

Preface

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NO MORE BRAINS ON STICKS

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What if faculty members required students to sign the following waiver prior to enrollment in a traditional college course?

I understand that over the next 15 weeks, this course will require me to remain seated in class for 37.5 hours, plus an anticipated requirement of 75 hours for homework, to total an anticipated 112.5 hours. Sitting for this length of time has been linked to the following adverse health outcomes, for which I will not hold responsible the instructor or the institution: anxiety, depression, heart disease, breast and colon cancer, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity, osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, and back pain.

It may seem unfair to link these conditions directly to taking a single college course. These ailments are linked to sets of other complex factors and may only develop over decades, but the phrase “sitting is the new smoking” feels like an important twenty-first-century reckoning. The widely discussed and unanticipated epidemic of mental illness on campuses coincides with increased sedentary habits and

time spent indoors, behind electronic screens. The vaunted human brain is turning out, as neuroscience probes it, to have some evolutionary vulnerabilities that can work against our well-being. We cannot deny our distance from the evolutionary physical conditions that shaped our embodied brains' expectations for continual daily movement, a natural and varied diet, and sleep patterns regulated by natural light. Our embodied brains are crying for help in "the age of the chair," as British author and academic Vybarr Cregan-Reid (2018b; see also 2019) has termed it. In the course of writing a book about how bodies impact learning, it's been impossible for me to ignore the implications of bodily health. I aim to bring the body into focus with an inclusive vision of wellness in the college classroom for bodies of all types and abilities.

This book represents a contribution to the scholarship of integration: I seek to bring the insights of embodied cognition, a subfield of neuroscience and cognitive psychology, to bear on practices of teaching and learning in college. An embodied teaching practice requires recasting cognition as a whole-body enterprise, yet faculty are typically unaccustomed to thinking about the body's role in learning at all. Discourse on well-being in higher education often focuses on belonging, flourishing, and transforming, but until the COVID-19 pandemic entered our universe, we did not routinely prioritize the physical health of students, staff, and faculty. The pandemic has dramatically demonstrated how a threat to physical health can affect every institution in a society. But preventing catastrophic illness is an extreme end of the embodied awareness spectrum. Teachers whose jobs involve nurturing brain growth should know that routine physical health impacts cognitive performance. Brains are organs of the body, with specific vulnerabilities

and strengths, like any other organ or system. They do not function in isolation from circulatory systems or digestive systems or endocrine systems or even ecological systems we think of as “external.” Intellectual performance demands physical energy that bodies must supply.

This book draws from the conclusions of experimental studies to recommend classroom applications, some empirically tested and some newly invented. I’ve used most of the exercises I describe here, and I can testify to the increase in enjoyment and engagement in learning for both me and my students. Understanding embodied cognition science has provided me with new insights for why many familiar, evidence-based practices work well, and it’s challenged me to try some unorthodox and unfamiliar activities, too. After twenty years in the college classroom, my decisions about how to create learning experiences for my students are now informed by a different set of criteria than they used to be, based on how to build knowledge and skills through physical movement, an attention to the spatial environment, and a sensitivity to the energy bandwidth of my students as the term progresses.

Over the course of reading widely and far afield from my own disciplinary background—early modern literature—I have discovered surprising new ways to make sense of common experiences, both in the classroom and in my personal life. I can offer reasons informed by embodied cognition science to explain why even shy or introverted faculty may enjoy lecturing, why good ideas often seem to occur in the shower, why grief over the death of a pet can be especially intense, why a desire for in-person learning persists despite good online alternatives, and why walking barefoot in the grass can ease a rough day as quickly as bourbon on the rocks. (At the end of this book, you can test yourself by