



The Embodied Playbook: Writing Practices of Student-Athletes

By J. Michael Rifenburg.

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For Michael Rifenburg, *The Embodied Playbook: Writing Practices of Student-Athletes* begins with a seemingly-simple proposition: student-athletes possess multiple literacies that “privilege the body as a central mode of meaning making” (p. 5). Offering unique glances at the academic and athletic lives of student-athletes, Rifenburg paints a robust picture of student-athletes as capable, autonomous, and participatory learners. However, these ideal students only exist in spaces that afford such learning opportunities. He suggests that while student-athletes do possess multiple literacies and learn through physical embodiment, these effective learning methods do not often translate to traditional writing-intensive academic environments like writing centers or First-Year Composition courses.

Speaking directly to an academic audience of Composition instructors, scholars, and Athletic Department faculty, Rifenburg goes to great lengths demonstrating he understands the complexities of the dueling learning contexts student-athletes inhabit. Although admirable care is given to walk readers through the sticky, and counter-productive web, of NCAA regulations and the fascinating world of plays as rhetorical devices, the nexus of his book hinges on a central idea: student-athletes are proficient learners. Because student-athletes use their bodies as vehicles of knowing, they constantly generate literacy-based knowledge in myriad ways. By dissecting the hindrances and affordances of athletic and academic learning contexts, Rifenburg’s proclamation that student-athletes should be understood as dynamic learners reveals an influential argument that can shift how Composition instructors approach embodied rhetoric and effective pedagogical practices.

Broken up into two sections (*Knowing Our Student-Athletes; Teaching Our Student-Athlete Writers*), Rifenburg spends the front-half of this project uncovering exactly who student-athletes are as learners and uses “plays” as his vehicle of exploration. Within the context of athletics, Rifenburg argues that plays display embodied action, and a “student-athlete’s embodiment of a play reflects how they understand the play” (p. 57). A central tenet of Chapter 2 is that plays reflect learning and offer a glimpse into how student-athletes come to know something, and Rifenburg pays painstakingly close attention to the rhetorical complexities of plays. His two driving questions in this chapter, “what are plays?” and “what do plays do?” are

answered by carefully taking the reader through the nuanced, multi-modal dimensions of plays and the transformative process they go through. Rifenburg is able to make a compelling case that plays represent the arguably most important element of student-athlete literacy: embodied learning.

Rifenburg begins supporting his intriguing argument by highlighting where plays come from and what they are designed to do. Noting that plays are made by coaches with a specific audience in mind, Rifenburg suggests that the audience of a play is a player (or players) particularly-suited and capable of carrying out the intended actions. Once the intended actions are theoretically carried out, this culminates in an ideal result for any given play. What's interesting here is that Rifenburg makes an analogy to the rhetorical value of plays -- in that they demonstrate key composition knowledge concepts like audience, purpose, and context -- to writing-specific situations. Since student-athletes have demonstrated they can master the rhetorical elements of plays, there is a bridge to be made that facilitates the same moves in academic contexts, which is addressed in Chapters 3 and 4. However, before he gets there, Rifenburg ensures readers can identify the value of plays, especially since they require multiple literacies to comprehend and are inherently multi-modal.

One may ask, why does it matter that plays are multimodal? Throughout the book, but most notably in the latter-part of Chapter 2, Rifenburg makes a crucial connection between multimodal plays and relevance. Plays begin as text, then undergo what Rifenburg calls "resemiotization" (how meaning transforms across contexts), which allows student-athletes to conceptualize the play and carry out the actions expected of them (p. 53). This move of resemiotization is tied to embodiment, metacognition, and transfer studies, all of which Rifenburg suggests are integral players in the larger puzzle of comprehension. Key to contemporary sports, Rifenburg notes how plays and their meaning shift across contexts like meeting rooms, film sessions, practices, and then onto the playing field itself. For example, although a play might be initially understood as "Spider 2 Y-Banana" as physical text, plays undergo a transformation when being signaled from the sidelines onto the field. Here, the aforementioned "Spider 2 Y-Banana" can now be visually represented via a symbol (either hand gesture, audible code, or visual cue-card) that communicates which rhetorical act should be carried out by the players. This process of resemiotization is paramount to Rifenburg's overarching argument that student-athletes possess multiple literacies; since student-athletes are deciphering rhetorical codes while simultaneously unpacking multi-modal meanings, they are inherently retrieving prior knowledge and enacting multiple literacies during each play of a particular sporting contest. When Rifenburg makes this move, it allows readers to warm-up to his argument of athletics being a dynamic learning space, despite not being readily-associated as such.

After Rifenburg meticulously lays out the primary vehicle by which student-athletes demonstrate their learning, Chapter 3 pays special attention to *how* they learn. Although plays on their own have merit, it is the *doing* of a play that generates knowledge. In Chapter 3, Rifenburg begins analyzing how student-athletes learn through their bodies. Each play requires, and is dependent upon, student-athletes comprehending the rhetorical situations they find themselves in and effectively carrying out embodied actions. Importantly, *doing* is representative of embodiment, where the process of comprehension, cognition, and execution culminate in a way that demonstrates one's literacy. This chapter takes readers through the intimate moments Rifenburg spends with the University of Northern Georgia's (UNG) Men's Basketball team during the 2014-15 season, each passage dedicated to a specific day and revelation surrounding

student-athlete learning. Rifenburg is transparent in his goal for this section, claiming “My argument is direct: my data suggest players learn the complex plays of their community of practice through three cognitive processes—spatial orientation, haptic communication, and scaffolded situations” (p. 68). These three processes are interconnected, and point to the fact that student-athletes fluidly learn by being aware of their location in relationship to others, coordinating with others via their senses, and by sequentially building skills and knowledge as they move towards achieving communal outcomes or goals. Through this three-pronged approach, Rifenburg claims that student-athletes broadly develop methods of understanding, internalizing, and enacting bodily and written literacies for their athletic communities of practice.

Drawing from research grounded in learning theory -- paying special attention to the connection between one’s mind, body, and external objects -- Rifenburg paints a picture of student-athletes as complex learners who engage in dynamic cognitive processes. He does so with great skill as he masterfully reveals the wide-ranging contexts and interconnected embodied practices that facilitate student-athletes’ learning across spaces. Breaking down film to build comprehension, using “discovery learning” to create agency, modeling during practice as means of “learning by teaching”, and making in-game adjustments based on observations and tendencies of one’s opponent are but a few of the contexts in which Rifenburg sees student-athletes for what they are: learners willing and able to overcome literacy challenges both on and off the court (p. 71). Ultimately, Chapter 3 argues for readers to see student-athletes as individuals capable of learning through their bodies and evolving rhetorical situations because they consistently engage with “cognitive processes to learn and embody the play” (p. 97).

Once Rifenburg has sufficiently revealed how student-athletes demonstrate strong learning proficiencies in athletic situations, attention is turned to the glaring disparity in academic contexts. In Chapter 4, Rifenburg focuses on his experience tutoring in an athletics-only writing center, and uses this vantage point to elucidate the bureaucratic hoops of compliance and NCAA mandates student-athletes must jump through. Taking a stance he believes represents the majority of Composition instructors, he argues that in order to learn, students must be exposed to effective writing, teaching, and learning pedagogical approaches. However, this ideal learning environment is restricted by NCAA rules, which severely impacts student-athletes’ dispositions towards learning in academic spaces. The once engaged, participatory, and confident student-athletes he muses over in previous chapters are gone. Now, they shrink in their chairs, watch others critique their work, and become trapped in a web that often “strip(s) them of curricular and extra-curricular agency” (p. 111).

Rifenburg credits this shift in learning identity to two primary factors: the fear of violating NCAA violations, and the inability of tutors/instructors to make connections to the cognitive processes student-athletes are attuned to. In athletic spaces, student-athletes are acutely aware of the expectations, rhetorical tasks, and embodied movements required of them in order to achieve their individual and collective goals. To that, their coaches are also aware of effective pedagogical practices, and often craft individualized teaching methods best-suited to specific student-athletes. Although Rifenburg is not admonishing writing tutors or Composition instructors/scholars for not creating personalized lesson plans for student-athletes, his overarching argument is clear: the same learning moves that kick-start the dynamic cognitive processes that yield fruitful results in athletic contexts are restricted, put-aside, or seen as inapplicable in academic contexts. Further, he suggests that a reconceptualization of student-athlete academic support resources is needed. By making “intra-institutional connections” Rifenburg suggests this approach, where student-athletes are integrated into the university’s

larger ecology rather than sequestered in exclusively-athletics contexts, may alleviate NCAA concerns and lead to better instructional practices (p. 125). When attempting to teach student-athlete writers within a specific writing center environment, Rifenburg came to realize that student-athletes simply do not receive the same kind of robust and effective instruction that facilitates and ignites their embodied literacies. It is here that Rifenburg leads readers to one of the most influential suggestions of his work, the goal of “describing how we can better teach our student-athletes in writing-intensive spaces... by implementing what we know about how they learn” (p. 111).

Although Rifenburg’s book focuses on student-athletes, there are broader implications at play. In Chapter 5, Rifenburg creates a through-line that culminates his points on rhetorical agents, embodiment, collaboration, and effective pedagogy. Suggesting Composition instructors at-large might benefit from seeing “literacy” and “writing practices” in a different light, Rifenburg provides the net-net of his work: there are different pedagogical approaches at our disposal that can facilitate learning for a wider-range of body-literate learners. Through his thorough investigation of student-athlete literacy practices, Rifenburg has brought attention to the fact that students often learn in unconventional ways. This break from tradition is not to be rejected or simply “othered;” rather, I believe Rifenburg has opened the door for scholars across Performance Studies, Embodiment, Teaching Pedagogy, and Composition to take a serious look at current writing-intensive teaching practices by incorporating elements of embodiment, collaboration, and improvisation. By investigating how student-athletes learn, Rifenburg has revealed that students may learn through physical, embodied movements; they may learn via relation and connection to others within activity systems; and, they may even learn through cognitive processes that are seldom articulated in papers, but are still very much present and integral. Ultimately, *The Embodied Playbook: Writing Practices of Student-Athletes* is more than an investigative case-study -- it is a call to action that pushes the boundaries of what we know, what we think we know, and how we come to know it.