

Move

by Emily O. Gravett

It's typical, especially in large lecture classes, for students to track (or ignore) their professors moving across the front of the room or up and down the aisles. It ain't called the "[sage on stage](#)" [method](#) for nothin'. One of my friends can get his [10,000 steps](#) a day just from teaching. I sometimes catch myself flailing wildly around to make a point, not to mention all the writing on the board I do in a single class period. Yet, by and large, our students are sedentary in our classrooms.

And we expect them to be, since well before they get to us in college. [In K-12, kids spend most of their time sitting at desks in school](#). Physical education and [recess times have declined over the years](#). Students rarely go outside, despite the benefits of "[place-based learning](#)," to the point that schools such as our local [Appalachian Forest School](#) seem like counter-cultural oddities.

Yet [human beings are meant to move](#), whether it's the automatic beating of our hearts and the blinking of our eyeballs or the intentional efforts of a seasoned triathlete. I find myself achy and restless when I have to sit still for too long (though this may also be part of a broader issue—[the ever-present pressure to always be doing something](#).) The [burnout book](#) we offered a reading group on a couple of years ago talks about how to "complete the stress" cycle through...physical activity (though [there are other ways too!](#)). Many of the recent [Faculty Wellness and Wellbeing Week](#) activities focused on bodily awareness and rejuvenation: nature walks, chair yoga, massages. Even the popular Pomodoro Method of productivity calls for five-minute breaks; various websites, [such as this one](#), recommend using those breaks to stretch, draw, go for a walk, eat, even nap—all of which entail our bodies.

There is a strong divide (thanks Descartes) in the so-called "West" between the mind and the body. This is, of course, not the only way to teach/learn/know (see [here](#) and [here](#) on indigenous educational approaches, for example). We are not simply "brains on sticks." We are embodied, physical beings who interact with the world through our sensations and senses. Work on motivation by [JMU Psychology Professor Kenn Barron and collaborators](#) indicates the various costs that can detract from students' ability to learn. Among the examples that Kenn gives when presenting? "Physical reactions" such as hunger, sickness, or [sleep deprivation](#), the latter of which I have written about before. These are *bodily*.

Like [others](#), I've been taken with Susan Hrach's recent book [Minding Bodies: How Physical Space, Sensation, and Movement Affect Learning \(2021\)](#). I appreciated her "wish to take an inclusive and compassionate approach" to this topic, attending to diversity and different bodies, while also synthesizing research and offering up recommendations that honor "our bodies as sources of knowledge and skill" (xvi). She winds up suggesting to instructors that we:

1. Recognize the impact of our physical spaces on learning;
2. Take our classes outside whenever we can;
3. Infuse learning with sensory experiences;
4. Build movement into our classroom time; and
5. Use movement to build social relationships among students.

One of the main points she makes throughout the book is that "knowledge is constructed through embodied experience" (13), that movement is good for learning. I was reminded of [an article I came across recently in College Teaching about "Embodied Engagement with Scientific Concepts"](#)

(2022). Students in classes on Polymer Science and Dance Making experienced a common curricular component (an attempt, by the two instructors, to expand both the scientist and the dancer’s teaching toolkits) and reported increased understanding of concepts as the result of the collaborative choreography. Former CFI teaching team member Jessica del Vecchio has written about [instructional approaches from theatre](#)—instructional approaches as complex as creating a tableaux and as simple as warming up for class by shaking out different parts of the body or stretching the tongue. There have been numerous [articles](#) devoted to incorporating physical activity in the classroom, such as “[gallery walks](#)” (which we might more inclusively call—and design as!—gallery shows or gallery visits) or [human timelines](#) (though, in one instance, [I’ve responded](#) to an article, to ensure we aren’t inadvertently excluding anyone through singular, mandatory pedagogical choices). Movement can range from voluntary [three-minute body scans](#), which I’ve done in classes before (and to which students respond very positively), to the option of “[walking office hours](#)” to entire courses devoted to play, such as the role-playing pedagogy [Reacting to the Past](#).

And, in case we worry that expecting students to sit still in chairs for 50-75 minutes is the more inclusive teaching practice, remember that bodies are different and that the *current* configurations and expectations don’t work for everyone either. For [children with ADHD](#), being able to squirm, tap, and stand may be an essential part of the learning process. For autistic students ([note the “identity-first” language](#)), self-stimulating or “[stimming](#)” behaviors such as rocking or hand-flapping are ways to manage an overwhelming environment, which I think we can all agree higher education often is. Classroom seating itself is rarely accessible, as the image that [Sarah-Marie Da Silva tweeted](#) demonstrates (an image I learned about from Jay Dolmage, author of [Academic Ableism, 2017](#)). Fluorescent lighting can cause migraines, some scents (especially in enclosed spaces like a classroom) can trigger allergic reactions. There isn’t ever going to be one perfectly accessible learning environment. But the reality is that it’s better for learning, not to mention our health, to incorporate movement, in whatever ways we are able/prefer. The movement doesn’t have to be the same for everyone—or even each individual each time (it may depend on the season, the time of day, our mood, our energy levels, what we just ate, how comfortable we feel around the others in the room, etc.). [Universal Design for Learning would encourage us to offer choice anyway](#). It’s possible to use [pre-course questionnaires](#) to get a sense of the needs/preferences of the actual students enrolled in your course—and then use that information to offer specific movement opportunities that work for the most learners.

So how could you add more opportunities for movement in your teaching context? How could you take better advantage of your space? How could you raise awareness of the bodies, and their potential, in the room? What would it be like to tap into [emotions and their connection to learning](#)? How could you incorporate more objects or visuals or sounds or tastes, to create multi-sensory experiences for your students? (Before class every day in my Religions of the World course, for instance, I play music associated with whatever religion we are studying, from the chanting of Tibetan monks to Jewish rap.) How could you incorporate the outdoors into your teaching (especially now that the weather is so nice)? What would help increase student understanding? What would [reenergize](#) your teaching?

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