

Contemplation as *Kairotic* Composure

W. Kurt Stavenhagen, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, and
Timothy R. Dougherty, West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Abstract: This essay claims that contemplative classroom practices can cultivate *kairotic* composure, which is an attunement to the dual aspects of the rhetorical concept of *Kairos*—a sense of timelessness or deep presence, and a sense for saying or writing the right word in the right moment. While theorists of contemplative writing pedagogy have helped ground the first aspect of *kairos*, current theorists of *kairos* have grown our understanding of the second. This essay unites both streams of scholarship with a cultural rhetorics framework that foregrounds storying relationships in time and place. We then share classroom exercises that can advance such *kairotic composure* across disciplines, increasing presence-based learning responsive to relationships in time and place.

Introduction

Have you ever found yourself so immersed in work that time seems irrelevant, where a few focused hours pass in a span that feels like mere minutes? Or perhaps you can relate to that moment following a presentation when you raise your hand, only for the presenter to call on someone else, and by the end of their exchange, feel your comment is no longer relevant. Some would call these moments manifestations of “flow,” or being “in the zone” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008). Ancient Greek rhetoricians would call both of them manifestations of *kairos* (Sipiora, 2002). The first example describes one aspect of *kairos*, which is its qualitative difference from *chronos* (clock time) or what Christian theologians influenced by the Greek rhetoricians often conceive of as God-appointed time.¹ The second example describes the other aspect of *kairos*, which is being able to say the right thing at the right moment. The first aspect of *kairos* is a sense of deep presence; the second aspect is being able to know when and how to meet moments with right words and right action. In many ways, *kairos* is the pinnacle of rhetorical performance. Yet, despite its importance, it has long been considered nearly impossible to teach. In this essay, we offer practices that grow students’ awareness of crucial relationships in time and place, and in turn help them apprehend opportune moments in their writing. We call this process *kairotic composure*, a reflective orientation to writing performance that aims to help one compose oneself, the subject, and others in relationship with a given moment in a given place.

In what follows, we first theorize *kairotic composure* in conversation with recent contemplative pedagogy both inside and outside of writing studies. We argue that these pedagogies provide excellent guidance in helping students experience the first sense of *kairos* mentioned above, yet have less to say about the performance of right word and action in the opportune moment suggested by the second aspect of *kairos*. We then turn to recent theorizing on *kairos* in rhetorical studies, noting how it offers guidance on interpreting the second aspect of *kairos*, but leaves the first aspect underexplored. To bring them together,

Across the Disciplines
A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing

wac.colostate.edu/atd
ISSN 554-8244

Across the Disciplines is an open-access, peer-review scholarly journal published on the WAC Clearinghouse and supported by Colorado State University and Georgia Southern University. Articles are published under a Creative Commons BY-NC-ND license (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs) ISSN 1554-8244. Copyright © 1997-2019 The WAC Clearinghouse and/or the site’s authors, developers, and contributors. Some material is used with permission.

we then anchor our concept of *kairotic composure* in the storifying relationships practiced in decolonial cultural rhetorical theory set forth by scholars like Malea Powell (2012) and evidenced, for instance, in the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address. We devote the rest of the essay to describing practices aimed at honing the appropriation of *kairotic composure* by students across disciplines: both realizing a qualitatively different presence in the moment, and meeting moments with the right word and right action.

Contemplative Pedagogy Establishing Embodied Writing and First Notice

A contemplative pedagogy of *kairotic composure* includes the reflective writing that has long been a hallmark instructional practice in our home discipline of Writing Studies, which is also known as Composition Studies or Composition and Rhetoric. That focus on reflective writing is intensifying as writing programs increasingly turn their attention to the importance of metacognitive reflection and transfer from writing classrooms to writing endeavors across the disciplines (Elon Statement, 2013; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). Reflective writing practices long familiar to Writing Studies like daily journaling, freewriting, or mindful observational writing are also key components of the contemplative writing pedagogies offered in Daniel Barbezat and Mirabai Bush's *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*. Yet, Barbezat and Bush offer compelling examples where they supplement such writing teacher best practices with other contemplative pedagogical practices that bookend or happen alongside writing sessions (2014, pp. 123-136). These vignettes show the pedagogical power harnessed by combining contemplative practices like yoga, walking meditation, *lectio divina*, or mindfulness meditation with the reflective writing practices often developed in Writing Studies. With studies showing how contemplative practices improve attention (Jha, KromPinger, & Baine, 2007; Tang, et al., 2007), cognition (Zeidan, 2010), and cognitive flexibility (Moore 2009), Writing Studies has taken notice and begun to produce and call for more scholarship addressing pedagogies that merge contemplative and writing studies best practices (Wenger, 2015; Mathieu, 2015; Yagelski, 2011; Kirsch, 2009). We add our collective voice here to those recent calls for writing studies to incorporate more contemplative practices in the classroom and offer the term *kairotic composure* as one way to more precisely name some of the rapprochement these fields seek.

We follow Barbezat and Bush in defining contemplative pedagogies as a broad family of “introspective” practices that “focus on the present experience, either physical or mental” and harness “concentration practices” in silence or “sustained analytical thinking” (2014, pp. 5-6). For Barbezat and Bush, the focus of all contemplative pedagogical exercises is to “place the student in the center of his or her learning so that the student can connect his or her inner world to the outer world” (2014, p. 6). They follow the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society by placing contemplative writing practices on a few different branches of the “Tree of Contemplative Practices,” including the reading/writing practice of *lectio divina* in the “generative” branch, journaling (and presumably freewriting) in the “creative” branch, and storytelling in the “relational” branch (2014, p.10). Presumably, then, a workable definition of contemplative *writing* pedagogy is any introspective writing exercise focusing on the present experience that seeks to connect a student's inner world with their processing of the outer world.

In Writing Studies, Christy Wenger has made powerful inroads at helping students to connect their inner and outer worlds through a feminist, embodied, contemplative writing pedagogy that engages students in sustained yoga practice. The most sustained and incisive contribution to contemplative writing pedagogy yet to emerge from Writing Studies, Wenger's groundbreaking book *Yoga Minds, Writing Bodies* (2015) argues that Writing Studies can use contemplative writing pedagogy to resolve some of the disconnects and dead-ends currently held between personal writing and critical writing. To do so, she asserts that

contemplative writing engenders a form of mindfulness that fosters rhetorical responsibility. Wenger (2015) notes

mindfulness forces us to be responsive to the sensations of our bodies and our corresponding feelings; it roots us in the present moment so that we may more consciously shape our future actions. Because it encourages careful consideration and choice, mindfulness fosters in writers the kind of rhetorical responsibility characteristic of embodied approaches to writing and rhetoric. (p. 5)

For Wenger, contemplative writing pedagogy deepens the power of critical and feminist rhetorical pedagogies that focus on the politics of embodiment. Embodiment “becomes *the* means of knowing, feeling and making sense of the world and not just a physical enactment of social forces” (14; italics added). In turn, contemplative pedagogies—and by extension, writing—distinctly “capture the importance of felt knowledge as a creative force on both content and process levels without capitulating to solipsistic or essentialist-expressivist notions of singular embodiment” (p. 15).

As Wenger implies, such embodied felt knowledge propels a rhetorical sorting of content and process and is more than an individual anachronism. It’s about one’s body, but it’s also about sensing others around oneself as repositories of knowledge. Mindfulness practices like yoga emphasize embodied observation as the basis for understanding: one works from one’s presence outward. Such a syncretical way of processing asks one to first “seat” oneself in a physical, interactive and sustaining environment. The body takes “rhetorical primacy” and contemplation becomes a means of “inquiry into the nature of things, a scientific suspension of disbelief (and belief) in an attempt to ‘know’ reality through direct observation by being fully present in the moment” (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, p. xii). Thoughts, feelings, and sensations get acknowledged as they arise to one’s attention (Wenger p. 15), and such informed presence grounds students in their pursuit of knowledge. Wenger’s pedagogy profoundly addresses the need to introduce students to a fundamentally different presence to the moment by rooting awareness in their body. This embodied awareness introduces students to the possibility of the eternal now, *kairos* as distinct from *chronos*.

Barbezat and Bush complement Wenger’s emphasis on writing rooted in embodied awareness by noting contemplative writing is more concerned with “process” than “product.” This emphasis on process resonates with Wenger’s focus on embodiment. Wenger demonstrates how yoga practice becomes a vehicle to help students have a more grounded understanding of their writing process. Barbezat and Bush (2014) underscore contemplation as a record of first notice:

Writing is communication, but contemplative writing as a practice often emphasizes process rather than outcome. Journal writing and freewriting encourage simple noticing what is in the mind, and writing the raw truth as experienced, not crafted for communication until later. (2014, p. 124)

Their emphasis on writing as a chronicle of “noticing” matches not only Wenger’s assertions of “felt knowledge” but discussions about freewriting and journaling by Writing Studies scholars. Like Barbezat and Bush’s emphasis on “noticing,” freewriting and journaling have been discussed as forms of pre-writing and invention that seek to capture first impressions that later often get polished into forms of public writing.

Such polishing is in part where we see entry for further discussion. Agreeing with Wenger and Barbezat and Bush that we write as an outgrowth of sensing ourselves in an environment in a given moment, we also see a need for a pedagogy of *kairotic composure* that attunes students to performing in the slippery and often fleeting moment and place that demand a fitting response. While contemplative writing

pedagogy habituates students well to the first sense of *kairos* as a rooted and focused presence in the moment, it has less to say about the second sense of *kairos*: that is, how to help students seize opportune moments with right word and right action. Presumably, a rooting in awareness will necessarily prepare students for such rhetorical action, but a *kairotic composure* demands that we help students to practice both sensing moments and seizing the moments to respond.

Theory Establishing Kairos as Interactive and Emplaced

Recognition of *kairos* as opportune timing and right proportion or measure (Kinneavy, 2002, p. 58) is critical for communication, a point not lost upon ancient philosophers and contemporary rhetorical scholars. James L. Kinneavy, the scholar most responsible for renewing a contemporary interest in *kairos*, notes it as a central concept in sophistic rhetoric and Plato and Aristotle's rhetorical theories thereafter (2002; see also Sipiora, 2002). Phillip Sipiora also notes how *kairos* was central to Isocrates's rhetorical *paideia*, a system that has been crucial in the development of the Western humanities. Sipiora sees Isocrates' "conjoining of *phronesis* or 'practical wisdom' and pragmatic ethics within the 'situation' and 'time' of discourse, an emphasis upon contexts" as Isocrates's most crucial contribution to rhetorical history (p. 8). *Kairos* points to both timing and occasion, the ability to harness the fleeting moment's opportunity in a specific place and set of conditions into effective communication that is appropriate to the circumstance. Rhetorical pedagogy often encourages students to study prior occasions to train their faculties of recognizing *kairos*, asking students to study an issue over time and to trace the stakeholders, the many arguments, the setting, and the surrounding circumstances that allowed a particular argument or framing to catch fire. This assessment can be a particularly productive practice in a writing course across disciplines, as faculty can ask students to trace a particularly striking moment of change within the disciplinary knowledge being studied in the course. In an engineering communication course, for example, students could study the technical communication failures that contributed to the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. The possibilities are endless and enriching.

Nonetheless, this theorizing and recognition of *kairos* in hindsight does not necessarily give students real practice in grasping *kairos* in the moment. More recent theorizing of *kairos* has emphasized that to do so, teachers must begin with a better sense of place and location. Thomas Rickert worries that much theorizing on *kairos* has reduced place to an empty placeholder—a mere scene upon which the *kairos* of timeliness and social context are expertly enacted. Rickert and the theorists he aligns himself with (Hawhee, 2002; Muckelbauer, 2008) remind us that the material and ambient conditions of place do not simply receive the *kairotic* encounters of human subjects. Rather, the place and objects within it "give back" to the occasion, co-constructing it in situ. Just as Wenger returns a crucial emphasis to embodiment as a basis of knowing in writing pedagogy, Rickert returns a crucial emphasis to place in our theorizing of *kairos*. That said, a re-theorized, re-emplaced *kairos* is still easier said than done. Or, perhaps more to the point, easier *thought* than taught. As Rickert (2013) himself asks, echoing Kinneavy and nearly all other theorists of *kairos* before him:

How to teach the unexpected? This mystery is still a theme in much contemporary work—as Eric Charles White puts it, *kairos* "stands for precisely the irrational novelty of the moment that escapes formalization" (p. 20). Even if *kairos* is prepared for in advance, for instance by repetition, priming, social pressure, and other suasive techniques, the actual moment of change to which *kairos* alludes will remain mysterious. (pp. 74-75)

Rickert's answer is that we must attune to it by dwelling within it, an answer that harkens back to the contemplative pedagogy theorists cited earlier. Rickert's metaphor for this, though, is to go out into the wild, asking that we dwell there amidst "an ambient catalysis within what is most material and concrete, a gathering that springs forward" (p. 98). He contrasts this approach with more agentive and subjective

understandings of *kairos* that put “too much emphasis on a rhetor’s powers for leveraging *kairos* and not enough sensitivity to what the situation itself affords” (p. 76). We agree with his ends: *kairos* is ultimately not the irrational concept the recent rhetorical tradition has feared, but instead a concept that points the way to an emplaced and distributed rationality—a rationality that “[abandons] the drive for mastery and control through the will to knowledge” (Rickert 2013, p. 98; echoing Brooke, 2000, p. 791). But what if we needn’t diffuse ourselves out into the wild, as he suggests, to achieve this abandonment? What if we must sink more directly into ourselves, not—as Wenger reminds us—in subjective solipsism, but as renewed presence and relationship with our bodies, with time, with place, and with others? How might this help us realize both forms of *kairos*?

Kairos Cultivated Through Communication that Emphasizes Relationship

Scholars of cultural rhetoric insist that our metaphors matter, that the words we use to describe a place carry stories of the relationships we are practicing with place. Malea Powell (2012) reminds us, “Stories take place. Stories practice place into space. Stories produce habitable spaces” (p. 388). What stories are we living, are we making, in concert with the other beings in the places we live and pass through? How is this building a society of mutual health? As she puts it, “Spaces, then, are made recursively through specific, material practices rooted in specific land bases, through the cultural practices linked to that place, and through the accompanying theoretical practices that arise from that place” (p. 388). Powell emplaces humans in relationship to the land and all the other beings in that place, beings that help to co-determine and co-create the space. Deep in the territory of relationship, Powell reminds us that even to story an emplaced *kairos* as occurring in “the wild” conjures a metaphor of separateness from us, and perhaps even one that ignores the deeply practiced relationships in place of the inhabitants already there, living in relationship to the place you encounter as a wilderness.

What if *kairos* is not distributed out there, “in the wild,” but is instead right here, the relationship at the heart of all things? Kairos can instead get realized as a practice of storying—that is of co-creating and making—in congruence with all of our relations. The Haudenosaunee, the longest practicing democratic society on the planet whose central fire is in Onondaga Territory just south of Syracuse, NY, have a longstanding tradition of sharing a Thanksgiving Address at their gatherings that shows how ceremonies emblemize the sense of *kairotic* timelessness through embodied contemplative communication. It is fitting to signal our learning from the Haudenosaunee, as we are both European-American men who met while living in their ancestral lands. We are both indebted to their ongoing storying in place, as it helps us to deepen our relationship to the land in which we met and forged a contemplative connection. We have both experienced versions of the Thanksgiving Address in public fora where Onondaga elders are coming into conversation with their settler neighbors to discuss treaty relationships and earth stewardship. The Thanksgiving Address is their customary way to open and close all gatherings, and it states thanks to all the beings that we are in relationship with. As Frieda Jacques, Onondaga Clanmother, notes, “It is not a prayer. It is a simple thanksgiving. It is not something where we’re worshipping those parts of creation. It’s where we’re giving thanks to them. And they can receive that Thanksgiving because all parts of creation have spirit that can accept that Thanksgiving” (Whatweni-neh & Kateri, 2014, 0:50). The Thanksgiving Address is not a projection onto creation (worship) but is itself a materialized *kairotic* composition—delivered differently depending on the context, season, and felt sense of the speaker. The following written version of the opening, then, provides a glimpse of the relational, *kairotic* practices of storying and making in place for millennia by the Haudenosaunee. We quote it to think alongside how its wisdom can be further theorized as *kairotic composure*:

Today we have gathered and we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in balance and harmony with each other and all living things. So now, we bring our minds together as one as we give greetings and thanks to each other as people.

Now our minds are one. (Stokes & Kanawahienton, 1993)

The focus here is on storying gathered participants into a harmonious “one mind” that gathers intention for the relationship we have to the entire cosmos. There is no need to decenter humans by ontologizing place, as this cultural rhetoric never placed humans in the apex or center in the first place. As those of us living in North America/Turtle Island ought to remember, these cultural rhetorics are being practiced all over the continent in ongoing ways. Any attunement to the ambiance of place must tread carefully not to overwrite, erase, or re-colonize the co-created stories of place already being realized in deep relationships. Indeed, following the Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab, we want to avoid an unexamined colonial logic that objectifies certain people while granting subjecthood to select others (Powell et al., 2014, Act 1, Footnote 11). The answer is not to diffuse subjectivity by reifying spaces as wild and thereby objectifying things. Instead, following Powell et al. and the Haudenosaunee, we seek a harmony of relationships between nonhumans, humans, and the places in which we reside.² A contemplative pedagogy classroom that emphasizes awareness of *kairotic* moments and the relationships they call forth prompts students to trace these relationships in their lives, and to write with a consciousness of the stories in their midst.

Kairotic Composure Exercises and Writing Outcomes

Kairotic composure is about cultivating full embodied presence to such unifying moments and being able to engage in fitting words and right actions to meet and enhance moments. As Powell and the Thanksgiving Address elegantly show, the truth of relationship is that we place ourselves relative to others in a given time. Narrating ourselves into a story, especially by way of ceremony, allows us to realize both elements of *kairos*—a sense of timelessness or “God-time,” and the sense for saying or writing the right word in the right moment. Ceremony especially helps us anticipate *kairotic* moments and emplace ourselves in right relationship with humans and nonhumans in a given situation. In using the word *ceremony*, we follow Shawn Wilson’s argument that, for indigenous researchers, research itself is ceremony. As he tells it, “The purpose of any ceremony is to build stronger relationships or to bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves” (2008, p. 8). In following the lead of Wilson, Powell, and the Haudenosaunee here, we hope to signal the centrality of indigenous wisdom and practice to our growing understanding of *kairotic composure*. We offer it here in thanksgiving for their insights, and in hopes that these crucial ideas will help to deepen ethical, contemplative pedagogies across academic disciplines—practices that we hope will aid in quickening the decolonization of this continent.

We share the following exercises as forms of ceremony and not as prescriptions but as witnesses of what has worked for us. Reflecting upon Mary O’Reilly’s sensibility of sharing classroom exercises, Christy Wenger (2015) states our need to find “inspiration from others using contemplative methods in their courses while also staying true to our motivations for incorporating those methods in our classrooms” (p. 19).³ Toward that end, and following the dual definitions of *kairos*, we list our exercises under two headings, “Toward Cultivating a Sense of Timelessness” and “Toward Cultivating the Well-timed Word.”

Toward Cultivating a Sense of Timelessness

In our practice, silence is the heart of contemplation and essential to developing an attunement to *kairos*. We begin each day of class with silence and a freewrite, and we encourage silence as a tool for students to return to as a fundamental method of invention. The following exercises emerge out of our play with the affordances of silence in its many variations. We offer them here as a way to cultivate classroom space that seeks to root in *kairos* as deeply qualitative time.

A Stretch into Mindfulness

We have found that beginning class with a simple body stretch grounds a shared moment of reflection and relaxation. In one stretch we do often with students, we step into a modified sun salutation pose, wherein we arc our arms and hands from our hips to above our heads, push them as far outward as possible, and upon closing our eyes, finally lower them slowly back to the starting position. As students and teacher do so, it can be helpful for the teacher to prompt students to sense their breath and feel the blood rush back into their fingertips because this grounds them in awareness of themselves in that moment. At times, we pursue the second part of the pose—dropping our arms and torsos toward the floor, dangling for a few playful moments, and after a few moments (where inevitably one of us jokes), we pull our hands upward, palms facing our bodies inches above our ankles, then calves, knees, torso, all the way up to the apex of the sunrise salutation again. In that case, it's helpful to then follow with closing one's eyes, lowering one's arms to the hips, and sensing the pulse at the fingertips, breathing, and this time also sensing the weight on one's feet, whether one foot feels as if it carries more weight than the other.⁴

After again a lengthy pause, and the opening of our eyes, we slowly take our seats, and tag the moment with a freewrite in our private journals. Like Jon Kabat-Zinn's (2012) body scan, the exercise promotes an awareness of timely sensations within their bodies. In addition, the writing that follows seems more situated (considered). Students more so inhabit the room in that they are more relaxed and focused and see the writing as an opportunity to memorialize the time we shared. At times, we provide prompts to coach a focus on nonjudgmental awareness of sensations and intentions: "Right now I'm sensing... and/or, "In my body, I sense..." and/or, "Today, I will..." Students either answer the prompt or freewrite on whatever topic they feel called to write about. Still other options offered can be having them send texts of thanks to friends or relatives that come to mind or having them doodle in their journals.

Students overwhelmingly share their appreciation for this time (many jot this on course evaluations). Having practiced this with students for years, I (Kurt) learned to keep the stretch simple, quiet, and even playful. When tailored to unspoken dynamics, and when alternatives are offered to those with physical limitations, rather than detract from critical engagement with topics of the day, this five to seven-minute exercise engenders focused engagement. For example, upon consensus, we may follow this exercise with additional freewrites on a point students select from the day's assigned reading or allot time for students to individually pursue an idea that popped up for them during the exercise. In discussions that follow, comments seem less rushed and generous humor more present.

We find that the combination of stretches, silence, a chronicle of body sensations, and open journaling invite students to more healthfully regard themselves, their relationships with each other, and the day's discussion. Together, we further realize *kairos* as deep presence.

Walking Meditation/ Haiku

Walking meditations provide opportunities for students to attend to their breath and pursue "haiku" moments of awareness of relationships between two or more elements. The idea is to walk more slowly and deliberately, focusing on one's breath, one's steps, and one's environment in the given moment. Once, stepping out of my library office onto our university's grassy quad, I (Kurt) looked up and saw goldfinches in relationship to the grey clouds and wrote:

Pulling a needle
through the fabric of grey clouds,
One goldfinch bobs over the other.

I share examples like this with my students to invite them to discover their own moments. For extra credit, they can meditatively walk and record "haiku" observations of relationships on paper, or as audio,

video or photos on their phone. In turn they are encouraged to publish an Instagram post, video, a journal entry, or artwork. It's optional for them to share their observations and haiku creations with me. The only form I require them to share is a short reflective report (250 words) wherein they share the time and place of their haiku moment, and the awareness it triggered.

Having students write American Haikus complements walking meditations but also serves as apt follow-ups to stretches at the beginning of class, in lieu of a journal entry. Based on consensus, students can then share their haikus with the entire class or in smaller groups.

Letters & Texts of Gratitude

As Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast (1984) underscores, gratitude is the heart of prayer. Through contemplative acts, we can unabashedly cultivate love for the world, engaging nonhumans as fellow gifts of “divine” presence. Like the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, practicing thanks can make us more open to listen to each other and widen the circle of composition: We appreciate our encounters, and, in turn, write expansively. These exercises help us recognize interdependence.

In one version of this practice, together with students we compose lists of five or ten people, places, or nonhumans we are thankful for, and share a bit why and how so in our journals. In another version of this practice, we write a letter or send a text of thanks to someone other than a family member for a specific word or deed that made a difference in our lives recently. Not only do we harvest recent *kairotic* moments, but as with the exercise “A Stretch into Mindfulness,” we tend to more carefully appraise course readings that follow. Tim and I have found that opening up a generous space, particularly at the beginning of class, helps us establish a climate for deliberate, well-paced appraisal and discussion of course materials.

Adapting Practices of *Lectio Divina*

Course readings such as the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address can also be approached through *lectio divina*, which asks practitioners to read very slowly, and multiple times. Participants are then asked to let their will be drawn to key moments from the reading and to sit with the insights that emerge through active contemplation. These freewrites can, in turn, become the basis for more extended compositions. This practice often weaves together well with the aforementioned contemplative exercises. Just as “a stretch into mindfulness” shows regard for the body and engenders a deliberate awareness of body sensations, slowing to attend to the text helps students calibrate their relationship to it. By reading texts aloud, this exercise helps one hear the sounds and feel the pauses in and between words, cultivating *kairos* as an act of deliberation and synthesis (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

Toward Cultivating the Well-Timed Word

Starting with the seedbed of silence in any writing classroom helps students—and us as teachers—to practice a different presence and relationship with time, our breath, our bodies, the other bodies in the room, the space we share, and the material covered in the course. While the practices above are geared toward helping us cultivate that quality of presence and relationship in the moment, the following exercises are about approaching an encounter with others while staying rooted in that sense of deep presence. Whereas the above exercises ask how we might work to arrive in qualitative time together, the following exercises ask that we work, once we get there, to seize the moment to beneficially impact others and the world.

These exercises proceed from the assumption that the classroom encounter is an evolving rhetorical situation as the class develops its relationships and dynamics. And *kairotic* moments will be dependent on

the types of relationship being practiced in the room. The goal with many of these exercises is for the students to compose on the spot to meet the moment, both as a group and as individuals. The class then examines the performances together and reflects on the moves that made specific performances more or less *kairotic*.

Kairos Autopsy

Alluded to in our discussion above, this exercise requires the teacher to locate a disciplinary moment of paradigm shift for students to examine. The goal is to have them reflect on the personalities, audience values, context, qualities of words, and intervening external factors that caused one view or argument to take off and gain dominance. It's a way to practice recognition of all the elements and relationships that can enable an idea or rhetorical performance to catch fire. For a detailed guide on how to do such a thorough analysis of *kairos* in a given controversy, see Chapter 2 of Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (2009). After class discussion of the case and the elements that made certain arguments more *kairotic*, students can then compose a persuasive paragraph (or a more extended assignment) using disciplinary course concepts to turn one common misconception on its head.

Visualscapes/Soundscapes

Having students take cell phone photos of objects, actions, or events that they find striking either within an outdoor class exercise or as an assignment yields a discussion of visual awareness and the narratives we construct as to what we value enough to photograph. Here the open question can be, "What is the apt timing that this photo captures?" We often coach such captures as memorializing moments of intense or humorous awareness. They can then compose words that narrate the images and introduce readers to how they might further place or use that photo.

Following Rickert's ambient lead, the same activity can be practiced through sound recording and composition. On the one hand, students can take turns co-creating immersive soundscapes for classroom composing—from mixtapes/playlists to full albums to nature sounds. In this instance, you can leave space at the end of the classroom session for students to reflect on the ways that the soundscape impacts their composing practices in situ. On the other hand, students can capture particularly striking sounds that they hear on a walk. In playing these sounds back to the class, you can then discuss the ways that sound itself tells a story, the ways its composition and framing suggests certain types of relationships.

Stone Soup

Building from the sound and visualscapes above (or using other found visuals or sounds in the moment), the stone soup exercise asks students to share the constraints and opportunities of an impromptu shared archive. Each member of a small group is asked to bring either a found image, a found sound, and/or one line of text from the class readings. The group then examines the artifacts together and takes a few minutes to compose (individually or as a group) a one-paragraph creation that somehow ties the archive together. The goal in writing is to create a fitting paragraph that "meets the moment"—that is, one that amply responds to the artifacts collected while also situating them in the larger current events and classroom dynamics that everyone is negotiating together.

Essence of Tweet

Good for use after a particularly dense discussion or lecture or reading activity, this exercise asks students to distill the meaning, vital essence, or most powerful insight of the experience into one tweet-length communication. To do so, students must use the 280-character limit and accompanying genre

conventions like hashtags and direct address of personalities. Have willing students share their tweets and lead a discussion about which ones seem more *kairotic* than others in crystallizing the moment.

Ripening the Silence

In a flipped classroom, students will often come to class having completed the readings and some reflective activities. Before they arrive in the room, place the chairs in a circle and seat yourself in the circle furthest from the door. Invite students to fill in the circle around you as they arrive, leaving ample space near the door for latecomers. Invite students to center themselves in their breath using one of the exercises above, and do a quick freewrite that puts their mind back in contact with the reading they completed. Once complete, begin an open-ended conversation about the reading with a few ground rules:

1. No hand-raising—the goal is to sit in silence until someone is moved to speak. Let the silence ripen within you and within the room, and speak when you are moved to do so;
2. No talking only to the teacher—folks are bringing insights to the circle, not only to the teacher;
3. (Optional, but potentially powerful) Conduct the session with eyes closed, sharing insights without looking at others—the goal of this exercise is to practice letting silence and listening guide the *kairotic* moment.

Kairos Tune-Up

Inevitably through the journey of a writing class, the group dynamic will hit a rough patch, even if it's simply a lull in the energy. This is the ideal moment for a *kairos* tune-up. As students center themselves in the moment, ask them to sit in wait for the still small voice. They are listening for the message that their classmates most need to hear at this moment. Often, this can result in platitudes. But sometimes it can open the door to incredibly powerful group experiences. One way to frame this work is to ask students to search their heart for what has remained unsaid so far in the discussion: “Is there a message on your heart you’ve been holding back? Perhaps something that’s been nagging at you but you’ve not yet mustered the courage to say? Or, here in the ripeness of this moment, perhaps something surprising or even unsettling has come to you unprompted, seemingly out of nowhere? Perhaps you’re being asked to be a conduit for a message meant for someone else in the room?”

First Thought, Best Thought

In contemplative writing pedagogy, the concept of first thought, best thought is often used to frame contemplative freewriting or journaling. While this is a powerful description of the open channel between heart, mind, and writing hand that freewriting cultivates, it's also an apt principle for an outward, audience-facing exercise in a pedagogy of *kairotic composure*. In this exercise, ask students to spend an entire week rooting in their breath as they go about their day, trying to keep their mind and heart as centered in the moment as possible. As they do this, have them pay particular attention to stirrings or promptings that arise for them as they encounter others—human or otherwise. These stirrings may come as thoughts or urges to share something that they'd often otherwise ignore—perhaps it's as simple as complimenting someone's shirt or asking someone the story of the button on their bookbag. Ask students to pay attention to what happens as they take action on these stirrings, and have them try to write about the experiences as soon as they can after they happen. At the end of the week, have students put together a first-thought/best-thought report on practice. In that report, have them seek to synthesize the lessons they are learning about *kairos* and their authorship process as they practice.

Entering the Cipa

Following David Green's (2011) pathbreaking work on hip hop and composition pedagogy, this category of exercises asks students to practice their rhetorical performance on the spot, and can be conducted in either spoken or written formats depending on your goals. The name comes from the hip-hop cipa, which is most often a freestyle and "battle" format where MCs practice their skills by going toe-to-toe off the top of their head (Green, 2011, p. 45). It can be fruitfully applied to disciplinary writing problems and can be particularly useful for practicing *kairos* when you tie it to a matter of translating important disciplinary language, concepts, or research insights to a general public audience (Green, 2011, p. 49). Perhaps there is a current event that is begging for leavening and light from your discipline's insights. Or perhaps there are crucial concepts in your discipline that are misunderstood or entirely ignored by the general public. We are thinking here of climate science or the biochemistry of vaccine technology or the socioeconomic causes of food scarcity or homelessness. Whatever concepts the students are coming to grasp in your course can be topics to bring to the cipa.

You start with a prompt such as "You have a two-minute elevator ride to explain (insert disciplinary concept here) to (insert crucial stakeholder here). How do you keep their attention, increase their understanding, and make them want more?" Give students ten minutes to compose, and then set them loose in small groups to share. Each group should crown a winner, with all small group winners then reading their composition before the big class.

I've (Tim) found that the process results in some terrific conversation about what types of writing moves are most effective for that audience in this particular moment. It helps to distill both disciplinary and rhetorical concepts as students encounter each other's impromptu attempts at meeting a weighty, high-stakes rhetorical moment.

Conclusion

Kairotic composure is ultimately about rooting students in the eternal now, as contemplative writing pedagogies have helpfully developed. But it is also about honing students' capabilities to speak up with right words to meet a fleeting moment. In an age that is increasingly characterized by the paradoxical reality that we compose more together in public while simultaneously feeling more lonely in a polarized information landscape, we need to help students bridge these two senses of *kairos* across disciplines. Cultivating such *kairos* ultimately seeds ground for transformative public dialogues in and out of the classroom. As author Mark Buchanan declares, "*kairos* is the servant of holy purpose" (2006, p. 36). In our classrooms and beyond, may we both inhabit and speak into given moments.

References

- Barbezat, Daniel P., Bush, Mirabai. (2014). *Contemplative practices in higher education: Powerful methods to transform teaching and learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brooke, Collin (2000). Forgetting to be (post)human: Media and memory in a kairotic age. *JAC*, 20(4), 775–95.
- Buchanan, Mark. (2006). *The rest of God*. Nashville, TN: W. Publishing Group.
- Crowley, Sharon, & Hawhee, Debra. (2009). *Ancient rhetorics for contemporary students*, 4th edition. New York: Pearson Longman.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihali. (2008). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Elon Statement on Writing Transfer. (29 July 2013). Retrieved from http://www.elon.edu/web/academics/teaching/ers/writing_transfer/statement.xhtml
- Green, David F., Jr. (2011). It's deeper than rap: A study of hip hop music and composition pedagogy. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from Penn State Electronic Theses and Dissertations from Graduate School. <http://etda.libraries.psu.edu/catalog/11828>

- Hawhee, Debra. (2002). Kairotic encounters. In Janet M. Atwill & Janice M. Lauer (eds.), *Perspectives on rhetorical invention* (pp. 16-35). Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Jha, Amish P, KromPinger, Jason, & Baine, Michael J. (2007). Mindfulness meditation modifies subsystems of attention. *Cognitive Affective Behavioral Neuroscience*, 7(2), 109–119.
- Kabat-Zinn, Jon. (2012). *Mindfulness for beginners*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.
- Kinneavy, James L. (2002). Kairos in classical and modern rhetorical theory. In Phillip Sipiora & James S. Baumlin (eds.), *Rhetoric and kairos: Essays in history, theory, and praxis* (pp. 58-76). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kirsch, Gesa. (2009). From introspection to action: Connecting spirituality and civic engagement. *College Composition and Communication*, 60(4), W1-W15.
- Mathieu, Paula. (2016). Being there: Mindfulness as ethical classroom practice. *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, 21, 14-20. <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol21/iss1/5>
- Moore, Adam, & Malinowski, Peter. (2009). Meditation, mindfulness and cognitive flexibility. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 18(1), 176–186.
- Muckelbauer, John. (2008). *The future of invention: Rhetoric, postmodernism, and the problem of change*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Powell, Malea. (2012). Stories take place: A performance in one act. *College Composition and Communication*, 62(4), 383-406.
- Powell, Malea, Levy, Daisy, Riley-Mukavetz, Andrea, Brooks-Gillies, Merilee, Novotny, Maria, & Fisch-Ferguson, Jennifer. (2014). Our story begins here: Constellating cultural rhetorics. *Enculturation*, (18). <http://enculturation.net/our-story-begins-here>
- Rickert, Thomas. (2013). *Ambient Rhetoric: The attunements of rhetorical being*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pitt Press.
- Sipiora, Phillip. (2002). Introduction: The ancient concept of kairos. In Phillip Sipiora & James S. Baumlin (eds.), *Rhetoric and kairos: Essays in history, theory, and praxis* (pp. 1-22). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Steindl-Rast, David. (1984). *Gratefulness, the heart of prayer*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.
- Stokes, John, & Kanawahienton (translators). (1993). Thanksgiving address: Greetings to the natural world (Mohawk version). Six Nations Indian Museum and the Tracking Project. Retrieved from http://nmai.si.edu/environment/pdf/01_02_Thanksgiving_Address.pdf
- Tang, Yi-Yuan, Ma, Yinghua, Wang, Junhong, Fan, Yaxin, Feng, Shigang, Lu, Qilin, . . . Yu, Qingbao. (2007). Short term meditation training improves attention and self-regulation. *Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences*, 104, 17152–17156.
- Wenger, Christina I. (2015). Yoga minds, writing bodies: Contemplative writing pedagogy. The WAC Clearinghouse.
- Whatweni-neh (Frieda Jacques), & Kateri (Riley Thornton). (2014). Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address (YouTube Video). Onondaga Territory, NY: New York State Museum. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swJs2cGNwIU>
- Wilson, Shawn. (2008). *Research is ceremony*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing Co.
- Yagelski, Robert P. (2011). *Writing as a way of being: Writing instruction, nonduality, and the crisis of sustainability*. New York, NY: Hampton Press.
- Yancey, Kathleen Blake, Robertson, Liane, & Taczak, Kara. (2014). *Writing across contexts: Transfer, composition, and sites of writing*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Zeidan, Fedel, Johnson, Susan K., Diamond, Bruce J., David, Zhanna, & Goolkasian, Paula. (2010). Mindfulness meditation improves cognition: Evidence of brief mental training. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 19(2), 597–605.

Notes

- ¹ In the New Testament, *kairos* connotes a fulfillment of a season or an appointed time for the purpose of God. Theologian Paul Tillich and liberation theologians further emphasize *kairos* as appointed times of crucial encounters. Internet searches on *kairos* yield numerous Christian sites that link *kairos* to “God’s time,” and Tim’s Roman Catholic high school led an overnight retreat for students called *Kairos* that attempted to get students centered in “God-time.”
- ² As Shawn Wilson states in *Research is Ceremony*, and Powell et al. quote in their piece on constellating cultural rhetorics, “relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality” (7, emphasis original).
- ³ Wenger calls upon her experience of *Sankalpa*, of setting an intention, “like having a goal when writing a paper. Intentions remind students to listen to their bodies as they move them in new and different ways, promoting focus and giving them a feeling of purpose to carry into their practice of yoga—or writing. Setting an intention is a conscious way to bridge the mind and body’s intelligence and can help students learn to connect feelings and thoughts, increasing awareness of both” (p. 6).
- ⁴ I (Kurt) practice this exercise with students about three weeks into the semester after first establishing rapport with them, and having a few class periods where I invite them to stretch any way they like. I also won’t conduct it in every class, since at times it doesn’t seem appropriate to the given moment. Also, recognizing that some students have temporary physical restrictions, I mention each time that we all stretch only as far as it is comfortable for us; I also take time to meet with those that have permanent physical limitations to come up with alternative body movements that they might pursue in lieu of the modified Sun Salutation exercise.

Contact Information

Kurt Stavenhagen, Ph.D.
 Instructor
 SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry
 1 Forestry Drive
 Syracuse, NY 13210
Email: wkstaven@esf.edu

Timothy R. Dougherty, Ph.D.
 Assistant Professor of English and
 Director of First-Year Writing
 West Chester University of PA
 542 Main Hall
 West Chester, PA 19383
Email: TDougherty@wcupa.edu

Complete APA Citation

Stavenhagen, Kurt, & Dougherty, Timothy R. (2019, March 31). Contemplation as *kairotic* composure. [Special issue on contemplative writing across the disciplines.] *Across the Disciplines*, 16(1), 66-78. Retrieved from http://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/contemplative/stavenhagen_dougherty2019.pdf