

WE ARE MORE THAN THINGS THAT THINK: MEDITATIONS ON EMBODIED LEARNERS, LEARNING, AND INSTRUCTION

AN INTERACTIVE PRESENTATION

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes (1596-1650) reinforced the long-standing divide between the body and mind by asserting that we are fundamentally “thing[s] that thin[k].” Relegating the body to an accidental role, even asserting we can exist without it, Descartes’ work galvanized centuries of dualistic thinking regarding the embodied subject, thinking that traces its roots back to Plato (428-348 B.C.E.). Dualistic thinking persists to this day, even despite our best efforts, and it is a serious obstacle to effective pedagogy.

In their *Facilitating Learning with the Adult Brain in Mind*, Kathleen Taylor and Catherine Marienau work to deconstruct Cartesian dualism and demonstrate its adverse impact on learning. Drawing from current research in educational psychology and cognitive science (Kahneman, 2011), they examine the way in which cognition is anchored in the body and its processes, effectively creating a “unified theory” of body and mind. This theory is supported by other extant scholarship on embodied learning. Collectively, this research paints the portrait of humans as things that can think because, not in spite of, their embodiment.

This presentation shares, and creates the opportunity to discuss, concrete strategies for collegiate level instruction that are designed to foster increased cognitive success by focusing attention on developing the necessary condition for it: physical and psychological security and well-being. This presentation explores the impact of factors such as stress, inadequate sleep, financial pressure, and food insecurity, among others, on academic performance and student satisfaction. It discusses techniques that have been used by the presenter in the classroom setting to address and mitigate some of these factors. These include sleep journals and guided mindfulness meditation.

In addition, the presentation examines the necessity of considering instructors as embodied agents whose efficacy can be compromised as a result of the inherited tendency to overlook embodiment and its role in professional performance. It considers the predisposition that many individual faculty members may have to succumb to dualistic thinking as well as strategies to ensure faculty are provided with sufficient support to consistently perform at an optimal level.

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