. Those three things are all what he defines as hope.

We’re in a moment when I think it’s very easy to feel very negative and to feel overwhelmed by the problem, to do what George Lakoff says in *Don’t Think of an Elephant*—respond to the frames you’re given because the frames are so overwhelming. It’s so easy to get hung up on covfefe and the Paris accords, all the kind of things that are so easy to get drawn into, but what Bloch really talks about in terms of hope is imagining something completely not yet. When things are so unhelpful, when you don’t just find yourself responding to the problems at hand but responding to the frames, that’s when we need to get outside the frames.

Chris: That strikes me as a productive way of thinking about rhetorical participation and action. Instead of simply responding, hope, in Bloch’s terms might lead us to envision other projects, other forms of rhetorical action.

Paula: I was just on a dissertation committee last summer. Her name is Kristi Girdharry. She’s at Northeastern. She helped build an archive of the Boston marathon bombing—people’s responses, their memories at the moment. Her project involved getting oral history, getting people to write, and getting people to remember. The rhetorical work wasn’t just analyzing, but building.

That’s doing a project, doing something that’s related to these problems, but also imagining how people are going to interact with these texts and developing a whole worldview of how will the word change if we build something that allows people to interact with them. I think that kind of archive building is a really important move in our field.

To me, that's a really important move—to have some kind of project. It might be why I've been interested in street papers. They are about changing the way people perceive homelessness, but not in a "you shouldn't think this way about homelessness." Instead, you read this really great poem or this great news article that someone wrote. This building of projects. To me, that's what hope means. This gets into some of the contemplative work that I'm doing. It's so easy to get pulled in to the things we hate, to say "Oh my gosh, I can't believe we can't even care about climate change." It's very easy to get pulled into that, but thinking instead about organizing a march for the climate would be a better response than just sitting online on Facebook and saying how much you hate somebody or some policy.

That's what I've been personally been trying to do—limit my social media consumption a little bit and think about the rhetoric. One thing that really was disheartening was seeing all the ad hominem attacks and the violent imagery against President Obama for eight years that had nothing to do with policies or facts or ideas. So I decided that I don't want to do that to someone whose ideas I find appalling. I'm trying to not fall into that same ad hominem because it's easy. You get a dopamine hit or something, I'm sure, on some level, but in the scheme of things, I don't think that's very hopeful. I think it's really easy to put yourself into a very negative cycle. What's so cool about Bloch is he says, "you have to imagine something that doesn't exist."

And that's what I like about community-based writing and public writing as goals for Writing Studies because they are always about trying to imagine something that's not yet, whether it's a way to frame an issue, a campaign, or whatever. I think that focus on building something rather than tearing something down, at least for me, is really necessary. I find it emotionally very draining to be just tearing things down. It's not how I want to spend my day.

That's the utopian influence of Bloch. It's not that you're going to get it right; utopia's never going to be the right vision, but we need something completely different to get us out of the moment of the now. He calls it the *novum*, the new thing. That's what I am thinking about what we need to do now. You can't just moan about fake news or alternative facts. Create a site that helps students source check or do some kind of project that contributes to what you worry about, but in a positive way. That's at least how I think about it.

Chris: This focus on the project rather than on the frame makes me think about the types of projects that will play the biggest role in sponsoring our students' public participation or rhetorical agency. This brings to mind questions that have been with public writing research for a long time—questions about the authenticity of assignments and how they foster students' public participation. I'm thinking of Brian Gogan's recent article on the letter to the editor assignment, where he seeks to expand our understanding of public participation. What, for you, makes a project authentic, or is that a category that you worry about a lot?

Paula: I don't know if I use the word authentic because it seems unitary—that we can only have one authentic self. But I do believe strongly in real purposes and real audiences. I don't want students to be just writing something to please me and to get a grade. A project I really have become quite attached to and that I tend to use in a lot of different courses is some kind of oral history or interview with someone in students' own generation or older than themselves. Often times, they're very meaningful projects. Students may want to collect family history or they may want to ask questions they've never felt they have the permission to ask about. Just this past semester, I had some students asking about divorce and another student asking about another family member's suicide, all kinds of things that have kind of been the third rail of family conversation. When you have an assignment, you might feel like you can have permission to ask. During that time in my class this past semester, we focused a lot on contemplative listening, really focusing on the act of listening itself—what it gives us. I always believe in having at least one assignment where the students have to think about whatever the issues were in the class and then apply them in a way that they feel has meaning to a real audience.



I have also just finished an elective writing course called Mindful Storytelling that focuses on this connection between writing, the stories we tell ourselves in our heads, and mindfulness. So, for a final project, I said “you have to do something with a real purpose and a real audience, and it has to connect to mindfulness and storytelling.” Like Jody Shipka’s “heads-up statement” (Shipka 288), I say “you have to give me a heads-up statement to show me how it connects, but the project is entirely up to you.” Some people wrote things like gratitude letters to family and friends.

One student was an EMT on campus. He works with a local church on their religious education program, and he felt that their discussion about alcohol was completely naïve, uninformed, and dangerous. It was kind of like “don’t drink and you’ll be fine.” As an EMT working on a college campus, he really wanted students to know when you should call 911, when someone just needs to sleep it off, etc. He said, “I don’t know if they’ll ever use this, but I’m going to write the kind of the project I think provides the information these kids really do need to make informed choices, and I’m going to give it to them in the hope that they’ll adopt it. If not, I’m going to give it to resident advisers because some of the RAs don’t know what to do. There’s a high cost to calling 911. A student will get written up or will get into trouble, so they don’t know when to call.” It was a very practical project. It’s public in a very focused way. In the same way, another student who has a sister who’s going to become a college freshman composed a podcast for her on how to survive her freshman year of college. It’s beautiful, and it’s the first time he’d ever done a podcast.

I do believe in real purposes and real audiences; and also, to some extent, trusting our students because they are already involved in a lot of interesting things. In the fall, I’m teaching a class called Writing and Social Action. It’s going to focus a lot on grant writing and working with nonprofits. Some of it will be working directly with Spare Change News in Cambridge, but there’s also students who are involved in volunteer stuff on campus or other nonprofits. I’m hoping that they can bring in that information too.

Chris: Courses like these speak, I think, to the idea that participation need not be on the grand scale of solving a public problem. Those problems involve a long struggle, and there are many ways to contribute.

Paula: Right. Also, following my interest in contemplative practices, sometimes that means we work on ourselves. Sometimes we’re not in the best place to be in community with others, and the best kind of gift we can give to the community is to work on our own reactivity, our own sort of emotional responses. I think I felt guilty when I got interested in contemplative practices and someone said to me offhandedly, “Oh, I guess you’re really turning away from all your activist stuff.” I was like, “No!” Because it was activism that brought me to that place.

But it’s very easy to see the kind of work that one does on oneself as solipsistic or selfish, instead of really seeing that I’m really the only one I can directly affect in terms of how I behave, and that how I act in community and with others is the way I can change the world. We can talk more about that later, but that’s been a struggle of mine, a feeling like public has to be big and important and deconstructing that for myself and seeing that it doesn’t have to be. I think Rosa Eberly once wrote about proto-public spaces and I was like, “Oh, I like that. That sounds more suitable to me. I’ll do proto-public writing then.”

Chris: Thinking about our public work and our teaching from the perspective of contemplative practices strikes me as a way to deal with the inevitable backlashes to public writing and community writing. We’ve seen these backlashes recently in reports like the National Association of Scholars’ *Making Citizens: How American Universities Teach Civics* and in the reappearance of the professor watch-lists.

Paula: You’re right about this backlash. In *Tactics of Hope*, I write about strategies and tactics and their relationship to place. I think, certainly when I talk about community work, I was arguing for tactical work, but I think this is where strategies really come in handy.

When there’s a big backlash from big organizations, this is when we should turn to our own big organizations and have strategic plans. Some of that is under way currently. At this past CCCCs, Linda Adler-Kassner put together a new CCCCs strategic action task force, specifically in response to NAS. Should we make a direct response? Will we be creating more publicity for the report by responding to it directly? What are the resources that people like Veronica House, who is named in the report, can use locally on their campus?

That’s a task force that I’m now a member of and Steve Parks is leading. How do we determine who our allies are, whether it’s alumni or other faculty? How do we build our support? How do we be smart? This is a time when you want to think in these big strategic ways and have this many thick spaces. To have a report signed by CCCCs is more meaningful than just me or you writing a letter saying, “Oh we think this report is bad.” That’s one way.

In addition, the Conference on Community Writing’s is working to create a vision of excellence for what community work looks like. This year, Veronica House at CU Boulder is the head of this work. She’s amazing.

We started a mentoring program, and we had a workshop at CCCCs, where people who have community projects

were able to sit down, talk to Eli Goldblatt, or David Jolliffe, or Veronica, or me, or Alan Cushman. There were many of us there. They got to say “well, I’m starting this project, and these are the troubles I’m having.” It’s all very local, and it’s very place-based. You can’t just put out a bunch of rules. Sometimes you just need to talk to someone who says, “Well, you applied for this kind of funding. What does the Dean’s office say?” You need to find your allies, your connections.

One way we can be stronger is to start developing a track record of us as a field saying “this is what we think excellence in community writing looks like,” so then when people are critical, we can respond. When people are having to answer the questions “why are you doing this?,” “what’s the good of this project?,” being able to look to a national document saying “this is how our head organization thinks these things should be evaluated” is really useful. Institutions are a reality and I’m not against them. It’s just a matter of what are they good for. I don’t think they’re typically good for making responsive projects semester after semester, but they are good for this kind of big strategic thinking, thinking about how we as a field say we value this kind of work.

Chris: Often, like in the NAS report, these arguments make the move of pitting academic writing and “basic literacy” against the type of community engagement that we see in public writing pedagogy. How might we respond? What kind of constraints might this discourse put on us?

Paula: Why is it that English Departments teaching community engagement is a problem? I mean, there’s a whole leap there that makes no sense. I mean, I would be more than happy to have our undergraduate curriculum require a undergraduate political science class in US civics. I think it would be great. I think civic literacy is low. I think they’re right about that. But then saying that anybody doing community-based writing is just evil and a pawn of the left is sort of a big leap.

I don’t know if it’s a backlash, but it does feel like some corners of our field are moving away from the public. If you accept the bounds of writing as preparing students for their college careers, that that’s what the job of writing is. Then it makes clear sense to administrators. I think that’s a fine job, but what drew me to writing is what writing can do in the world. So, yeah, it can help get students through college. That’s one thing writing can do in the world. That’s just not everything writing can do. Even in my Mindful Storytelling class, having students realize what writing can do for them personally, when they’re feeling moments of anxiety, or when they need to question tacit beliefs about themselves or the world that they held for a long time, even that, which is even less public than some of the other projects, feels really impactful to me.

If all we do is help our clients sort of successfully navigate the institution and get good customer service rankings, writing is just not as meaningful. In their new book, *The Meaningful Writing Project*, Michele Eodice, Anne Ellen Geller, and Neal Lerner researched hundreds of students in order to understand what makes writing meaningful, and one of the things they found was some sense of personal engagement. How do you make students passionate about a project, whether it’s writing a grant or writing an academic essay, or doing a podcast for their sister? I know how to work with passionate students as a teacher. The hardest thing is working with a student who’s not passionate about what they’re doing and trying to get them to care about it.

I find it a lot easier to have students come up with things they’re passionate about, or to help them find things they’re passionate about, rather than trying to convince them. I guess I wouldn’t be the right teacher to convince them of why exploring the discourse community of one’s major is an assignment to get super excited about. I’m sure the right teacher could.

Chris: How do we bring this passionate commitment to the public that we explore in our classes to writing programs? Like you, I am a writing program administrator. I think a lot of us who are committed to public writing and who also direct writing programs think about how we might collaborate with faculty to build, support, and sustain public writing programs. How do you understand the role of WPAs in the public turn?

Paula: I think it’s hard. The job of WPA is the hardest part of my job. I think all things are possible if we have a teaching staff that’s very stable and well supported, and also if we have a program that extends beyond one semester. Currently I don’t have either of those things. [Laughs]. I’m working toward the former; the latter will probably never happen. I would never require community work because of the burden I think it places both on teachers and students. I see my job of writing program director to be as supportive I can of what the staff wants to do, what the people want to do. I had a part-time instructor who was very interested in public writing. I helped pay for his trip to go to the Conference on Community Writing. I try to support projects with small amounts of funding, so I think one thing WPAs can do is funding. We should use whatever fungible money we have to support pedagogical innovation in whatever form people want it to take.

What I’ve been focusing on is really helping students see writing as a tool for a living because I think they come in

over-tested and seeing writing as just that boring thing that you have to do. Before we can have people going out and changing the world with writing, we have to get them to believe that writing matters. Seeing writing as a form of social action—if we can really teach that, then maybe they'll sign up for my Writing in Social Action class or other kinds of classes that we offer.

So, one thing I'm planning to do this year is to have us as instructors get together and try to name what we think our assignments ask students to do. I want this to be a project where everybody writes their ideas on Post-it notes and then we go around and say things like "well, is 'inquire' the same thing as 'learning about?'. Are those synonyms?" So, for my class, I use "writing to 'orient,' 'inquire,' 'heal,' and 'advocate.'" Those are my words. Someone else would be like "'heal?'," I don't like that word. I say reflect." I'm hoping that will be the kind of discussion where we ask ourselves what we are asking writing to do.

That might be ten stages removed from really supporting an active kind of public writing curriculum, but I think that an important step for us as teachers is to think about what writing can do and what its limitations are and share this conversation with our students. David Jolliffe spoke at CCCCs about this. He's been doing work with men on death row in Arkansas, and they are doing a lot of writing projects. Several of those men have been executed and some of them were not. It probably had very little to do with how good any of their writing was. When can writing save a life, and when does it just not matter? I think those kinds of case studies and those issues are really important and can make students both value writing and also see that it's not everything. Sometimes might wins out over right, and sometimes words aren't up to the occasion, but sometimes they are.

To me, that's been the central kind of conundrum that makes me love what I do. I feel like when we get back to those really basic questions with our staff and our students we're doing ourselves a favor. I always feel like a writing class is supposed to prepare people for every thing they're ever going to meet in their life. You know, you can't do that, but if they can at least know that they can read an assignment and say, "What am I supposed to be doing here?" or "What can I tell from reading this assignment about what this audience wants?," just doing that kind of critical reading might be helpful.

This summer, I'm going to be working with Bob Yagelski on thinking about writing as a tool for a living, that's kind of my new mantra--that it's not just about navigating the institution. Writing is an important tool for doing a lot of things in life, not everything, but some stuff.

Chris: Throughout our conversation, we keep coming back to the idea that university and college education are something that should go beyond disciplinary and vocational aims, that higher education should educate the whole person. Two of your recent articles, "Excavating Indoor Voices," and "Being There: Mindfulness as Ethical Classroom Practice," have pursued the fascinating question of mindfulness in the writing classroom, and we've touched on mindfulness in public discourse several times during our conversation. When I think of your work, I can see mindfulness infused throughout your work through an emphasis on telling accurate narratives about our practices and being present to question the conditions of our teaching and the institutions we inhabit. How might mindfulness help us think about the role of university education?

Paula: Well, I feel lucky working at a Jesuit institution, where there's a very clear focus on educating the whole person. It's not just about career, it's about vocation. This class I just finished teaching on mindful storytelling falls into a program called Capstone, which is a unique program for seniors that asks them to reflect on their own education and their relationship with self, community, family, career, and spirituality. It asks all the big questions of life.

In my class, the question is "what is a mindful story?" What is the story we tell ourselves that brings us to greater awareness or sense of being in the world? What are the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves in the world, stories that make us feel? I'm fortunate. I went to all state universities, so I'm used to working in a secular institution. The advantage of working in a Jesuit school is that we are allowed to ask questions of spirituality. It's not that there's one right spirituality, or that it needs to be Christian, but it's at least a question on the table. I think this is valuable because so many of our public debates today are being justified in terms of spirituality or religion in one way or another. I think this environment allows me the permission to care about those things and not have to feel apologetic about them, but I also think another reason is that I am a first-generation college student, and I often work with people who don't have college degrees. I see college as one piece of a larger cultural puzzle. I got interested in writing, in rhetoric, because of all the things I saw writing doing in other places, and not just in an institution.

I think part of this interest in mindfulness is that this is just what is interesting to me, but I also think that it's connected, whether secularly or spiritually, to worrying about how our students are doing. Are people okay? To me, that question supersedes what they know about the discipline I'm trying to teach them. If you don't have students in your class who are okay, what difference does it make how good you are at teaching them something? There's a

book by Christopher Uhl, an environmental scientist, called *Teaching As If Life Matters*. In the chapter “We are Not Brains on a Stick,” he talks about the need to engage students’ emotions and their preconceptions about things. I think what got me more involved in contemplative practices is that I became persuaded that we can’t really do the job of intellectual work if we are not mindful of all these other things going on in our lives, in our students’ lives. Intellect is just one way of knowing. It’s not even necessarily the best way of knowing. Sometimes our brains tell us ridiculous stories that are completely untrue, super unhealthy, and drive us crazy.

If intellect were the way out, then our brightest faculty members would be the happiest people on earth. We know that’s not true. What is the role of intellect in relationship to all these other ways of knowing? To me, that’s a really key question. Bob Yagelski wrote a book that I think is just amazing called *Writing as a Way of Being*. He says that as long as we rely on the Cartesian dualism of “I think therefore I am” we’re never really going to achieve any of the social goals we have in Composition because this perspective separates self from the world. He connects this perspective to climate change and the way that none of us really care about the planet because we see ourselves as the self that is separate from the world. It’s a great book. I actually got to review it for *Composition Studies*, and I said this book would either change the field; or, what I feared was going to happen, was that people were going to ignore it because it really asks us to totally rethink the way we do things. It came out in 2011; and, so far, it hasn’t changed the world. I think it’s a situation of, well, “it’s totally asking us to rethink things, so we’ll just put that over there.”

Chris: This kind of response to ecological crisis underlines, I think, the importance of mindfulness and contemplative practice for social change. Work towards social change is often agonistic or conflictual, even work within specific community groups or social movement organizations can take on a conflictual character. Such conflict can make engagement exhausting and sometimes difficult to sustain. In what ways might mindfulness or contemplative practices play a role in sustaining the work of community organizations or even movements?

Paula: You might regret this one because I could literally go on all day. The Boston Rhetoric and Writing Network has a Summer Institute every year. I did a two-hour workshop on contemplation and activism in the writing classroom just the other day. This has me really excited now. I think my interest in activism and contemplation started with my role in working in community projects, especially working with street newspapers, where people’s lives have been very dysfunctional. They have faced a lot of institutional racism and institutional oppression, and there’s a big emotional component. Street papers really strive to have people from the streets at all levels of leadership, but then you’ve got this mixture of people who have lived very difficult lives with people who have lived quite privileged lives on the board of directors, and nobody knows how to interact. Everyone has good intentions, but everybody’s hurting each other and scapegoating each other and saying painful or objectionable things to each other. Watching other street papers that I haven’t been involved with, there’s always someone who gets scapegoated and then kind of thrown out of the organization. It’s somewhat endemic to the history of street papers.

Tim Harris, who started *Spare Change News*, was fired from *Spare Change*, and he now runs *Real Change News* in Seattle. This kind of situation is sort of a cycle of dysfunction, and I’m realizing that if you want to change things, you’ve got to deal with that. The history of racism and class differences and all these things bring a heavy weight. None of us are all that good at talking about race and none of us are always good at acknowledging privilege. Then you try to do a project together, and there’s deadlines and stresses and money problems—it’s just a recipe for dysfunction, and so things fall apart.

This goes back to the very first question we discussed. I’m relying on a lot of people smarter than myself to figure out what to do in these dark times. I remember Marianne Williamson said something like, “well it’s easy when you look at a political leader like Trump to be like, oh he’s so this, he’s so that,” but then she argued that the real step is to look inward and say, “and to what extent do I do those things? When do I try to be the smartest person in the room? When do I use my power to make someone else feel small?”

To really see any problem as an opportunity to make ourselves more aware of the way that we perpetuate pain and suffering in the world—that’s been really interesting to me. Contemplative pedagogy is not about turning away from the public, but turning toward the public with more resources, with a little more wisdom so that we do not personalize things that otherwise might be personalized and so that we own what we say and do. I might not mean anything racist, for example, but there’s a whole history of when a white person from a university says something to a person of color in a community setting. It has a resonance that goes far beyond what my intentions, what my words are.

For me, that’s been really revelatory. There’s a group called *The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education*. I went to their five day workshop last summer, and it was amazing. They are just some of the smartest people. One of the keynotes was an African American law professor at the University of San Francisco named Rhonda Magee. She has to teach students the Dred Scott Decision, which says people with her skin color are not equal. She talked very frankly about the amount of sitting, preparation, and contemplation she needs to do to bring herself into the classroom and to not just seethe with anger about that. She says that’s not the point, and she speaks

eloquently about how everyone is a mix of privilege and vulnerability and that none of those things are things that we asked for. Having people like Magee to look to is important. So, I'm going again this summer. My campus also had a contemplative pedagogy cohort all year, and I was part of that. Then I went to CCCCs, which now has a contemplative pedagogy special interest group (SIG). I went to this SIG, and I was like, "Wow these are my people!"

Chris: I can see many readers being interested in how mindfulness and contemplative practices shape the day-in-day out teaching that occurs in our composition classrooms. In what ways has mindfulness shaped your approach to planning a class, making a syllabus, and the day-in-day out activities of teaching?

Paula: In 2013 I was part of the Watson Conference, and the theme was *responsivity*, or what it means to be a responsive researcher and teacher, to really respond to the people in front of you and not respond to the students from last semester or just to the colleagues in your department. To really see the people who are in front of you.

A syllabus is already a backward-looking document. The syllabus is made before you walk into the classroom, so you're really preparing it for the last group of students you taught. So how do we make our teaching responsive to the students who are actually in the seats, or the community group that we're actually working with, and not to the success we had six months ago? To me, that's what mindfulness is all about, to be in this moment and to try to let go of the ego and all these other things about that great victory or that miserable thing that happened last week and just be in this moment, and let it be what it needs to be.

I think about how we often equate students with whatever paper they just handed into us and how seldom that it's their best work. You think about all the conditions that precipitated the paper, but not the student with the paper. That's what we do when we meet someone, we equate someone with a small snippet of who we think they are. We make all kinds of judgments and ideas based on that snippet. Mindfulness starts to slow that down and complicate it.

It sounds really simple, but it's so hard, and that's why they talk about it taking practice. Mindfulness is one of the easiest things to explain, but it's really hard to do. I feel like writing helps mindfulness and mindfulness helps writing. I see that connection very clearly. It just seems like a natural fit. I wonder "why haven't we always been doing this?," though I know there are people who have been doing this longer. Barry Kroll has a great book from 2013, *The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace*, and I just got Christy Wenger's book *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies: Contemplative Writing Pedagogy*.

Chris: I wanted to conclude with something that I've been thinking about throughout our discussion. So much work in political thought often deals with the contemplative and the public as overlapping, even interpenetrating, but often distinct domains of activity. I'm thinking at the moment about the work of Hannah Arendt, who maps out the various activities associated with the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* in *The Human Condition*. Your work takes part in that discussion in interesting ways, I think. Here, the contemplative enables politically productive practices like listening, and the border separating action and contemplation as different domains of activity become blurred.

Paula: That's what drew me to going last summer to the Contemplative Mind workshop. The theme was integrating Black Lives Matter with contemplative perspectives. I was really impressed that this theme was front and center. They had sessions on reading Frederick Douglass contemplatively, and they had a keynote session on looking at black faces that had participants look at images of black faces and write about their responses. It was, in a way, incredibly uncomfortable. It wasn't easy or simple work. What also really impressed me is that the organization is incredibly diverse, both racially and institutionally. There were, for example, many community college teachers. I think that a few years ago they realized this institutional diversity wasn't going to happen on its own and so they had scholarships and outreach.

We're also lucky on our campus. We have an amazing Buddhist scholar named John Makransky. He came twice to our contemplative pedagogy class. I literally typed the entire time he talked. His argument is that the only path for social justice is to undo these oversimplified, mistaken notions we have of other people, notions that that we assume and then act on. He said that's the fundamental error and that correcting this error is what Martin Luther King was talking about when he spoke of the beloved community—he saw something beyond the people shooting fire hoses at them. Makransky said that this kind of argument is the only thing that has ever changed the world.

I'm sure at some point I'll move on to something else, but for me that's really persuasive and exciting right now.

Works Cited

Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. 2nd Edition, U of Chicago P, 1998.

Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. MIT Press, 1995. 3 vols.

Kroll, Barry. *The Open Hand: Arguing as an Art of Peace*. Utah State UP, 2013.

Lakoff, George. *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate—The Essential Guide for Progressives*. Chelsea Green, 2004.

Mathieu, Paula. *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Heinemann, 2005.

---. "Excavating Indoor Voices: Inner Rhetoric and the Mindful Writing Teacher." *Journal of Advanced Composition*, vol. 34, no. 1-2, 2014, pp. 173-190.

---. "Being There: Mindfulness as Ethical Classroom Practice." *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, vol. 21, no. 1, Winter 2015-16, pp. 14-20.

Mathieu, Paula, Steve Parks, and Tiffany Rouscoulp, eds. *Circulating Communities*. Lexington Books, 2011.

Shipka, Jody. "A Multimodal Task-Based Framework for Composing." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 57, no. 2, Dec. 2005, pp. 277-306

Uhl, Christopher with Dana L. Stuchul. *Teaching as if Life Matters*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2011.

Wenger, Christy I. *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies: Contemplative Writing Pedagogy*. The WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2015.

Yagelski, Robert P. *Writing as a Way of Being: Writing Instruction, Nonduality, and the Crisis of Sustainability*. Hampton Press, 2011.

"A Conversation with Paula Mathieu" from *Composition Forum* 36 (Summer 2017)

© Copyright 2017 Christopher Minnix.

Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License](#).



Return to [Composition Forum 36 table of contents](#).