

# Disrupting Habits: Modifying Writing Center Processes in Pursuit of Disability Justice

Kerri Rinaldi  
Immaculata University

Rebecca Spiegel  
Drexel University

In her 2021 Mid-Atlantic Writing Centers Association keynote, Allison Hitt aptly noted: “there is a lot of *disciplinary anxiety* about disability in that folks want to help disabled students but *don’t know how*.” In this article, we argue that knowing what to “do” about disability means thinking about disability through the lens of critical theory—disability as a sociocultural identity influenced by structural power. To consider disability in the writing center means considering the cultural and structural forms of power that contribute to disabled students’ experiences—with writing, tutorial interactions, and more.



Rather than asking “How can we best work with disabled writers?” we ask, “How can framing disability as a sociocultural identity help us better understand how to enact disability justice in the writing center?” Instead of merely nodding toward disability theory while recommending ways to “work with” disabled writers, in this article we suggest writing center scholars and practitioners approach disability from a critical disability studies (CDS) lens in order to deeply examine the relationship between disability and power in writing centers.



## MODELS OF DISABILITY: MEDICAL VS. SOCIAL

Though some recent work in writing center studies has helped to move the field forward (Kleinfeld; Anglesey and McBride), there continues to persist an urge to conceive of disability as a problem located in the individual body, often positioning disability as a paradigm: abled-bodied tutors versus disabled writers. Historically, disability was (and still often is) understood from the medical model: the perspective that considers disability to be a medical impairment and disabled people as “lacking.” Rooted in capitalist Western notions that ascribe one’s value to their ability to partici-

pate in the workforce, the medical model underlies a lengthy history of discrimination against and dehumanization of disabled peoples (Barnes).

There is an overreliance on conceptualizing disability in writing centers from a medicalized standpoint as an individual attribute that must be attended to in the session or the physical space of the center. Not only is this evidenced by scholarship and praxis that pathologizes disabled writers or reduces the disabled experience to “guides” for how to work with disabled writers (as previously argued by Jenelle M. Dembsey; Noah Bukowski and Brenda Jo Brueggemann; Kerri Rinaldi; Ada Hubrig; Tara Wood et al.), but even the most inclusive writing centers are situated within an academic institution, which means they are part of a structure that often disempowers and burdens disabled students.

The social model of disability, in contrast, states that disability is socially constructed rather than inscribed in medical diagnosis and treatment. Because social and cultural forces ultimately determine what counts as disability (exemplified by how glasses-wearing is not considered a disability in most cultures), the social model argues that we are “not disabled by our impairments but by the disabling barriers we [face] in society” (Oliver 1024). In essence, the social model relocates the “problem” of disability from the individual to a societal issue of civil rights and social justice (Dewsbury et al.; Vidali). Despite that much recent scholarship at the intersection of writing center studies and disability defines disability using the social model, many times the application of disability theory is underdeveloped or problematic, evidenced by practical suggestions that are thinly veiled—or even overt—ableism (Dembsey).

The habit of localizing disability in the individual body is not unique to writing center scholarship. Amy Vidali, for example, points out that scholarly work in composition and rhetoric often conflates embodied experience with personal experience, while Wood et al. note that though disability is generally “accepted” as having a place in academia, we often think about disability as a one-time accommodation or adjustment to be made on the behalf of an individual. However, as Christina Cedillo argues, if we “continue to base our composition practices on normate assumptions rather than the embodied experiences of people most in need of access to voice and space, our praxes can and do become part of a racist, ableist apparatus that promotes other-isms.” What these authors argue for instead, then, is considering disability from a postmodern theoretical lens, rich with opportunities that help us better understand identity and power structures. We agree that the same is true for

writing center work—disability should be invoked as a sociocultural identity, much in the same ways that scholarship theoretically takes up student identities such as race, class, and gender.

### CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES (CDS)

CDS has sought to complicate the field of disability studies and its most basic theoretical assumptions, including the social model. The binaries produced by modernist perspectives—social vs. medical models; disabled vs. non-disabled—are challenged by CDS in favor of considering complex embodiments of multiple possibilities (Meekosha and Shuttleworth; Shildrick). Early critics of the medical/social model binary argued the two models unnecessarily excluded each other: it is overly simplistic to think of disability either as “the product of socially imposed restrictions” or as “real” limitations of the body (Rembis 378). Others called into question whether the social model is dogmatic, “a grandiose theory that excludes important dimensions of disabled people’s lived experience and knowledge” (Barnes 24). This is especially important to consider as the disability studies field expands to include scholarship on chronic pain, chronic fatigue, and mental health illnesses.

We conceptualize disability here in line with Bukowski and Brueggeman, as “an identity category that is socially and environmentally constructed by larger power structures,” and agree that CDS can help us critique long-held ideas about both praxis and theoretical foundations of writing center studies (68). An important task of CDS is to add nuance to our understanding of disability and to reject the non-disabled/disabled binary; this then allows us to authentically take up the work of disability justice in the writing center (Shildrick; Shakespeare). In his compelling treatment of race and power in writing center studies in “Unmaking Gringo-Centers,” Romeo García argues that a reduction of racial struggles to a black/white binary does the anti-racist agenda of the field a grave disservice. For García, the “failure to attend to the conditions experienced by and the needs and interests” of students who continue to be othered is an ethical failing of the field (29). Hitt feels similarly: “I want us to move away from access for access’ sake and toward an ethics of accessibility that prioritizes disability justice in our classroom and research spaces.” Writers who identify as disabled and then have that identity reduced to a roadblock that must be addressed in the writing center session are disserved by the faulty binary placed on an already othered and marginalized identity.

Like Bukowski and Brueggeman, Hitt, and Vidali, we understand disability theory not as a way to theorize individual differences or deficits, but rather how such “differences” are understood as situated within systems of power. Bukowski and Brueggeman draw

from disability studies' theoretical concept of complex embodiment—wherein all bodies (tutors, writers, administrators) have a range of physical iterations, each with their own capabilities, preferences, and limitations that interact with each other and their physical space in myriad ways—noting that CDS concepts can act as a source of social-justice-oriented insight for writing center studies. Given that writing center work prizes collaborative dialogue, negotiation of power and identity, and shared meaning-making, key concepts from CDS lend themselves particularly well to writing center work and can be applied in generative, productive conversations that help us to “design writing center environments that are accessible and equitable, rather than simply accommodating of difference” (Hitt).

### ACCESS FATIGUE

Because we recognize that it can be difficult to put disability theory into practice, we want to examine how the concept of “access fatigue” can enable writing center studies to work toward disability justice by disrupting existing habits and processes. In her insightful and provocative work, Annika Konrad introduces and defines access fatigue as “the everyday pattern of constantly needing to help others participate in access, a demand so taxing and so relentless that, at times, it makes access simply not worth the effort” (180). Access fatigue builds upon critical race studies' concept of microaggressions, which posits that the experience of oppression is cumulative—and even small, unintentional behaviors can amass to an accumulation that is harmful to the recipient (Konrad; Sue et al.). Konrad hopes that naming and theorizing access fatigue can help us to notice everyday habits that prevent accessibility and inclusivity. Even the most well intentioned non-disabled people<sup>1</sup> often assume that disabled people always know how to—and always want to—request access or accommodations without pausing to consider the substantial mental and emotional labor that comes with advocating for oneself (Konrad). The popular, but misguided, assumption is that accessibility is procedural, streamlined, and straightforward. The reality, however, is that self-advocacy happens in many small, messy moments within a disabled person's daily life. Requesting access isn't as simple as a disabled person articulating their needs; each rhetorical act of articulating a request for access involves a uniquely complicated relationship between context, interlocutor, text, and any number of other factors, as well as the weighing of risk and burden against the value of access. Disabled people must first consider how they and their disability are viewed by those with whom they are interacting, then filter the request accordingly. This means that disabled people endure the rhetorical burden of fram-

ing their requests politely and pleasantly—if they do not, they are less likely to be granted access. What’s more is that disabled people often find that in order to gain access, they have to teach others how to participate in said access.

Like other disabled scholars have confessed, for Kerri (one author of this article), requesting access is often a negative, unpleasant experience. *Where and how do I request access? Should I email someone? Who? If the request goes unacknowledged (as it often does), do I follow up? When? With whom? How will I know my access request will be granted? And, if it isn’t (as it often isn’t), do I speak up? When? To whom? Are they going to ask me how to enact my request? Do I have the capacity to teach that today?* Deciding to request access, requesting access, and then helping the receiver work through and sometimes even enact your access request is *exhausting*, especially in light of the frequency with which disabled people must perform these risky rhetorical acts.

To be committed to disability justice as a writing center, then, means actively working to reduce this burden for disabled people. Konrad argues that what is needed to reduce access fatigue is a “structure of habit for practicing collective access in everyday life” (181), which “should include habits for inviting engagement with difference, embracing unfamiliar relationality, exercising a notion of agency that includes disability and use of assistive technology, and uptake and transfer of access-oriented practices from one situation to another” (196). Hitt agrees: “Shifting focus to disability justice [...] involves collaboratively working with disabled students and faculty, rather than making decisions about accessibility that are based on isolated interactions with students or scholarship that generalizes disabled experiences.” Next, we walk the reader through one example of how a writing center can lean on the concept of access fatigue to work towards greater inclusivity.

### **BUT WHAT ABOUT PRAXIS?**

Upon close examination of our structures and habits in our own writing center, with access fatigue in mind, we found that some of our procedures had been designed to streamline tutors’ work, inadvertently creating barriers to access. With our tutors, we discussed ways we could empower students by allowing them to articulate their preferences, including access requests, without requiring them to formally disclose or document a disability. We decided to integrate multiple opportunities into our appointment intake process: tutors reminded themselves to ask about the tutee’s needs and preferences at the beginning of a session (or any point during a session where it seemed useful), and we also added

a field to our appointment intake form on WOnline inviting students to articulate their needs and preferences. By adding this point of access for every session, we are acknowledging student embodiment that is complex—disability, needs, and preferences are not static and immovable, but rather fluid and dependent on myriad factors. We are also signifying to tutors that writers bring a unique set of needs and preferences to every session and reminding them to approach each session with flexibility, responsiveness, and openness toward Konrad’s “unfamiliar relationality,” or new ways of relating to others.

By disrupting our writing center’s existing intake process to integrate repeated opportunities to articulate needs, preferences, and access requests, we hope to communicate to disabled writers who use our writing center that we value and support them, and that we strive to reduce the burden of internal risk-weighting and decision-making described by access fatigue. Because there is a significant gap in empirical research on disability and writing centers, especially focusing on students with disabilities (noted by Babcock and Daniels and others), we plan to study whether inviting writers to articulate their needs and preferences through our appointment intake form can further our center’s pursuit of disability justice.

In scholarship about disability, there always seems to be the desire for insight as to what we should “do,” or practical suggestions that can be implemented. The question of how to enact theory in practice is a difficult one, especially in this context; as Konrad argues, requesting practical suggestions in light of disability theory is another means of requiring labor from disabled persons. Even though we share how we modified our intake process in this piece, we are moved by Lisa Ede’s urging to resist the “strong impulse toward such pedagogical closure,” and we invite our readers to sit with the discomfort of ambiguity raised here (326).

Of course, practical approaches to issues of accessibility like universal design are incredibly important for disability justice. Writing centers would be best served by engaging in inclusivity as a recursive, continuous, transformational process rather than singular adjustments that are made as if disability and embodiment are static in time and space. We advocate for writing centers to create multiple points of access and opportunities to request access; access that is collaborative, intimate, and interdependent, as Mia Mingus argues for; access that offers multiple modes and multiple options (i.e., I can do this, this, or this; would any of those be your preference?); access that reduces the burden of access fatigue for disabled people.

But when we consider disability in the writing center, it is crucial to understand that access is not the only or final step, but rather merely the first step “in an ongoing process of challenging institutional oppression” (Hubrig). Disabled people do not merely want to be granted access to privileged spaces, “we want to challenge and dismantle those ranks and question why some people are consistently at the bottom” (Mingus). Konrad, too, “urge[s] readers to take on the critical internal work of unraveling our thoughts and feelings about disability to develop everyday habits of access” (196). We hope that this article encourages writing center scholars and practitioners to approach disability from a critical disability studies lens, sitting with these feelings of discomfort and examining the relationship between disability and power in their own writing center.

## NOTES

1. Though in this article we discuss how CDS challenges the binary categories of non-disabled and disabled, we still choose to rely on these terms throughout to 1) align with Konrad’s chosen terminology in how she describes her theoretical concept and 2) recognize that disabled people still do occupy a marginalized position in society.

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