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Our profession, as Laura Micciche has framed it in Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching, is not for the faint-hearted. Far from a feel-good fix, this book confronts the ugly truth that emotion has been locked out of its own home and made to live in the basement closet, thanks chiefly to the reason-versus-emotion dichotomy that developed in ancient Greece (Cicero, in De Oratore, blames the unfortunate rift on Socrates). Consequently, reason became privileged as the sole reliable mode of knowledge creation and critical thought. Emotion, devalued as a tool for discovery, critical thinking, invention, and knowledge creation has, nevertheless, always been embedded in the work of the effective writer and teacher of writing. The writing teacher and student have been left to work only cerebrally with text, a limitation far from the oratorical tradition, the theater, or the face-to-face embodied (gendered, raced, etc.) and emotive communication that surrounds everyday life. Micciche notes that she is acutely conscious of exploring uncharted territory, reaching beyond the comfortable grasp of terminology and conceptual frameworks readily available, and venturing somewhere off the conceptual map. This is just one of the ways this book challenges its readers. We are called on to imagine, explore, and research as she points toward a new direction even while she cannot describe the destination. This book invites us to dialogue, to contemplate, to rethink positions that have appeared natural. Micciche challenges us to imagine, to explore, to research the questions raised in this slender but weighty volume of sweeping scope.

Chapter 1, “On Terms and Context,” distinguishes the book’s focus from the mere rhetorical strategy of appealing to pathos, such as President Bush’s classic rhetorical approach to “transform people into objects of feeling” (13). Rather, Micciche sees power in the dynamics of emotion which emerge relationally, among people in the context of a larger culture—local, national, and global. She contrasts her view of emotion (as co-created among individuals) with the more standard model of emotion that exists inside individuals and flows either “inside-to-outside or outside-to-inside” (3), called forth by a speaker or writer or expressed, pressed out from within an individual’s reservoir of emotion. Put simply, emotional realities are created among individuals in social context as the glue that “binds the social body together as well as tears it apart” (14). For Micciche, emotions are “technologies for doing” with the “potential to enact and construct, name and defile, become and undo—to perform meanings and to stand as a marker for meanings that get performed” (14). Emotion has a pivotal impact on embodied, lived realities, including those of the composition classroom. To ignore the role of emotion is to be acted upon instead of actively participating in creation of more ideal practices, results, and working conditions.

Micciche surveys a substantial body of recent cross-disciplinary research that validates her vision of emotion as a rhetorical construct, not internal, irrational (and thus feminine and problematized), and natural. She cites numerous titles in anthropology, architecture, history, philosophy, psychology, the sciences, feminism, and education that evidence the scope of the widening “affective turn” (15). She also cites ancient scholars of rhetoric on the role of the body-mind connection and emotions as “ways of knowing” and “means of reasoning” (21), and she criticizes several well-established composition textbooks for ignoring these important elements. However, Micciche does see a more nuanced view derived from the ancients in one text, Ancient Rhetoric for Contemporary Students (21). Finally, she recommends that “the teachers would do well to construct dynamic writing assignments and, more broadly, to conceive writing in a way that capitalizes on everyday forms of embodiment and performance” (19). In chapter 2, “Sticky Emotions and Identity Metaphors,” Micciche explains how we are held back by old metaphors driven by ineffectual emotional baggage and inferior self-concept of the profession, while new metaphors must form around new identity and emotionality if we are to be the change we want to see in the form of job security, status, and working conditions. The point is well taken that when we teach critical thinking it makes good sense to apply it authentically to our profession.

Chapter 3, “Emotion Performed and Embodied in the Writing Classroom,” is a practical pedagogy chapter in which Micciche offers some performance exercises to try in our classrooms. Though a chiefly theoretical work, this book speaks not to abstraction but to embodiment, to performance, to the paralinguistic dimension of meaning which is embedded in social context where communication happens. Gesture, expression, tone of voice, and the impulses that drive them are inseparable from the culture of everyday life, which renders invisible the “emotioned” ways we make meaning and obscures the cultural
biases and commonplaces which define emotioned meanings. Much of chapter 3 is devoted to the theoretical underpinnings for the practices Micciche proposes, along with a caveat that—while not necessarily tried and true in the composition classroom—the exercises, drawn from theater arts, seem to her a promising way to fill a missing ingredient she perceived in honors classes she has taught: “I mostly hope to cultivate a sense of wonder—openness, curiosity, and suspension of disbelief in relation to how we do language . . . once we admit emotion legitimately into the mix” (49). Such a stance of openness would poise students ideally for the work of research, discovery, critical thinking and creation, which makes an admirable case for the legitimacy of emotion as a tool for these purposes. The performance exercises are designed to make visible the invisible language of emotion by embodying the critical stances and messaging through performance via posture, facial expression, voice, movement, for “knowledge cannot be separated from the bodily world of feeling and sensation,” and, once visible, the meaning can be more consciously and accurately translated to the page (52). The performance exercises include “Deep Embodiment” and “Performance and Play,” in which students work in pairs to observe differences in how their classmates perform texts, showcasing how the emotional meanings they perceive in them inform their different understandings of the text which, Micciche asserts, are influenced by the readers’ different senses of physicality. Each exercise includes an individual writing assignment that serves as an integral part of the feedback loop of the performance. Adding such work to writing pedagogy, she writes, would expand our repertoire of choices for helping students to “get” rhetoric in a way that has been “long neglected by writing pedagogies” (56). It appears that Micciche would reverse the banishment of oratory to the speech departments, and reinstate the ancient Roman standard of watching and practicing performance as integral to composition, as Cicero, Tacitus, Quintilian, and others espoused.

Chapter 4, “Disappointment and WPA Work,” invites us to de-naturalize the current view of emotion, to distance ourselves critically from the prevailing attitude which casts affective work of the composition teacher and the WPA as “women’s work” that does not warrant staff, access to a copy machine, pay commensurate with considerable administrative duties, or job security. In other words, if we stick to our professional identity as undervalued and marginalized, then we tend to undermine efforts toward change. Or, as mother told us, if we keep frowning, our faces will stick that way. How interesting, the author notes, that although women dominate this field, men have written almost all the theoretical books published. Must the feminist stance of WPAs expand to embrace a greater sense of self-efficacy, of civic voice, of valor? The author does advocate that we become conscious of our role in the feedback loop that perpetuates the status quo in WPA work where the emotional climate is characterized by disappointment (96).

In her “Interchapter: Experience and Emotion,” Micciche acknowledges dissenting opinions, publishing responses to her article “More Than a Feeling.” She includes some of the comments sent to the WPA-L by three WPAs who described success and happiness in their work. Micciche takes the opportunity to acknowledge the unique satisfactions of WPA work, but asserts in her conclusion that the dominant emotional tenor of the field warrants her call to activism, new attitudes, and new ways of seeing to inform not only how we work, but how we teach. Doing Emotion supplies a rich theoretical framework that adds momentum to the study of emotion as an embodied way of knowing that can bring composition back to life.

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Works Cited
