

## Modeling Accessibility: Perspectives from the Accessibility Task Force

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The stories of writing center professionals with disabilities are beginning to be explicitly mentioned, discussed, and researched in the literature and in our professional spaces. Beginning in the last decade, personal narratives from directors with disabilities (Rinaldi; Weber; Garbus; Kleinfeld) have disrupted the dominant scholarly focus on student-writers and broadened the conversation to include professionals with disabilities. This scholarship challenges the field to grapple with issues of access for its members and how the field has engaged in ableist practices. For example, Jenelle Dembsey highlights how writing center conferences are designed for nondisabled attendees in everything from non-printed programs that are accessed only by online PDFs to conference sessions held a significant distance from one another. This lack of consideration for disabled bodies forces professionals with disabilities to “shoulder the weight of disclosure” or else be excluded from participation in the conference (6). While professionals with disabilities *may* receive accommodations when they disclose, this way of doing business privileges a non-disabled point of view, making disability a personal, individual issue instead of a systemic one. Despite emerging work on accessibility in composition conferences (Hubrig et al.; Brewer et al.; “Composing Access”; Price), little change has come to our field and professionalizing activities, such as conferences, publications, working groups, and leadership at local, regional, and international levels. The writing center community needs more models for how to make sustainable and meaningful change to the academic ableism the field currently perpetuates (Dolmage, “Academic Ableism”).



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The writing center community needs to make changes, and it can start by organizing events and professional meetings with an access-for-all perspective at the onset of the planning instead of making singular accommodations. We argue that systemic change in our profession comes only when professionals stop accommodating disability and start designing writing center work for the embodied experience of all members in the community. To do this, our writing centers and professional organizations must invite and recognize leadership from the disability/Deaf communities<sup>1</sup> and, in addition, create structures that foster a collective focus on accessibility. As one model for the kind of change we hope to engender in our field, this article presents our experiences in founding the Accessibility Task Force established by the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA). As a mixed-ability<sup>2</sup> group, we share the history of creating International Writing Centers Association (IWCA)'s Accessibility Task Force, examining how dis/ability is foregrounded in our origin, leadership, membership makeup, goals, and collaborative process. We also discuss how the Accessibility Task Force created the IWCA's first conference access guide, which was designed for accessibility, rather than reifying a focus on individual accommodation. In this article, we share (a) a history of the Accessibility Task Force that highlights our goals and our setbacks, (b) the development of the "Conference Accessibility Guide" as an important artifact of the work we have done in challenging ableism in our conferences, (c) the challenges we encountered in those processes, and (d) some guidance for others interested in forming accessibility committees. Through our narrative, we hope to offer our model as one way to move from retroactive accommodations toward structural, thoughtful changes in access.

## **CREATING AND SUSTAINING: LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF THE TASK FORCE**

### **A GATHERING OF LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE WHO WERE TIRED OF THE BULLSHIT**

The Accessibility Task Force, which was officially established in fall 2020, began with several individuals (Lucie Moussu, Jenelle Dembsy, Sarah Kosel Agnihotri, Rachel Herzl-Betz, and Manako Yabe) coming together in late 2019 with a range of motivations: indignation over a lack of access at conferences, frustration with inconsistent conversations about access in the organization, a desire for a Special Interest Group (SIG), and an interest in disability justice.<sup>3</sup> In

their separate conversations with each other before forming a group, they found a uniting thread: a need to make IWCA and its conferences more inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities. IWCA has a history of accommodation that was often a reaction to individual needs, but it did not have a sustained focus on creating its structure or conference as accessible spaces from the outset of the planning.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to change IWCA's practices, these five women, at this point working independently, took aim at unpacking attitudes toward disability in the writing center community. Lucie and Jenelle conducted a survey on the state of accessibility in writing center conferences, which they sent to writing center organizations around the world. Simultaneously, Jenelle and Sarah discussed developing a SIG for IWCA, which would bring together interested individuals to discuss concerns and potentially make change. Eventually, Jenelle and Sarah brought Manako and Rachel together to work on the SIG. As the survey wrapped up and plans for proposing a SIG solidified in early summer of 2020, their different conversations converged into one as it became clear that they had shared goals related to accessibility in the IWCA. The conversation led the group to a unifying focus on fostering a sustainable commitment to accessibility, and this eventually led the group to suggest a standing committee in IWCA as a way to ensure lasting, structural change.

### **ENCOUNTERING CHALLENGES TO ACHIEVING INCLUSIVITY**

In order for this initial group to be inclusive, which was a requirement of the mission, group members needed to immediately negotiate access and communication, an undertaking that required expertise and money. Since we started out as an unofficial group, there was initially no budget for access services. One member of the group is Deaf (Manako), and one hearing member (Sarah) is an interpreter. While it may seem to some that this would solve any accommodation issues, it actually created an ethical dilemma. Sarah could either be an active member of the group, or she could provide interpreting services as a neutral third party. To try and do both would create role conflicts and violate the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct that interpreters follow. For example, any time Sarah wanted to share her own thoughts, she would have to stop interpreting which would deny access to Manako; it would become confusing whether Sarah was interpreting another group member's opinion or providing her own; and it could create a conflict of interest if she had differing opinions from those being expressed by the other group members. Since Sarah wanted to be an active member of the group, Manako and Sarah agreed to use a different interpreter to avoid a duplicate role for Sarah as a member

versus a designated interpreter (Hauser, et al.).<sup>5</sup> This arrangement also meant that Sarah could provide information on the interpreting process to the group when discussing accessibility so that the working designated interpreter could focus solely on communication access instead of needing to “step out of role” to reply if questions were directed to her.

To achieve an inclusive environment that allowed both Manako and Sarah to engage as active participants in the group, we explored various options for interpreters, including Video Relay Services (VRS; Federal Communications Commission) which enables American Sign Language users to communicate by teleconference through a video remote interpreter. Unfortunately VRS was not suitable for our purposes due to randomly assigned interpreters, higher risks of error in translation, and interpreters’ lack of specialized knowledge. Furthermore, VRS was available only in the US, which limited Manako’s access when she moved to Japan shortly after the group formed. Fortunately, the group was initially able to request interpreters through Sarah’s university,<sup>6</sup> which was unique in its support as other institutions may not be willing or able to pay for access services. While this group was ultimately able to achieve inclusivity, this desired outcome is not necessarily achievable in many group-building contexts. As Margaret Fink et al. argue, deaf and disabled scholars are often forced to defend access needs and “justif[y] what we know works” in research contexts because “cost is the bottom line” (104). Our story is emblematic of how difficult it can be to secure access even when every participant already understands its value. Considering this all happened before we were an official group, it highlights the barriers accessibility advocates can encounter even in their attempts to organize and create a proposal for change to bring to organizations like the IWCA.

### **DEMANDING STRUCTURAL CHANGE TO AVOID RETROFITTING**

Thinking in terms of structural ableism, we needed to change the structures while we were still working within the structures. In the summer of 2020, as the pandemic raged on, near-future conferences were becoming increasingly virtual. Unsure of what access would look like for these online conferences, this initial group became concerned about the need for accessibility initiatives that would be permanent and sustainable. It was decided that a better course of action might be to temporarily pause work on the SIG proposal and instead focus efforts on a proposal to the IWCA Executive Board to create a new standing committee in the organization. The standing committee could be a permanent part of the IWCA organizational structure and work to make access a founda-

tional part of the IWCA, including access planning for all upcoming conferences and redrafting the outdated disability position statement. Simultaneously, the new IWCA President, Sherry Wynn Perdue, reached out to Lucie and Jenelle—two people she knew were working on disability-related issues—and Karen Moroski-Rigney, who was not affiliated with the original group but has a demonstrated scholarly interest in disability, to ask if they would be interested in writing a revised position statement on disability and accessibility. Lucie and Jenelle shared that the group was already in the midst of working on a proposal related to accessibility, emphasizing that it would be important to first establish a standing committee and then have that committee work on an accessibility statement. Karen joined the group and contributed as the proposal was finalized.

Sherry invited submission of the proposal to the IWCA Executive Board. The group's proposal focused on an expansive definition of access that included multiple non-disability related requests (e.g., rooms for breastfeeding; better signage for gender-neutral bathrooms), essentially trying to focus on any barriers to access based on identity versus just on disability or that require complex changes to the organization. The Executive Board's response was much more limited. They recommended that a task force be created and that the definition of access be specifically centered on disability access. This decision from the board was informed by two key concerns: There was another task force being created at the same time called the Inclusion and Social Justice Task Force, which had areas that overlapped with the accessibility proposal. Also, IWCA has a sprawling structure with seven standing committees—each needing to be staffed by the members of the board. Adding a new standing committee would strain an already strained volunteer board. From the Executive Board's point of view, creating an Accessibility Task Force would ensure the work would continue and have a non-duplicated focus.

While the Executive Board responded to the proposal with a consideration toward organization limitations, the group was not fully aware of those concerns or why a task force was suggested instead. From the group's perspective, this was a frustrating response from the Executive Board because creating a standing committee would have suggested that the IWCA was willing to make disability visible in the organization and that there would be a sustained commitment to access. Choosing to create a task force instead brought up questions of how permanent the group would be, and taking a narrow focus on disability access caused the group to believe that the organization had become reliant on retrofit-style accommodations,

which adjust existing structures, rather than focusing on accessibility and universal design from day one (Dolmage, “Mapping Composition”). A standing committee could be a foundational component of the IWCA and could direct all access initiatives through an overarching strategic plan.

Additionally, a standing committee could serve as a gathering space for writing center professionals interested in disability justice and a starting point for additional accessibility work. This mattered because the group wanted to make sure the work for access would be sustained within the organization. However, the reality is that when working to dismantle structural ableism, sometimes we have to change those structures while working within them. As autistic activist Lydia X. Z. Brown argues, creating spaces that are “equally and fully accessible for every single person’s possible access needs” is impossible. It is a necessary but unending project that is often too messy for established institutions, like the IWCA. The group decided that being a task force would at least be a starting point from which to work toward broader accessibility. Our initial agenda included two priority items: create a conference access guide and have task force members host listening sessions at the upcoming IWCA event being held online in place of a fall 2020 conference.

### **MAKING CHANGE: CREATING THE “CONFERENCE ACCESSIBILITY GUIDE”**

Despite the challenges of gathering and creating our group, once we were established, we wanted to make a change to the business-as-usual ableism of the IWCA conferences. One of our first tasks was to create a “working draft” Accessibility Guide, which would suggest and outline ways of making presentations, meetings, conferences, and other professional gatherings more accessible. This guide was tested by the IWCA Collaborative presenters in the spring of 2021. Since the Collaborative was being held online, we prioritized creating a set of guidelines for online presenters and attendees, saving work on the hybrid and face-to-face portions of the guide for later. This draft was revised and expanded based on presenter and audience feedback.

Our process focused on building on existing conversations around conference accessibility. While IWCA was just coming to address accessibility, other organizations had a long history of creating similar guides. Existing guides, including those created by the Conference on College Composition & Communication (CCCC), the Modern Language Association, and the Society for Disability Studies, as well as the “Composing Access” guide through The Ohio State University, provided a range of models that we could use to determine what would work for IWCA. Some guidebooks, such as CCCCs, were

research-driven whereas others were more focused on technical aspects of accessibility. This step in our process was both practical and theoretical. Access work can only succeed when it acknowledges our fundamental interdependence as scholars and as human beings. Access labor becomes liberatory—and begins to serve disability justice—when it works to dismantle entrenched myths of independence (Mingus). To make that kind of substantial change, we need to learn from other organizations and their years of organizational labor.

Our group also explicitly prioritized collective accessibility over individual accommodation in our presenter guide. In this, we draw on social and cultural models of disability (Oliver)<sup>7</sup> to expand our communal sense of what it means to be a member of IWCA, rather than working to fit our members into inaccessible structures. This focus had multiple ramifications for the guide's form, content, and rhetorical choices: 1) we emphasized brevity to make the guide less intimidating for conference presenters who were new to thinking about accessibility; 2) we deemphasized disability to focus on universal design; and 3) the guide regularly returned to the idea of accessibility as an ongoing process.

We based our decisions on our disabled and nondisabled audiences in the IWCA community, and we'll continue to collect information about our community's needs and revise accordingly. For example, original drafts of our guide were upwards of 12 pages. We chose to revise for brevity, which prioritized new users over the productive redundancy that often marks universally designed texts (Quintana). Similarly, readers may notice that the final guide rarely mentions disability. Instead, it emphasizes the ways that flexible, multimodal, and transparent choices create an accessible environment for all users (CAST). While this choice may be inviting for those who are new to access work, it also runs the risk of framing the disabled community as undeserving of intentional transformation or of "eras[ing] disability altogether" (Dolmage, "Universal Design"). Finally, the guide emphasizes accessibility as an ongoing process that is always in-progress and incomplete (Price and Kerschbaum). This too centers the new user who may be intimidated by the idea of getting access "wrong." By focusing on a collective, iterative process, the guide promises to support presenters and attendees in attempts that will, necessarily, be incomplete.

The IWCA Collaborative took place on March 25, 2021, and a survey was distributed to both the presenters and attendees to learn about their experiences with accessibility. We collected 44 responses. Although 84% of the respondents did not identify as

someone with a disability, they expressed gratitude for the fact that presentations were consistently accessible. Most presentations were synchronous and the presenters agreed that they had learned a lot through the process of trying to follow the guide's suggestions. The respondents also agreed that they would use this guide for future presentations and share it with their colleagues. Furthermore, the respondents expressed interest in future training opportunities related to accessibility. Based on the survey results and general feedback, we agreed to continue working on the Accessibility Guide so that it could be an "accessibility expert" available for people when they prepare their presentations for IWCA conferences.

### REFLECTIONS ON OUR CHALLENGES

There are three key points to take away from the formation of our Accessibility Task Force. First, the group was intently focused on making the meetings accessible for all. Without diverse membership, the group could not meaningfully exist. Disability Justice centers on the "leadership of those most impacted" (Sins Invalid) and, at the same time, this work cannot simply fall on "those among us who face barriers to access" (Jackson and Cedillo 111). Having members from disabled and non-disabled communities was essential to our makeup, and so we needed to negotiate time differences, abilities, schedules, and needs. We all contributed to setting the agenda, and as individuals' work loads increased we would informally rotate responsibility for who kept everyone on track, took notes, and organized our shared documents. Second, the group was formed essentially by internal networks. Without the dedicated work of five individuals, IWCA may not be having these conversations. While our connection over shared goals and our determination to create change focused our work, one of our first and ongoing questions was about who was not included because of how our group formed through these internal networks. A reliance on personal networks can limit new voices, particularly those who are already marginalized in scholarly spaces. Finally, it is challenging to work within a large organization. It was disheartening, to say the least, when the group was not granted standing committee status, but the structure of IWCA does not easily lend itself to change.

Other challenges were tied to our range of connections to disability. Our perspectives brought multiple voices to the conversation, but they also caused friction when assumptions about the task force's purpose weren't aligned. For disabled and multiply-marginalized scholars, "risk and vulnerability are imperative for participation in academic life," but not every member of the task force experienced the same levels of risk (Jackson and Cedillo 111).



Where some needed to be vulnerable on a regular basis, others could explore disability-focused topics without personal investment. Of course, most of us existed somewhere in the middle of that spectrum, and those differences led to an equally wide range of questions. Was the task force the first of many access goals within the IWCA? Was it a temporary working group? Or, was it a personal opportunity to learn more about disability? These goals often overlapped and shifted over time, leaving group members grappling to stay on the same page.

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR STARTING AN ACCESSIBILITY GROUP**

To end, we hope this article is helpful for writing center professionals who want to develop a new committee for increasing accessibility awareness at their organizations. We would like to emphasize the focus on accessibility at all levels for and by disabled/deaf professionals, scholars, and students who are part of the IWCA and for those who work in writing centers nationally and internationally. We offer some final best practices to consider in order to do so:

### **ESTABLISHING THE GROUP**

- Consider how your group's structure and membership will allow for leadership by disabled members without expecting them to only and always do the work for accessibility.
- Do not expect disclosure from group members about their identities if they choose not to share that information.
- Be thoughtful about how members will become part of the group and whether that process (self-nomination, invitation, appointment, etc.) is inclusive.

### **DESIGNING FOR ACCESSIBILITY**

- Plan for how to make the group as accessible as possible and know that adjustments will probably still be needed as the group evolves.
- Assess what resources are available (such as funding for interpreters or CART captioners if needed) and explore how to obtain those resources in your local context.
- Consider the accessibility implications of where, when, and how meetings take place.
- Create an interdependent structure that allows for fluidity of membership, but regularly discuss overarching goals to keep shared objectives in mind.

### **SETTING GOALS**

- Have open discussions as a group about your goals and priorities.
- Work together to figure out where to start and what can rea-

sonably be accomplished without overtaxing the group.

- Discuss how to establish and stick with a sustainable routine for meetings, projects, and communication. Remember and accept that life events will sometimes force changes to happen and projects to remain imperfect.

### **ADDRESSING URGENCY AND WORKLOAD**

- Be mindful of how to balance the goals you planned for, the important items that appear along the way, and the urgent needs that will pop up suddenly.
- Consider whether you have enough people in the group compared to the workload so the group does not get overwhelmed.
- Explore how to structure the group and assign/not assign roles so that you can decide what makes the most sense for your context and how to appropriately share the workload.

### **NOTES**

1. Some Deaf Studies scholars are shifting d/D and no longer use uppercase D to designate a cultural identity, while other scholars include the word “culture” when that is relevant (Kusters et al.).

2. By mixed-ability group, we mean a group made up of people who identify as having a variety of disabilities and people who do not identify as having a disability.

3. Disability Justice is a movement founded on ten intersectional principles, which aims to abolish ableism and foster interdependent communities of care (Sins Invalid). This framework was created and cultivated by disabled women and femmes of color, including Mia Mingus, Alice Wong, Sandy Ho, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarashina, and Patty Berne.

4. We do acknowledge that IWCA’s conference planning guide does identify an allotment of money for some services for people with disabilities.

5. A designated interpreter is a dynamic participant in the deaf professional’s environment, and their actions influence communication outcomes and the deaf professional’s work performance. The designated interpreter is more accurate compared to the ad-hoc interpreter (Hauser, et al.).

6. Once the group became an official task force, IWCA agreed to pay for interpreting services. Sarah, however, still finds the interpreters for each meeting since IWCA (at the time of this writing) does not have a formal process in place for identifying and hiring interpreters.

7. The social cultural model of disability views society as the problem because it fails to provide an accommodating environment for disabled people (Oliver).

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