Decolonizing Teaching and Learning
Through Embodied Learning
*Toward an Integrated Approach*

ROXANA NG

THE ARGUMENT FOR AN EMBODIED PEDAGOGY

This essay is, first and foremost, about teaching and learning. It is a critique of current modes of teaching that do not treat the learner as an embodied subject and an exploration of a more holistic pedagogical endeavour that explicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of mind, body, emotion, and spirit in the construction and pursuit of knowledge. To explore this interconnection, I argue, we need to disturb the existing boundaries of educational discourse and turn to and incorporate other epistemological and philosophical traditions. But the present essay also forms part of a volume on interdisciplinary studies. Thus, in beginning, I pose the questions: What are the boundaries of interdisciplinary studies, and can an integrative approach to pedagogy be considered
interdisciplinary? I invite the reader to keep these questions in mind, and I will return to them in closing.

As I have argued elsewhere (e.g., Ng 1998, 2005), contemporary Western liberal and critical education is built on a profound division: the privileging of the mind-intellect over the body-spirit.¹ By and large, educators, including critical educators, have focused their educational efforts on developing students’ intellect and capacity for critical reasoning. The body is relevant only as a vessel that houses the brain, which is regarded as the organ responsible for the mind/intellect. Although there have been attempts to rescue the body and restore its agency, both in social theory (e.g., Shilling 1993: Turner 1991) and in cultural theory (e.g., McLaren 1995), most of the writings focus on how the body is represented and instrumentalized in postmodernity (what I call the outside-in approach). This attempt to incorporate the body into social and cultural theories, however, does not include the spirit, which is relegated to the domain of religion. The spirit “belongs” to theology and religious studies, not to other disciplines; this indicates the depth to which our thinking is circumscribed by existing disciplinary boundaries. Much of critical teaching is implicated in the mind-intellect versus body-spirit divide.

When I talk about the spirit, which I call the body-spirit, I do not mean “spiritual” in the common, Western, religious sense. I use this hyphenated term to indicate that we cannot talk about body, mind, and spirit (which includes our emotion and psyche) as if they were separate entities. I am aware that this topic has provided both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions with a long history of intellectual and theoretical debates too complicated to discuss here. In contrast to the other contributions in this volume, I am invoking an understanding, based in Chinese medical theory, that treats the mind, spirit or soul, and body as completely interrelated. Thus, nothing can happen in one sphere without having an effect on the others. I came to the realization of this inextricable connectedness during my doctoral study. The pains, discomfort, and other persistent, though not serious, ailments I experienced during this intense period of intellectual concentration not only reminded me of the body’s inevitable presence in our every endeavour; it also awakened me to the fact that if we ignore its presence, there can be consequences. However, it wasn’t until I began teaching that a
drastic shift in my consciousness occurred, informed by my experience as a minority in the professoriate. This, in turn, led to my subsequent journey toward discovering and incorporating the connection between body, mind, and spirit in my teaching and praxis.

It is not easy to be a minority, a woman, and an immigrant living in a society that upholds white male supremacy. As a nation colonized by Europeans, notably the English and the French, we live with the legacy of colonialism in Canada, which began with the subordination of Aboriginal peoples. This subordination is extended to other groups that are seen to be different—physically, linguistically, culturally, ideologically—and hence inferior. As we move up in the power hierarchy, this inferiorization of the “other” becomes much more entrenched and difficult to disrupt. As part of the institutional structure created historically to preserve the privilege of certain classes of men, the academy is no exception to the entrenchment of white male privilege, values, and knowledge based on men’s experience of the world. The fact that women and racial minorities have made inroads into this bastion of patriarchal power does not mean that they are now fully accepted within the academy. Indeed, there is a burgeoning literature that exposes the barriers that minorities encounter in the university, be they teachers or students, both because their presence challenges the once homogeneous makeup of the university and because they challenge the process of knowledge production based on white, male assumptions (e.g., de Castell and Bryson 1997; Roman and Eyre 1997).

The exercise and maintenance of power takes multiple and complicated forms. Elsewhere (Ng 1993, 1995), I have identified three major power axes in the university: that between the classroom and the larger academic institution; that between the teacher and the students; and that among the students. Thus, although a faculty member has formal authority as a representative of the university, this authority can be challenged by students in the classroom. For example, a minority woman faculty member may be challenged more often than her (white) male colleagues simply because she is relatively powerless in the larger society. Faculty members whose teaching does not conform to the expected conventions in terms of content and style are likewise apt to be challenged more often. Sexism, racism, a sense of class privilege, and other such biased attitudes are operative in interactions among students as well.
What is important to point out is that relationships of power are never enacted *merely* in the form of intellectual encounters. Most intellectual encounters entail a confrontation of bodies, which are differently inscribed. Power plays are both enacted and absorbed by people physically, as they assert or challenge authority, and the marks of such confrontations are stored in the body. Each time I stand in front of a classroom I embody the historical sexualization and racialization of an Asian female, who is thought to be docile, subservient, and sexually compliant, even as my class privilege, formal authority, and academic qualifications ameliorate some of the effects of this stereotype. My presence is a moment in the crystallization of the historical and contemporary contestation of ideas and practices that are constantly changing. That is, my physical presence in the academy, in turn, challenges the sexist and racist construction of the archetype of an Asian female.² It is indeed the encounter of bodies, not only of intellect, that gives dynamism to the process of teaching and learning. As we engage in critical teaching and bring our activism to the university and to our classrooms, this dynamism is what excites us, at the same time that going against the grain can make us physically ill (Ng 1998).

Yet despite feminist scholarship’s insistence that “the personal is political,” we have no language to speak of how we embody our political and intellectual struggles. We wage these struggles in our professional and public lives, but when we get sick, we see and treat our illness as a personal and private problem that is not to be openly discussed. This bifurcation points to how fundamentally we have been influenced by Cartesian thinking, which posits a separation between the body and the mind (Bordo 1987, especially chap. 5), and by the privileging of mental over manual labour (Marx and Engels 1970). It goes beyond compartmentalizing our lives into two spheres, the public/professional and the private/personal; it also extends beyond a simple theory-practice split and the contradiction between what we think and how we act. It has to do with the more fundamental way in which ruling ideas have become taken-for-granted practices, and it affects how we are—our *being*—in the world. These practices are *embodied*; they have become habitual ways in which we conduct our business and, more importantly, ourselves.

The opportunity for me to integrate my personal explorations of health and illness and my teaching, and thereby develop a mode of teaching that...
honours both the mind and body-spirit, came in 1991. I took over a colleague’s course, “Health, Illness, and Knowledge of the Body: Education and Self-learning Processes,” when he moved into another field of study. (My experience developing this course was documented in Ng 2000.) Since that time, I have experimented with different ways of (a) insisting that embodiment be an essential part of my classroom encounters with students, and (b) remaining truthful to the traditions of critical education central to my training and writing. The method of teaching, which I will describe later, has gone through numerous iterations and name changes, from “Health and Illness” to “Integrative Approach to Equity.” The present iteration is reflected in the title of this essay—an integrative critical embodied pedagogy, or embodied learning (EL), for short. I incorporate EL into most of my teaching at a graduate program of education, with different degrees of success and popularity. Notably, starting in 2001 I developed a course called “Embodied Learning and Qi Gong” that places EL front and centre. Central to EL are two interconnected elements: I insist that physical and contemplative activities are part not only of the course content but also of the students’ everyday life. Qi Gong, a meditative and breathing practice that originated in ancient China as early as five thousand years ago, is the primary tool I use to promote the interconnection of the body, mind, and spirit.

**DISRUPTING THE BODY-MIND BINARY THROUGH QI GONG**

Simply translated, Qi Gong is a generic term for any exercises that involve the breath—the art of cultivating qi, qi in this context referring to the breath. It is one of the healing and martial arts. According to scholars of Qi Gong, this form of exercise was developed by people of an agrarian society who watched and mimicked the movements of animals in relation to cycles of planting and harvesting, life, and death. It was practised originally as a form of therapeutic dance to cure rheumatism and ward off other symptoms of excess Damp Evil in the flood-prone Yellow River basin (Reid 1994, chap. 13). It has been known by many different names throughout Chinese history. In fact, the term Qi Gong is fairly recent. According to Ken Cohen, a scholar and practitioner of Qi Gong, while
the term was first mentioned in Taoist (or Daoist) texts during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), it was not used in its present specialized sense until the twentieth century (Cohen 1997, chap. 2). While there are many forms of Qi Gong, developed and guarded by families who practised Chinese healing arts, most are based on Taoist principles and theory similar to those of Chinese medicine.

Chinese medical theory, or TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine), is based on the central Taoist principle of the unity of opposites—yin and yang. According to Chinese creation myths, the universe was an undifferentiated whole in the beginning. Out of this emerged yin-yang: the world in its infinite forms. In both Taoism and TCM, yin-yang is a symbolic representation of universal process (including health, in the case of TCM) that portrays a changing rather than a static process (Kaptchuk 2000, chap. 1). The important thing to understand is that the two opposite states are not mutually exclusive or independent of each other. They are mutually dependent, and they change into each other. Therefore extreme yang becomes yin, and vice versa. The theory of yin and yang has been mistakenly represented in the West as a dualist philosophy. Chinese medical scholars such as Kaptchuk, however, argue that it is a form of dialectic that is both similar to and different from Hegelian dialectics (see Kaptchuk 2000, 174–76).

Health is considered to be the balance of yin-yang aspects of the body, and disease is the imbalance between these aspects. This is a form of dialectical thinking radically different from the causal linear thinking and logic of allopathy and positivist science. The body in TCM is understood to be in a state of dynamic interaction of yin and yang; it is constantly changing and fluctuating. On the basis of this fundamental understanding of the nature of yin-yang and health as balance, TCM views illness not so much in terms of discrete diseases as in terms of disharmony. Thus, TCM outlines eight guiding principles for determining these patterns of disharmony. According to Beinfield and Korngold (1991), the eight principles are four sets of polar categories that distinguish between and interpret the data gathered by examination: yin-yang, cold-heat, deficiency-excess, and interior-exterior. Again, these are not mutually exclusive but can co-exist in a person.
A major difference between biomedicine and TCM theory is the way in which the body is conceptualized. The Chinese view of the body does not correspond to that of Western anatomy. For example, Chinese medical theory does not have the concept of a nervous system, yet it can treat neurological disorders. It does not speak of an endocrine system, yet it is capable of correcting what allopathy calls endocrine disorders. Although language makes reference to what the West recognizes as organs such as lungs, liver, stomach, and so on, these are not conceptualized as discrete physical structures and entities located in specific areas within the body. Rather, the term “organ” is used to identify specific functions. Furthermore, TCM does not make a distinction between physical functions and the emotional and spiritual dimensions governed by the “organ” in question. It describes an organ not only in terms of its physiological processes and functions but also in terms of its orb—its sphere of influence (Kaptchuk 2000; Beinfield and Korngold 1991).

For example, in TCM the Spleen is the primary organ of digestion. It extracts the nutrients from food digested by the stomach and transforms them into what will become “Qi” and “Blood.” The Spleen is thus responsible for making Blood, whereas the Liver is responsible for storing and spreading Blood. As such, the Spleen is responsible for transformation, transmutation, and transportation, and these functions apply to physical as well as mental and emotional processes. At the somatic level, “weakness” in the Spleen means that food cannot be transformed properly into nutrients that nourish the body. At the emotional and psycho-spiritual level, a weak Spleen diminishes our awareness of possibilities and our ability to transform possibilities into appropriate courses of action, which leads to worry and confusion. Ultimately, it affects our trustworthiness and dependability (Kaptchuk 2000, 59–66).

The body, then, is conceptualized not so much in terms of distinct parts and components as in terms of energy flow (qi). Qi, a fundamental concept in TCM and Chinese thinking, is frequently translated as “energy” or “vital energy” but in fact has no precise conceptual correspondence in the West. Qi is what animates life. Thus, while there is Qi, there is life; when there is no Qi, life ceases. It is both material and immaterial. Qi is present in the universe in the air we breathe and in the breaths we take. It is the quality we share with all things, thus connecting the macrocosm.
with the microcosm. Qi circulates in the body along lines of energy flow called meridians or organ networks. Another way of conceptualizing disease is to say that it arises when Qi is not flowing smoothly. This leads to blockage and stagnation, which, if persistent, will lead to disease (that is, pathological changes in the body). Thus, an important part of the healing process is to unblock and facilitate the free flow of Qi. Different therapies (massage, acupuncture, and herbology) are aimed at promoting the smooth flow of Qi and rebalancing disharmony.

Together with these notions of health and the body, the Chinese have developed exercise forms called Qi Gong aimed at optimizing health and balance. These are exercises or movements aimed at regulating the breath, the mind, and the body simultaneously. Daniel Reid identifies four basic applications of Qi Gong: health, longevity, martial power, and spiritual enlightenment (Reid 1994, 175). There are literally thousands of forms of Qi Gong, from sitting postures similar to what the West recognizes as postures conducive to meditation to Tai Ji Juan, which at its most advanced is a form of martial art aimed at honing the body, mind, and spirit to respond to external attack without the use of force. Practitioners of Qi Gong believe that by disciplining, activating, and regulating the normally automatic, involuntary way of breathing, they are able to regulate and alter other functions of the body such as heartbeat, blood flow, and other physical and emotional functions. Thus, Qi Gong is not simply a physical exercise. Nancy Zi, a professional vocalist who studies Qi Gong to enhance her operatic singing, puts it concisely, “The practice of chi kung . . . encompasses the ancient Chinese understanding of disciplined breathing as a means of acquiring total control over body and mind. It gives us physiological and psychological balance and the balance of yin and yang” (Zi 1986, 3). Qi Gong is thus based on the same principles as TCM; they are complementary. It is a recommended exercise form in TCM and is taught widely as a healing art in China.

It is precisely the way TCM and Qi Gong conceptualize the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit that I found useful in my attempt to restore the centrality of the body in teaching and learning. Since 1991, I have been experimenting with using Qi Gong as a tool for cultivating critical inquiry that is at once embodied and reflexive—a mode of inquiry that is contemplative and dialogic and that acknowledges the equal
participation of body, mind, emotion, and spirit in scholarly pursuit and in knowledge construction. This understanding underpins embodied learning (EL).

THEORIZING AND PRACTISING EMBODIED LEARNING

In addition to Qi Gong theory and practice, I draw on Frantz Fanon’s (1963, 1967) analysis of the psychology of the colonized and on Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) notions of hegemony and common sense. Fanon’s work is groundbreaking because he was one of the first social scientists to attempt to understand colonization as more than just a direct oppressive force. More profoundly, it is an attitude internalized by the colonized, so that she adopts the ideas and behaviour of the colonizer and acts, or regulates herself, according to the norms of colonial society. Similarly, Gramsci uses the term hegemony to explain how ruling ideas are shared by the dominant and working classes. He asserts that once a ruling idea becomes hegemonic, it becomes common sense. Commonsense thinking is uncritical, episodic, and disjointed, but it is also powerful because it is taken for granted (Gramsci 1971, 321–43). Applying Gramsci’s historical discussion to racism in contemporary British society, Stuart Hall notes:

I would extend Leys’s observation to argue that once hegemonic ideas become common sense, they are condensed in our emotional and physical beings—in how we relate to women and minority groups, for example, and in how we see and relate to ourselves. In short, they become patterns of behaviour.
Elsewhere (Ng 2004), I have used my babysitter’s attitude toward eating as an example to illustrate this force of habit. The example is worth repeating because it is clear and non-threatening; its power as a message lies in its simplicity. My “babysitter,” who looks after my animals when I am away, was eighty-two, going on eighty-three, when I first wrote about her. She doesn’t cook, so I cook for her. She gulps down her food as soon as I put it in front of her, frequently finishing a whole dinner before I have a chance to sit down. When I asked her to eat more slowly, she would say: “I always had to eat fast when I worked at the hospital. We were only given half an hour for lunch.” When I remind her that she has been retired since she was sixty-five, her rebuttal is inevitably: “I can't help it.” It is the belief that “I can’t help it” that locks people into fixed patterns of behaviour. So it is that my babysitter has developed a “habit” of eating quickly because of years of working in a place where she had to hurry or else her pay would be docked or she would be reprimanded. Gulping down her dinner is “natural” for her, taken for granted, not to be questioned. Thus, change is only possible if we can develop the capacity to examine our patterns of behaviour objectively, without attachment, in order to determine whether and how to change. This requires that we be reflexively critical, that we be open to examining the integrity of our being without guilt and judgment.

Using insights from Fanon, Gramsci, and Foucault, we can see how dominant and subordinate power relations are played out interactionally in “normal” and “natural” ways. Feminists have drawn attention to how patriarchy works in practice: men are listened to when they speak; women and minorities are not heard. My notion of EL, which I am calling an “integrative embodied critical pedagogy” here, seeks to help us develop the capacity not only to reason critically but to see dispassionately and to alter actions that contribute to the reproduction of dominant-subordinate relations. It is an attempt to close the gap between progressive theory and practice. To illustrate, I will describe briefly what I do in “Embodied Learning and Qi Gong.” This course consists of three basic components.

First, in addition to introducing students to TCM and Qi Gong, I assign readings on different ways in which the body is conceptualized in different disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and psychotherapy. The goal here is to expose students to the centrality of the body in academic and other writings—including what some sociologists have identified as
the absent body in social theory (Shilling 1993; Turner 1991)—and to drastically different ways of constructing the body. Thus, they come to see that the boundaries of the body are by no means fixed; they are malleable. Understanding the diverse ways of perceiving and describing bodily experience raises questions about knowledge and power: about who has the power to define what constitutes illness, for example.

Second, at least one hour of this four-hour-per-week course is devoted to the practice of Qi Gong as a form of mindfulness exercise. There are at least two objectives for this component of the course. Insisting that exercises be part of the curriculum reinforces the fact that we are embodied learners, that learning does not only involve the mind. It draws our attention to how the body, emotion, and spirit are involved in the learning process: what we embrace and resist, and why. Moreover, in many Eastern traditions, meditation is used as a discipline that focuses the mind, enhancing our capacity to reflect on our thoughts and actions without judging them—what Buddhism refers to as non-attachment, as opposed to detachment. An attitude of detachment is characterized by the absence of emotion when we are presented or confronted with something. In contrast, non-attachment consists in refraining from passing judgment on something in the first instance. It is a state of dispassionate observation, one that enables us to consider, objectively, how to interpret or act on something and to do so with understanding and compassion. The following journal description, written by one of my students, serves as an illustration:

I felt my feet rooted to the floor. I sensed the movement of my limbs located in relation to the space I occupied. I sensed the tension and relaxation of my muscles as a physical experience of my tissues. I felt the flow of breath that was at one moment a part of me, inside my lungs, and at the next moment, a part of the air that surrounded me. I experienced these things with my body, that physical part of my self.

There were times when I was so involved in the physicality of the experience that my surroundings faded from my vision. I was aware of the professor’s verbal instructions and my efforts to translate those instructions into coordinated physical movement. I was aware of concentrating on the cycle of my breathing. I knew these and other
things from the cognitive part of my being. At times it was as if I were an outside observer watching the experience of my body. My mind, my body, and my breath were connected yet separate entities engaged in qi gong. It was like a revelation that day I was able to articulate a sense of body—my body from those oppositional and interdependent positions. Through repetition of body movement which replicates the cycles of breath I was echoing the rhythms of life and nature. . . . Qi-gong training was embodied exploration of the invisible process of constructing knowledge of the body. (Gustafson 1998, 53)

While initially I took up Qi Gong practice as a way of reducing stress and promoting health, with time and practice I came to understand and appreciate how it is that Qi Gong and other forms of meditation are spiritual, as distinguished from merely religious, practices. These practices enable one to develop the capacity to be mindful of one’s thought and action, so that one does not go about one’s daily business thoughtlessly and automatically as a matter of habit. They enable one to see how one’s actions affect others, and whether and how one should change. They therefore give us the means, albeit not the only ones, to interrogate how our consciousness is developed and changed. The assumption here is that consciousness has both a mind-intellect and a body-spirit dimension. It is tangible because it is embodied. Understanding and analyzing the development of consciousness thus necessitates an interrogation of our being as sensuous living individuals, of the material conditions that enable and limit our bodily existence, and hence of knowledge construction itself (which is accomplished by embodied subjects). Much like the call for starting with people’s lived experience proposed by critical and feminist pedagogy, it is a mode of learning that grounds the knower in time and space and provides an anchor enabling us to see that thought processes are inevitably historically and spatially specific. This in turn allows us to see that indeed consciousness can be changed, as we confront it and understand how it comes about.

The third component is journalling, which is included as part of the course requirement and as an accompaniment to the mindfulness exercises. Journalling has three purposes. First, as with many courses that require students to keep a reading journal, I ask students to summarize
the major argument(s) of an assigned piece of reading to develop their comprehension and summary skills. Reviewing this part of the journal gives me a sense of whether students understand the materials and, if not, what remedial action I and they should take. Second, journalling is another tool that enables students to reflect on their reactions (feelings and emotions) to the course materials. I ask students to record and analyze their reactions, to trace how these feelings are triggered by what they’ve read, thus enabling them to use reactions as a starting point for reflection and analysis. Finally, students are required to keep a Qi Gong journal, preferably on a daily basis, that describes their practice of and reaction to the practice of Qi Gong. The purpose here is to treat the body as a site for knowledge construction.

**RISKS AND POSSIBILITIES OF EMBODIED LEARNING**

Practising EL by incorporating Qi Gong in the university curriculum presents an invaluable and promising opportunity for me to interrogate Western knowledge construction with like-minded, or at least curious, students. Not only have I learned tremendously from teaching EL, but I have also changed my own praxis over time, to the point where I am now convinced that integrating body, mind, and spirit is not only disruptive to established educational conventions in North America but is a method of decolonizing—undoing—ways in which we have come to be in the world. Similarly, Deborah Orr has theorized and advocated for the use of mindfulness as part of anti-oppressive pedagogy in higher education. She claims that mindfulness practice is “a proven technique to address the non-cognitive forms of attachment to ideation that may remain in force despite the most thorough-going intellectual change” (2002, 477). In working with Aboriginal women who have experienced tremendous abuse and violence, Alannah Young and Denise Nadeau argue strenuously for a multi-dimensional approach that uses songs, meditation, ceremonies, and other forms of embodied spiritual practice. In their view, “the transformation of the impacts of sexual, racial and colonial violence requires unlearning ways of thinking and being that have been etched onto the body” (2005, 13), and thus one must decolonize the body in order to heal.
But what about the students? What do they get out of EL in the classroom? Here, I want to report on three students’ written reflections on EL. These women took courses with me during different periods in my own development of EL. Although my overall approach has remained fairly constant over the years, my own thinking, and the course title, contents, and format have undergone many modifications. However, what can be gleaned from their writing is how they take up the notion of embodiment creatively in their own lives, thereby demonstrating the risks and possibilities of EL. Their experience and work will be described in chronological order below. As much as possible, I will quote from their own writing, in order to let them speak. But even with that, I vastly simplify the depth and poignancy of their analyses and narratives.

Si Transken was a student when I first offered the course titled “Health, Illness and Knowledge of the Body.” I was both excited and apprehensive about introducing unconventional, specifically physical, movements in a graduate class. In retrospect, I had vastly underestimated the power of engaging the body explicitly in intellectual pursuit and what this might open up. Thus, Si’s paper, titled “Reclaiming Body Territory” (not to mention the journal I required her to keep), took me completely by surprise. In it, she detailed, for the first time, her experience of being sexually and physically abused for over a decade by her father and his friends, and her subsequent healing journey. The work she did in the course was part of this healing process, which involved a tremendous amount of emotional pain and physical discomfort. In the paper, she disclosed that she could not do the movement exercises because her method of survival throughout the abuse was to detach from her body, but she also wrote succinctly and movingly about how she reclaimed her body during the course, which culminated in the writing of her final term paper. Below are excerpts from the conclusion of her paper, which was published in the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women’s Feminist Perspectives series:

I spent the first half of my life barely existing in my body. I have spent an equal number of years reclaiming my body. The remaining years of life I have available to me will, hopefully, be spent experiencing joy and peace in my body. I am attempting to be an active and vocal reclamer
and maintainer of my territory. One of the horrors of incest is the isolation and sense of aloneness in the world that the victim experiences.

I am trying to reclaim all of my stolen self/body. While daring and reclaiming, I am also bearing witness and offering my testimony as a political act as well as a therapeutic act.

The writing and the sharing of this story has been both excruciating and delightful and it has been an important part of that process of reclaiming. (Transken 1995, 28–29)

I remember clearly one of the questions posed by students in that course: “Are experiences always stored in the body?” My answer was, “I think so.” Since that time, I have learned a lot about embodiment and embodiment. Now my answer would be, “Absolutely,” even when we have no active memory of the experience or event. In offering courses of this nature, I now warn participants about the risks of engaging the body in the learning process and provide resources for counselling and other help should painful memories arise for which they need support. If participants persist and work through their discomfort, the rewards can be satisfying, as Si Transken and Carrie Butcher discovered.

Carrie came into our program as a part-time mature student who had been active in the anti-racism movement. She described herself as a “45 year old woman of Hakka Chinese, African and Scottish descent” who “was born in the former British colony of Trinidad” (Butcher 2009, 2). While she originally returned to school to improve her professional knowledge and skills in organizational change and anti-racism efforts, she found herself drawn to courses that focused around health, wellness, and creativity, including the “Embodied Learning and Qi Gong” course. After taking that course, she went on to enrol in my doctoral-level special topics course “Applications of Embodied Learning.” In the beginning, her academic goal was to explore issues of resilience and decolonization of her body. Soon after the course began, her focus became much more practical and immediate: after doctors discovered fast-growing fibroids, she had to decide whether to have a complete hysterectomy. Her class presentation and her journal, which she continued to keep during her fairly
lengthy hospitalization, documented her struggle with the decision. Her term paper (submitted two terms later because she did undergo surgery) was an examination of how she applied embodied learning processes to prepare for the surgery and to aid in her recovery. In it, she reviewed various TCM, biomedical, and women-centred perspectives on uterine fibroids based on medical and popular writings and touchingly and candidly explored the connection between resistance, traumas, and illness, and healing. She began the paper with her resistance to writing for an academic grade:

Reviewing my journal entry helped me to acknowledge and accept my resistance to writing about my surgery. . . . I came to see that my resistance to writing was a visceral message that it was time to care for myself before seeking to care for the world (through working with racialized communities). (Butcher 2009, 5)

She quoted from her journal to indicate how she worked through her resistance with the tools she learned from the class:

Looking within—by this I mean bringing my attention, my consciousness, to my bodily feelings—I became aware of a feeling of resistance to writing followed by judgment of myself for not being able to write, and then a sense of panic. I gently brought my awareness to this energetic pattern of resistance, judgment and panic that had emerged within me. Employing the mindfulness practice of unattached observation, I was able to stand back in my observer self, and simply look at this energetic pattern. In so doing I was able to reframe my embodied inquiry. I reframed the judgemental question “why can’t I just write?” to a more compassionate and simply curious question. It became “what is this resistance about?” This was an important shift, and one which finally allowed me to look at my resistance to writing. (7; emphasis in the original).

Through journalling and drawing, she transformed fear and resistance into yielding and acceptance, thereby laying the foundation for her process of healing:
In the two days before my surgery I reflected on the transformational possibilities that severing ties with my fibroids and losing my uterus might hold. The image that follows is of a sketch from my new journal, created as I lay in my hospital bed about two days before my surgery. The sketch . . . [developed] into an abstract flower, to my surprise . . . [with] three distinct parts—root system, stalk and petals. (16)

These parts signified different things to Carrie: the root system represented stuck creativity, which was informed by some of the feminist spiritual writing on fibroids (see Northrup 1994) and by her African heritage, among other things. The “vine-like” stalk symbolized letting go, transformation, and “the body saying no to unhealthy patterns,” in addition to ten other attributes (Butcher 2009, 18). At the centre of the petals is the word “possibility.” For Carrie, they represent a number of “possibilities offered by the image of the flower head, located at the culmination of a period of illness” (19).

In her integrative paper for “Embodied Learning and Qi Gong,” Carly Stasko recounted her resistance to the dominant definition and treatment of cancer and described how she applied the insights gained in the course to her work as a media literacy educator. Several years before she enrolled in the MA program in Holistic Education and took my course, Carly was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a form of cancer that affects young people. She wrote about how she survived the diagnosis and treatment process:

I began to resist what I saw as oppressive in the language and metaphors of cancer and reclaimed a place of authority for my own embodied wisdom. . . . I did not want to energetically claim the cancer. I saw it instead as a blockage that needed to transform and pass through me. . . . I saw healing in a way that more closely resembled the understandings of Traditional Chinese Medicine, TCM—such that energy flowed through my body in various patterns and that all “things are imbued with interactive qualities and dynamics in their relationships to the things around them” (Kaptchuk and Croucher 1986, p. 17). Through a form of daily mindfulness mediation I was able to . . . “develop an awareness of the corporeal and emotional responses that accompany
ideas, opening up the possibility to more completely address their effects” in my life (Orr 2002, p. 492).9 (Stasko 2009, unpaged).

The course and the work she did for it enabled her to name her experience of recovery and healing, and reinvigorated her already creative work in media literacy.

Through my own process of embodied learning I’ve had to tune into my inner felt sense of power, energy and wellness, to have the courage to subvert a dominant narrative, and the creativity to generate a new narrative in which I had voice and could feel engaged in a meaningful and empowered way. This experience has reinvigorated my passion for embodied media literacy education because it showed me that processes learned in one context could be applied in unanticipated future ways. . . .

By integrating embodied ways of knowing into media literacy pedagogy new ways of relating to learning and understanding can be established such that wisdom becomes rooted in the felt sense of the body so as to ground a critical awareness of the concepts that shape our ways of knowing. In this way the two forms of wisdom can become integrated through engaged and embodied action in the world. (Emphasis in the original)

While not all of these authors use the term “decolonization” explicitly, I argue that their analysis and narration of their experience are concrete examples of decolonization that involves at least four elements: resistance, questioning, reclamation, and transformation (from negative to positive and from margin to centre). This progression in turn engages two critical acts: deep reflection and some form of embodied mindfulness practice that (re)integrates body, mind, and spirit.

Increasingly, therefore, I see EL as a form of decolonizing pedagogy (see also Tejeda, Espinosa, and Gutierrez 2003). This contrasts with the commonsense use of the concept of “decolonization” to refer to a political and intellectual project having to do with the reclamation and reformulation of nationhood (see, for example, Duara 2004). For me, the notion of decolonization dissolves the boundaries between self and collectivity,
between the individual and the system. It interrogates how we, as individuals living within and being part of collectivities, reproduce and sustain systems of oppression—the questions addressed by Fanon and Gramsci. Understanding the dissonance between body, mind, and spirit leads me to see that, regardless of whether we are the oppressor or the oppressed, the perpetrator or victim, we reproduce oppression through normalized patterns of behaviour that have developed over time and have become “natural,” automatic, and unconscious actions and ways of being in the world. Thus, I use the notion of decolonization to indicate the practices in which we can engage to free us from ideas and ideology, on the one hand, and action and behavior, on the other, that serve as sources of separation. A mindful and reflexive practice such as the incorporation of Qi Gong into the classroom not only has the potential to extend the boundaries of Western knowledge construction but also helps us develop the capacity to transform our own bifurcated and compartmentalized way of being. It therefore holds the promise of facilitating personal as well as social transformation.

Final question: is EL interdisciplinary?

As commonly used, the term “interdisciplinary” refers to studies between or among disciplines as they emerged historically in the academy in Western societies. Strictly speaking, then, because TCM and Qi Gong fall outside the disciplinary boundaries of the Euro-American construction of knowledge, my work on EL is not interdisciplinary. However, if one adopts an expanded notion of interdisciplinarity as a crossing of boundaries (e.g., Klein in this volume), then one can say that my notion of an embodied critical pedagogy that combines Eastern mindfulness methods and Western critical analysis falls within the domain of interdisciplinary studies. However, we are still left with the issue of how to distinguish between interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and integrated studies (see, for example, Angus, Briton, Graff, Kisner, Klein, and Szostak, in this volume). The boundaries of interdisciplinary studies are still indeterminate and contested, and it is finally up to the reader to decide how she or he wishes to take up the ideas shared here.
By critical education I mean critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and anti-racist education, in Canada, and critical, emancipatory, or revolutionary multicultural education, in the United States (see McCarthy 1995). Although the two have different roots and traditions, they do share a common goal: to expose existing inequalities and instill critical consciousness in students.

I am using the term “archetype” here simply to refer to the fact that it is out of an archetype that stereotypes are developed. It is not to be confused with the way in which the term is used in Jungian psychoanalysis, where it refers to primordial, inherited, innate, and a priori modes of perception (Hyde and McGuinness 1992).

Daoism, or Taoism, is one of the oldest and most prominent Chinese philosophies. The way in which the term is spelled depends on the system of romanization. The older spelling, “Taoism,” is still widely in use, although the pinyin spelling, Daoism, is the one preferred by the People’s Republic of China. Similarly, “Chi Kung” and “Qi Gong” refer to the same form of exercise, with the latter spelling (the pinyin) now becoming the more prevalent.

Following the convention of scholars of Chinese medicine, I am capitalizing terms such as “Spleen” and “Blood” when they are used in the Chinese way, to distinguish them from Western usages.

Leys made this observation in a seminar at OSIE on 21 March 1993. The seminar, which Leys led, was organized by Tuula Lindholm on behalf of a Gramsci study group. I thank Tuula for inviting me to the seminar.

My characterization here resonates with Foucault’s understanding of how the panopticon leads to self-regulation among the part of prisoners (Foucault 1977).

Indeed, students have to practise Qi Gong and meditation for at least five minutes each day as part of the course requirement. The rationale is to make it part of their everyday lives so that mindfulness becomes a habit. From students’ discussions, I have discovered that this is one of the most difficult aspects of the curriculum.

As we will see, the final term paper of one of these students, Si Transken, was subsequently published, and I am able to quote from that. I have the permission of the two students to use their names and to quote from their work.

The references are to Ted Kaptchuk and Michael Croucher, The Healing Arts: A Journal Through the Faces of Medicine (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1986) and to Deborah Orr’s “The Use of Mindfulness in Anti-oppressive Pedagogies” (Orr 2000).

All the same, during the symposium at which this essay was first presented, Julie Klein commented that EL is a form of integrative study, rather than interdisciplinary study.
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Decolonizing Teaching and Learning Through Embodied Learning


