

The Embodied Playbook: Writing Practices of Student-Athletes

by J. Michael Rifenburg. Utah State UP, 2018. 188 pp.

The Embodied Playbook is very much worth the read for anyone interested in the rhetorics, pedagogies, and literacies of the human body. Primarily, the book collects a combination of primary interviews, first-person observations, and recent historical commentary to help clarify the processes by which student athletes learn. The findings have many applications, not the least of which is to reenvision existing methods of teaching and learning composition to help teachers better understand the students in their classrooms.

The monograph begins with a dense but informative history of some of the problems of several sports programs and the rifts between academic programs and sports over time, revealing how money, prestige, and ethics often entangle those programs. Rifenburg also uses this space to dispel some of the stereotypes about student athletes. Rifenburg's second chapter establishes a sports play as a repeatable genre with a context, and in the third chapter the author goes on to explain the processes by which athletes learn and internalize these genres. The fourth chapter holds implications for writing centers, and the fifth discusses ways to help student athletes improve as writers in the classroom.

Rifenburg presents real and poignant commentary from behind the curtain of secrecy that often veils the athletic world from the academic. As Rifenburg's interviews began the task of unmasking the *otherness* of the student-athlete, my sports-fan self and my teacher self came together to see anew that the student athletes I teach are complex people with different needs and experiences than many of my other students have.

Rifenburg focuses on student athletes as they learn the movements and patterns of scripted plays that their coaches want them to execute when the performance of game time comes. He notes that there is a different vernacular, a transformed scope and sequence, and unique mode of performance for the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are being nurtured for the athletes he follows.

Players learn scripted plays through three cognitive processes: spatial orientation, haptic communication, and scaffolded situations. These processes theorize bodily reaction to an unfolding text. Moreover, these processes can find their way into our writing classes as theories of writing pedagogy (130).

Why, one might ask, *does this athletically focused pedagogy matter to me if I am teaching four rooms full of honors students?* Rifenburg acknowledges that we don't all teach football players, addressing the concerns of Holly Hassell and Joanne Baird Giordano, but affirms

the appropriateness of this approach for all writing students. He relates the observations and interviews of the first part of the book to the classroom by drawing upon both jazz music and Kathleen Blake Yancey et al., framing the three cognitive practices described above as ways to access prior knowledge. If our students do not come to us blank slates, but rather come loaded with their own knowledge, skills, experiences, and practices, then it is incumbent upon us to recognize, access, and leverage those things in our composition classrooms.

It is in witnessing these athletes' learning processes through Rifenburg's writing that we as teachers, counselors, and mentors can find a connection to our students that our current methods may not be reaching. Tapping into existing student knowledge and practice can increase the ease with which our composition practices can transfer into students' lives. Simultaneously Rifenburg's rejuvenated take on Frank Barrett offers suggestions of shared orientation (community), distributed task (collaboration), and soloing and supporting (improvisation within a context). These pathways to learning offer deeper stimulation for those who are already thriving in our current academic paradigm. With a little creativity from the reader, Rifenburg's observations and interviews, in addition to the wealth of scholarship upon which he draws, provide insight many of us may need to successfully adapt learning styles more frequently found on the fields and courts of athletics to the academic classroom and to see anew the connections that already exist in curricula, such as teaching for transfer and writing about writing, which the

author discusses in his next steps section.

I recommend this book as a bridge between theory and practice, as a different way to see anew and reapply existing composition practices, and as a call to develop a more inclusive pedagogy in our classrooms that not only allows for, but takes advantage of, the lived experiences of our students. Especially in the two-year college, where many students may feel more comfortable with hands-on professions or athletic communities than they do in academia, this book provides a way for writing teachers to understand and assist the wide variety of students in our classrooms.

Works Cited

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