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AND PERDUE | RINALDI AND SPIEGEL | KLEINFELD

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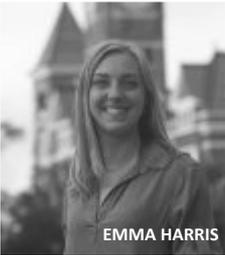
Guest Graduate Co-Editors

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ADRIANNA MARIA AVILÉS

In fall 2020, each of us made a decision that altered the trajectories of our research, pathways as educators and professionals, and most importantly our worldviews. When we joined our writing center’s Accessibility Committee, we began to dream of accessible educational environments in writing centers, classrooms, and beyond. Accessibility runs deeper than words on a page. Learning from lived experiences and embodied identities, we researched anti-ableist and disability justice rhetoric and practices.



EMMA HARRIS

While we understand this special issue aims to bring awareness to accessibility and disability justice, we are acutely aware of the voices, identities, and lack of representation among these pages.



EMILY KAYDEN



IMARI CHEYNE TETU

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”).



RACHEL HERZL-BETZ



LUCIE MOUSSU



MANAKO YABE



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 communities¹ 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-ability² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.).⁵ 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,⁶ 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)⁷ 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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Disrupting Habits: Modifying Writing Center Processes in Pursuit of Disability Justice

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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 people¹ 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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The No-Policy Policy: Negotiating with (Neurodivergent) Clients

Elizabeth Kleinfeld
Metropolitan State University of Denver

Fall 2019: I glance over the appointment schedule, noticing that Abdul and Emma,¹ two of our regular clients, each have multiple appointments scattered across the week. Despite our policy that clients can have only one appointment a day, Abdul has booked two back-to-back appointments for several days during the week and Emma has three appointments in one day. I suspect they will not show up to some of those appointments and that their tutors will express concern that they are doing more writing than the clients. Sighing with frustration, I ask the receptionist to call Abdul and Emma, remind them of our policies, and cancel the appointments that violate our policies. If Abdul doesn't show up for any of his appointments this week, he'll end up banned from making appointments for the rest of the semester. Emma is a week or two away from such a reminder.



ELIZABETH KLEINFELD

In January 2020, I shocked my writing center staff and colleagues by eliminating all our policies governing the number, frequency, and duration of appointments that clients could make. These types of policies are so standard that WOnline, one of the most frequently used writing center scheduling platforms, has built in prompts related to them. And indeed, the policies are so standard that when clients occasionally pushed back against them, rather than reflecting on the policies themselves, I reacted by identifying the clients as the problem.

My elimination of the policies was triggered by an employee's observation that in reviewing client report forms, she had noticed that most of the clients who wanted policy exceptions had disclosed being neurodivergent; that is, their brains process in a way considered atypical. Autism and OCD are two common examples of neurodivergence. When I wondered why those clients wanted exceptions, I realized that the policies themselves hindered our access to that information; instead of asking about clients' needs, staff and I fell back on the phrase, "That's our policy." While I recognize these types of policies can assist in setting healthy boundaries for both consultants and clients, in practice, the policies were short-cir-

cutting conversations. I was engaging in classic ableist thinking, assuming that a set of policies that seemed reasonable to me and *many* of our clients worked for *all* clients.

The new no-policy policy acknowledges that the assumptions baked into the previous policies about why students don't show up for appointments or make more or more frequent appointments than I see as ideal are faulty, as I will discuss below. The no-policy policy also redirected energy from enforcing policies to enforcing boundaries.

THE POLICIES

The policies were all implemented because of problems I perceived: clients not showing up for appointments, clients making multiple appointments in a day, and clients asking for appointments that ran very long.

THE NO-SHOW POLICY

When I became director, I was amazed that as many as 40% of appointments resulted in a client not showing up. I put practices in place to reduce the no-show rate, such as calling clients to remind them of their appointments the day before, but the rate remained in the double digits. A few years later, when I adopted an online appointment system, it was easy to implement the pre-loaded script that automatically blocked anyone from making an appointment after three no-shows. The rate was cut in half, which seemed to indicate the policy was a success.

THE ONE APPOINTMENT PER DAY POLICY

The “problem” that precipitated the policy was clients spending hours in the Writing Center with one or more tutors. Several tutors told me they felt anxiety about back to back sessions with challenging clients. We sometimes had a waiting list and I heard from clients who couldn't get appointments because another client had taken all the available slots. After putting the one-appointment-per-day policy in place, the number of students with multiple appointments in a day plummeted to zero, so I judged the policy a success.

THE 50-MINUTE APPOINTMENT TIME

The “problem” that precipitated the policy limiting appointments to 50 minutes was hearing from tutors that long sessions were tiring. They said that sometimes it seemed that they had done everything they could for a client and yet the client didn't want to leave. They worried that some clients were getting them to do too much of the work for them. Once I put the policy in place limiting appointments to 50 minutes, the “problem” disappeared, implying a successful policy.

EVALUATING THE EFFECT

In all three cases, I judged the policies to be “working” because the “problems” that precipitated them were reduced after implementation. But, as the following discussion will demonstrate, the problems themselves were misidentified; the problems did not in fact go away—they simply became less visible to me.

In creating these policies, I failed to do what Sue Jackson and Margo Blythman recommend in their chapter, “‘Just Coming in the Door Was Hard’: Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties,” in the Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels edited collection, *Writing Centers and Disability*. They mention a client who is perpetually late for appointments and suggest talking with the client about what is behind their lateness, allowing that they might be struggling to get adequate sleep because of mental health issues (245). This seemingly innocuous suggestion is actually quite radical. Writing center employees very seldom engage the client who is late or doesn’t show up in conversation, in part because the client isn’t there to have the conversation. I used the client’s lateness or non-presence as justification for not having a conversation with them, thinking, “If they don’t care enough to show up or be on time, I am not going to invest any of my time and energy in following up.” My attitude as director trickled down to tutors, as I coached tutors to match their effort to the client’s, making ableist assumptions about how effort is demonstrated.

Margaret Price acknowledges this line of thinking when she says “presence is the sine qua non of learning in higher education,” highlighting the common assumption that students who don’t show up simply lack motivation or discipline (65). But as Catherine Prendergast observes, when a student doesn’t show up to a class or a client doesn’t show up to an appointment, we don’t ask them why; we feel comfortable making negative assumptions about them. In effect, she says, “to be disabled mentally, is to be disabled rhetorically” (202) because when the student or client doesn’t show up, we also stop communicating with them, reasoning that their not showing up constitutes their withdrawal from communication, which justifies our termination of communication. Price points out that many neurodivergent clients don’t show up, are late, or need more time with a tutor for reasons that go far beyond motivation and discipline and notes that many people with mental disabilities fall off the radar, simply disappearing from a school because they failed their classes (6).

ABLEIST ASSUMPTIONS

Being a disabled person who lives with low vision and cognitive

processing delays myself hasn't protected me from internalizing the ableism embedded in academia. When an employee initially called my attention to the fact that the clients most often resisting our policies were neurodivergent, my perspective on the policies shifted. Suddenly, the ableist assumptions behind the policies seemed glaringly obvious to me:

- Clients who don't show up for appointments are lazy, inconsiderate, or poor planners. It's easy to call and let us know you need to cancel or reschedule. Banning them from making appointments is a reasonable consequence of their poor behavior or inability to plan.
- Clients who need more than one session in a day are trying to get the tutor to do their work. They are lazy or devious. Prohibiting them from making multiple appointments in a day is either a reasonable consequence of their poor behavior, or in their best interest as it will force them to start doing the work themselves.
- Clients who can't learn what we want them to learn in a 50-minute session aren't putting in enough effort or have needs beyond the capacity of what the writing center offers. Not being allowed to have a longer appointment will force them to put in more effort or seek out more appropriate resources.

Once these ableist assumptions became clear to me, I realized I had misidentified the "problems." The problem wasn't clients not showing up to appointments; the problem was that our appointment system hinges on clients having predictable lives. The problem wasn't that clients were making too many appointments but that I hadn't adequately taught the tutors how to pace and structure long appointments to meet both the client's needs and their own self-care needs. The problem wasn't that clients weren't putting in the effort to learn everything they needed to learn in 50 minutes but that the Writing Center was taking a one-size-fits-all approach to tutorial time.

THE NO-POLICY POLICY

I replaced the three policies with what I called "the no-policy policy," which is actually a protocol:

Any client can make as many appointments as they want, whenever they want (as long as the Writing Center is open and a tutor is available). Clients who want a two-hour appointment can simply make two back-to-back 50-minute appointments. If any staff member feels that the number, duration, or frequency of a client's appointments is not meeting the needs of that particular client, challenging

our ability to meet other clients' needs, or producing anxiety in tutors, I have a meeting with the client to assess the situation and collaboratively work toward a solution. The new protocols embrace a spirit of "nothing about us without us" and are designed to reduce access fatigue, the emotional exhaustion of having to constantly ask for accommodations, for clients with disabilities (Konrad); normalize and value neurodiversity for both clients and staff (Price); and push back against the idea that disability must be "overcome" (Dolmage).

To illustrate how this plays out in practice, I want to come back to the two clients, Abdul and Emma, who were constantly at odds with the original policies, and discuss how the shift to the no-policy policy changed my approach with them.

Abdul was a graduate student who had appointments nearly every day, often multiple times a day. He disclosed that he was registered with our disabilities services center but did not indicate why. He regularly made three to ten appointments a week but didn't show up to half of them. He tried to make multiple appointments in a day. Every semester, he was the first client who got banned from making appointments under the old no-show policy, which led to him calling the front desk regularly to complain and try to secure an appointment anyway.

After the no-policy policy took effect, I asked Abdul how we could help him avoid making appointments he couldn't keep. He explained that he shared a vehicle with others and couldn't always get to our commuter campus when he expected; his anxiety over transportation led to him making many appointments so that whenever he could use the car, he would have an appointment. He suggested that he be allowed to make as many appointments as he liked and then each morning, he would contact the front desk to indicate which appointment for that day he would keep, if any. This system worked well for the two semesters he had left before graduating.

Additionally, tutors were concerned that Abdul was getting them to write his papers for him. They had noticed that when Abdul had three appointments in a day with three different tutors, he would suggest that the tutor heavily edit one paragraph of the essay to model how to do it. After three appointments in a day, he would essentially have three paragraphs of his paper written by others.

I called a meeting of all the tutors who worked with Abdul to talk about concrete strategies they could use to avoid such heavy editing of Abdul's work. We agreed upon some boundaries that ev-

everyone would consistently enforce with him, such as rewriting only one sentence per session, and resisting pressure to get more “done” in each session. I then met with Abdul and told him about the concerns of the tutors. He agreed to try the new strategies. After two weeks, I checked in with the tutors by email; they agreed that when they all consistently held the boundaries around only doing extensive rewriting of one sentence, Abdul stopped pushing them to do more.

Emma was an undergraduate education major who also disclosed that she was registered with the disabilities services center. She came in for help with sentence structure and grammar. Tutors were concerned that she wasn’t applying what she was learning in one session to the next because she appeared to make no progress between sessions. In addition to being a regular no-show, she complained that 50-minute sessions weren’t long enough. Tutors suspected that Emma was having one tutor edit a few sentences and then meeting with another tutor who edited a few sentences and so on, until her entire paper was edited by tutors.

When I spoke with Emma, I learned that she had a hard time remembering from one session to the next what had been covered.

I called a meeting of tutors who worked regularly with Emma. I discovered that because tutors were simply noting in their client report forms that they had worked on grammar with Emma, it was difficult for one tutor to avoid repeating the lessons of the past tutor. The tutors agreed to write more detailed notes in the client report forms so the next tutor could begin their session by recapping what had been covered previously. In practice, this helped jog Emma’s memory of what she had learned in the last session and allowed tutors to feel confident that they were not inadvertently doing her writing for her.

Both clients were combative under the old policies; under the no-policy policy, the Writing Center staff found them to be cooperative and pleasant.

My approach to no-shows also changed significantly. Now when a client doesn’t show up for a session, they automatically receive an email that says

I noticed that you missed your Writing Center appointment scheduled for [date] at [time]. I’m reaching out to make sure you are OK. Please feel free to get in touch with me or anyone on the Writing Center staff for support. We can point you toward campus and community resources if you need help. And of course, we can get your appointment rescheduled if you want.

Our no-show rate remains unchanged, but now I regularly get emails from students who missed an appointment thanking me for checking in and sometimes giving me a glimpse into the complicated lives they lead that caused them to miss an appointment: childcare fell through, they were up late because of a chronic health condition and overslept, they got called into work unexpectedly, adjusting to a new medication has caused disruption. Sometimes the information they give me provides an opportunity for me to refer them to offices on campus that can help; sometimes all I can do is convey my sympathy for their situation.

The no-policy policy embraces “crip time,” a concept in disabilities studies that Alison Kafer describes as “requir[ing a] re-imagining [of] our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of 'how long things take' are based on very particular minds and bodies. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (27).

RESULTS

There have been four significant results of the shift to the no-policy policy:

1. Staff and I question what is behind the behaviors we’re seeing rather than assuming it is laziness, lack of discipline, disengagement, and all the other negative traits that are euphemisms for “someone who has a complicated life that I don’t understand.” I have more conversations now with both clients and staff, negotiating what they want, what the writing center’s capacity is, and what we can all agree to be held accountable for.
2. Tutor education focuses more on practicing boundary-setting during back-to-back sessions with the same client. For example, I explicitly encourage tutors to give the client a freewriting exercise to do for ten minutes while the tutor takes a break.
3. I have more meetings with groups of tutors to talk about consistent practices and boundaries to set for specific clients.
4. It is never necessary for a client with disabilities to disclose their disability or that they are registered with the disabilities services office to get a longer appointment time. This enables any client, disabled or not, to schedule as much time as they want with a tutor.

CREATING AN ANTI-ABLEIST CULTURE

Our no-policy policy is one way my staff and I are building an anti-ableist culture that seeks to make accommodation and disclosure

unnecessary. Committing to creating an anti-ableist culture doesn't mean my staff and I don't fall victim to ableist logics and assumptions, but when we recognize that we have done so, we hold ourselves accountable. Indeed, the reason the employee I mentioned at the beginning of this article felt comfortable sharing their observation with me that it was mostly neurodivergent clients who ran afoul of the original policies is that in the writing center's anti-ableist culture, the employee knew I would welcome the observation and hold myself accountable.

NOTE

1. These are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the students.

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Conference Calendar

Oct. 11-14, 2023: International Writing Centers Assoc., Baltimore, MD
Contact: Mairin Barney and Holly Ryan: IWCAConferenceChair@gmail.com

Nov. 2-5, 2023: National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing, Pittsburgh, PA
Contact: James Purdue and Renee Brown: ncptw2023@yahoo.com;
conference website: <https://www.thencptw.org/index.php/ncptw-2023-pittsburgh/>

Mar. 15-16, 2024: Secondary School Writing Centers Assoc., Boston, MA

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Blog Editors' Note

Anna Sophia Habib, Esther Namubiru, and Weijia Li

This spring, the Global Spotlight series in the WLN blog has taken us to two writing centers in South Africa and one in Ghana and featured a conversation with Loren Kleinmen and Max Orsini on their edited collection, *Student Writing Tutors in their Own Words: Global Voices on Writing Centers and Beyond*. It will be followed by three chapters from the collection written by writing tutors around the world.

Check out a Tutor Voices piece titled “Permission to think” about the role writing tutors can play in encouraging creative and critical thinking for students transitioning from the more standardized writing culture in post-secondary institutions. In addition, read a feature piece by our “Dear CW CAB” guest-writer, Graham Stowe, on the trend to pull writing centers into arguments about student underpreparedness.

Over the summer, we’ll be recording conversations for our Slow Agency Podcast with colleagues from Japan to Turkey, Germany, Ireland and beyond! These episodes will be released in August, so stay tuned! To listen, visit <https://wlnjournal.org/blog/slow-agency/> or follow us on Anchor, Spotify, YouTube, Apple Podcast, and Google Podcast. Don’t forget to follow @WLNjournal on Twitter, “like” us on Facebook, and subscribe to the blog and newsletter at wlnjournal.org/blog.

Finally, we’d love to hear from you! Please submit a piece or pitch an idea to writinglabnewsletterblog@gmail.com. To see our submission guidelines, go to: <https://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/submission-guidelines/>





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