

# Where We Are: Disability and Accessibility

## Moving Beyond Disability 2.0 in Composition Studies

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Our perception, as specialists at the intersection of disability studies and composition studies is that disability has arrived in the sense that it is now on most peoples' radar. We seldom hear questions anymore such as, "Aren't there special colleges for those students?" or "How would a disabled student even get into college?" We have come to what we might think of as "Disability 2.0": now that disabled students and teachers are accepted as belonging in our classrooms, and we affirm that their presence is an asset rather than a deficit, what should we be doing?

When we give workshops or presentations on disability and the writing classroom, we are often asked whether there is a checklist of things that writing teachers can do to make their classrooms more accessible. Spoken truthfully, our answer would closely resemble that time-honored teacher response: "Welllll . . . yes and no."

Checklists are useful in some circumstances because they offer a place to start. When one's head is swimming with the question, "How do I even approach this?", a checklist gives a sense of grounding, of crystallizing a vague lack of knowledge into recognizable themes: how to check in, language to avoid, perhaps some individual accommodations. But that crystallization process is also, inevitably, a reductive process. Even teachers experienced in working with disabled students, including teachers who are disabled themselves, may find themselves gravitating without realizing it toward reductive assumptions about students based upon diagnoses or symptoms. Disability has all too often been seen as something that must be fixed or accommodated minimally. So checklists get yoked to diagnoses in ways that discipline disabled bodies and minds.

A checklist approach locates disability over there, isolates disability within the body or mind of one student in one class, freezes disability as a set of symptoms rather than as a social process—or demands that disability be overcome—and allows us to perpetuate the fiction that disability is not me or not now. Instead, composition teachers should be prepared for and actively working within the times and spaces of disability.

Disability's presence, like the presence of students with race, class, or gender differences, is not a "problem" but rather an opportunity to rethink our practices in teaching writing. So the truth is, while we could offer a checklist, and it would cover many important topics, it would be contrary to the direction in which we want to push writing teachers, which is a more holistic, recursive approach, one in which disability becomes a central, critical and creative lens for students as well as teachers.

In what ways should and could disability actually be central and centered in all classrooms? How does disability better help us to understand the learning process and the writing process? Disability sharpens our focus on important concepts including adaptation, creativity, community, interdependency, technological ingenuity and modal fluency. Could such a focus replace traditional pedagogical ideals like correctness, the autonomous writer, bootstrapping, and reverence for final drafts?

Instead of rules or norms flowing from teachers to students, we see classrooms as spaces where teachers, along with students, explore and discuss and write to audiences with the knowledge that disability is *us*. This kind of classroom discussion could be as minute as what pronouns include or exclude implied audiences, or as far ranging as what do I need to do as a writer to make this particular project accessible to people with a range of disabilities, and why should I make it accessible? This last point requires teachers to inject some history, art, and writing by and about disability, and so we realize that moving beyond Disability 2.0 requires us to start with teacher training.

Teacher workshops should stress accessible course design and emphasize a dynamic, recursive, and continual approach to inclusion rather than mere troubleshooting. This focus can relieve some of the pressure instructors might feel to design the Perfectly Accessible course prior to the onset of a given semester. Ironically, the most common objection we hear to anticipating disabled students invokes the infinite diversity of human minds and bodies; or, "How can I accommodate everyone?" This is a good question, but a misdirected one. A better question might be, "How can a classroom community be productively and continually transformed by an orientation of inclusion?" Understanding access and accommodation as recursive projects that exist before, throughout, and even after a course allows for deliberate and proactive course design while also inviting and drawing on the diversity that each roster provides.

Yes, legal requirements for accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (including the 2008 amendments and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, both of which apply to colleges) should be introduced in teacher training and faculty development workshops.<sup>1</sup> These laws are easily available online and can be searched for and read together during workshops. But we ought to go further, making instructors aware of disability's deep connection to rhetoric, especially to the rhetorical concepts of *metis* (Dolmage;

Walters) and *kairos* (Price)—adaptive and alternate ways of moving in time and space. In addition to introducing disability law and rhetoric, teaching workshops can suggest ways to build a shared responsibility between instructors and students, especially since many students with impairments do not disclose. Some examples:

- Have teachers in small groups brainstorm ways of including disability topics as part of larger discussions and as options for research (when a course is not disability themed). Have groups present their ideas, followed by short reflective writing on teacher moves that work. If time permits, allow one group to demonstrate a teacherly move to the whole class.
- In a writing class, invite students to create audience profiles suggested by particular compositions (their own or others'). Whether a short reflection or a preliminary assignment before essay drafting begins, this activity encourages awareness of the type of body-mind a piece may privilege as well as critical reading and thinking, with attention to inclusivity and access.
- Ask students to choose and design an adaptation to an assignment that foregrounds their strengths as learners and writers. For example, students asked to write a research memo could choose to create that memo instead as a visual map. Ask them to accompany this assignment with a short written reflection on why they created the adaptation, how it meets the goals of the assignment, and what they learned from carrying out this adaptation. A kairotic teaching move at the end of this sequence might be to spur a class discussion of accommodations in general, charting students' ideas on the board or on a computer screen and digitally saving the chart on a class website for future reference, as a text to later write back to, or as brainstorming for future research topics.
- Many rhetorical choices include some audiences and exclude others. Ask students working in small groups to brainstorm ways to include and address people with a range of sensory disabilities, and then ask the group to collaboratively create guidelines for inclusive writing and publishing, suitable for college writers. End with a reflection on the difficulties of this task. Was there a tendency to revert to universal rules? Norms?
- Another modification of this exercise is to ask students to focus on a particular text, such as a website, analyzing not only its accessibility to those with sensory but also physical and mental disabilities. Have students expand their list of possible accommodations or adaptations for such audiences. This can then serve as a precursor to the "create your own accessible text" assignment.

- Ask students to create a composition (for example, a video essay, podcast, infographic, or traditional written essay) that is widely accessible to a range of learning styles and abilities. This will involve discussions about audience—what assumptions does a text normatively make about its readers/viewers—and how to broaden accessibility using multiple modalities, such as accessible web design, or accompanying an image with descriptions, captioning a video, including transcripts with sound files, and so on.
- Assign writing projects that use disability as a point of inquiry. For example, assign a writing project that asks students to perform some sort of critical university study. Students could examine the geography of campus to assess its accessibility, examine specific colleges or majors for inclusivity, or write about the culture of disability on campus.

We composition teachers no longer consider giving students a list of do's and don'ts as the best practice for the teaching of writing. We want students to engage in inquiry, research, conversation, and critical thinking and to experiment and write as they make rhetorical decisions about what to say, what forms their writing should take, how to reach broad or selected audiences. Our approach to disability should likewise move beyond mere lists and individual accommodations. There's room for those, but we want to engage our students in researching and thinking about disability in relation to writing, audiences, purposes, and access via various modes of dissemination.

## Notes

1. "Students with disabilities attending post-secondary schools are protected from discrimination by both the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In accordance with these laws, a school must make its programs, including its extra-curricular activities, accessible to students with disabilities in an integrated setting. This includes providing accessible architecture, such as classrooms and housing, accessible transportation and auxiliary aids and services, if requested" ("Disability Connection Newsletter – July 2014").

## Works Cited

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