

WRITING CENTERS AND DISABILITY: ENABLING WRITERS THROUGH AN INCLUSIVE PHILOSOPHY

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In its *Position Statement on Disability and Writing Centers*, the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) recognizes and emphasizes the relationship between writing centers and disability and “encourages scholarship that explores the ways disability intersects with writing center work.” The IWCA further encourages writing centers to be inclusive to all writers by adopting “communication that takes into account various learning styles or ways of processing language.” We too, argue that writing centers should be welcoming environments for all writers and that they should engage with their writers as unique beings, making accessible to them the individuation of instruction and support. Writing centers should be spaces where the multiple barriers that students experience in their writing are addressed and a variety of options are provided.

We frame our discussion within inclusion. Though no consensus definition exists for inclusion, we find Inclusion International’s definition useful for our discussion as it starts from the perspective of individuals who have been marginalized and excluded. They define inclusion as “the opportunity for persons with a disability to participate fully in all of the educational, employment, consumer, recreational, community and domestic activities that typify everyday society.”

This article ascribes to a social rather than a medical view of disability. A social perspective of disability seeks to locate human difference as manifested in bodily, sensory, neurological, and mental differences rather than as problems to be overcome, as in a medical model. This perspective acknowledges that there are variations of ways of being in the world and thus there should be flexibility in approaches to tasks. Though we are positioned similar to Clare (1999), who succinctly argues against equating disability with an illness or disease that needs to be cured, we also take cognizance of Wendell’s concerns

that the social constructionist view on disability might be shifting the focus away from those living with disability who are ill and in need of medical treatment. She makes an important distinction between the healthy and the unhealthy disabled, with differing needs across disabilities. The university student that we surmise mostly use the writing center facilities would be the “healthy disabled”. In other words, those students who physically are able to access the writing center. We are, however, aware that categorization would be tricky with disabilities such as MS and ADHD, as conditions that often occur with recurring chronic illness that require medication.

In this article we consider pertinent issues and challenges that hamper the inclusion of disabled students and staff in writing centers and put forth ways in which enabling pedagogies and practices could be put in place. The article further reflects on the ways in which some of the challenges shape our work in writing centers and how we respond to such challenges. To support the positions we take in this paper, we also draw on first person reports and case studies of writing center practitioners’ experiences of working as a disabled person or with disabled persons in the writing center from the forthcoming book *Writing Centers and Disability*.

Towards an inclusive Writing Center space

Writing centers are widely understood within educational institutions as enabling and supportive spaces where students go to get individual help with their writing projects. In the writing consultation students enter into conversation with a trained and supportive tutor about their writing. The nature of the engagement is interactive, informal, and focused on the needs of the individual. In this way, the “uniqueness of each writer is acknowledged” and writers are provided with opportunities to “engage in trial runs of ideas and approaches, to fail and move on

to another attempt, and to receive encouragement for their efforts” (Harris). Through this iterative process writers are equipped with skills and practices to become independent and confident writers.

Nancy Grimm argues that writing centers are “uniquely situated to begin offering more complicated representations of students; representations that change the way we talk about those students – not as incomplete and undeveloped individuals” who need our help, “but as complicated people with history, class and culture ...” (*Good Intentions* 13 – 14). Typically writing centers aim to respond to the diverse learning needs of students rather than to a diversity category or to a “category” of disability into which they “fit” (Howell and Lazarus 60).

Despite such inclusionary intentions, the reality is that some students are often acted on differently, depending on markers that include race, ethnicity, gender and disability. In our eagerness to accommodate all students in a welcoming manner, it is not uncommon for students living with visible impairments such as blindness or amputations to experience people over-compensating for their disability, which is another form of “othering.” This could create the impression that they are responded to as if they are also academically challenged and in need of remedial writing support - a mindset that subconsciously equates disability with deficit.

In recent decades thinking has shifted to a model that advocates “disability rights.” This mindset to work towards changing the environment rather than the person is in keeping with the social model of disability that argues for a shift from emphasis on the individual to an emphasis on society. Disability then is no longer seen as “something that a person has” but instead becomes “something that is done to the person,” such as being excluded or confronted by “barriers” on a daily basis (Swain, French, and Cameron 24). The advantage of the social model of disability is that it has been “invaluable as a stimulus for action.” This model puts pressure on the university to effect structural and cultural changes that will ultimately make it more accessible and inclusive. By working in the social model of disability and adopting teaching and learning methods that are more inclusive, Sue Jackson and Margo Blythman claim that they can make a difference to the learning experience “not only of students with mental health difficulties but to all students” (245).

The Inclusive Agenda and Implications for the Writing Center

Inclusion, in any facet of life, is a basic universal human right. UNESCO defines it as the process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education.

Our understanding of the concept as contextualised within the university is that inclusion considers space, place, and mind-set as part of the process of challenging ableism and facilitating the incorporation of students with disabilities into university spaces such as writing centers. The objective of inclusive education is thus to transform the education system so that it meets the needs of all learners. Educators are encouraged to embrace diversity and engage with all learners as assets rather than problems. Thus the inclusion philosophy promotes a holistic and coordinated approach that seeks to remove educational as well as socio-economic, cultural, and political barriers to progress. Inclusion is however not synonymous with access; it is part of a much wider process than just the admission of an individual to an academic program. When applied to students with disabilities, inclusion advocates both for increased participation and for removal of the barriers that exclude them (Barton). However, when applied in societies plagued by exclusionary practices due to ethnicity, race, class, or gender, inclusion loses its narrow focus, as we see in the many countries that have been liberated from oppressive regimes, and who are now transforming.

Countries that have undergone major political reform over the past three decades tend to advance inclusionary practices for the disabled alongside other reforms. So, for example, South Africa’s *Education White Paper 6* (Department of Education), the document that guided the transformation of the education system, proposed inclusion and accessibility for all students, irrespective of disability or ability. Our review further found that official attention was given to disability issues as part of the national educational transformational process. It is understandable that South Africa’s history of racial discriminatory practices would motivate policymakers to foreground race rather than disability in their educational transformation initiatives (Daniels and Daniels). We make this point to emphasize the importance of context in determining what will be prioritized for inclusion.

Though most higher education institutions have policies to guide institutional transformative initiatives,

in the writing center, it is at the practical application level that challenges may occur. An issue that Richard Rose raises about disability concerns how people with disabilities think they are being accommodated within higher education contexts, especially when information about their disability is known. When students are distrustful of the center's motives that guide the interaction, they are more likely to interpret the support that they receive from tutors at the writing center as affirmative action or preferential treatment instead of seeing it as their right to have access to a supportive environment in which they can function effectively.

Writing center tutors are not always privy to personal information of the students that they consult with, so if a student has a disability, tutors seldom know beforehand if a different kind of support is needed. Whilst writing center workers tend to respect the student's right to not declare a disability, their lack of access to information about certain disabilities might lead to the student not being optimally supported, especially when the disability is not visibly detectable. It thus is ironic that respect for privacy and confidentiality could work against a transformational agenda that seeks to advance inclusion. Moreover, the center's respect for non-declaration can also be experienced as a deterrent to developing a data base that captures important information on students with special needs. Such a data base could be a valuable resource for writing center staff, as it could facilitate tutors' understandings of students' varied challenges and could facilitate the monitoring of successes during writing center consultations.

One way to address such a situation is to include a generic type of question at the beginning of all consultations. In the pre-textual stage of the consultation, when tutors are trying to establish rapport with the writer, tutors could ask students whether there was anything specific that they would like the tutor to know about themselves or their writing. In this way then, students are given the opportunity to declare information about their disability which may assist the tutor in facilitating their learning or writing. Such a question also gives the student the choice about whether or not to "disclose" and what information to share with the tutor that could be beneficial to the consultation. This is also a question that could be asked of all students with whom we consult.

Paradigms, Pedagogy and Practices to Meet the Needs of Students with Disabilities

One of the intersections between writing center studies, disability studies, and policies on inclusion is that all advocate for and adopt flexible approaches to teaching and learning and follow collaborative approaches to working with others. Inclusion in the writing center is closely associated with diversity – diversity of students, diverse writing concerns, and diverse ways of working with people. Thus, Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz argue that because students come to writing centers with a "variety of differences" (and for different reasons), what "tutors do with a student with a disability should be no different from what they do with any other student" (50). Since writing centers adopt student-centered pedagogies and encourage student agency, a typical consultation would encourage various and multiple ways of interacting and working with people. Such interactions could include "verbal discussions, collaboratively drafting, looking up information in books, working on computers, and participating in online appointments" (Hitt 32). Each student is engaged with as a unique person and each writing consultation is approached and treated as individual and contextual. The agenda for the consultation would be determined by the needs of the writer and guided by the tutor. One of the most valuable skills of a good tutor, therefore, is the ability to listen actively and effectively to the needs that writers express and to be able to understand how to address those needs in the consultation. This inclusive approach allows for multiple ways of working and for the individual needs of all students to be accommodated as far as possible.

In their editors' overview of the essays in the special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* on Disability Studies in the Undergraduate Classroom, Amy Vidali, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson observe that pedagogies for disability remain somewhat traditional in approach and the adoption of inclusive pedagogies seems less common. This raises the issue of complacency within the writing center environment and the need to become more reflexive about pedagogy and paradigm and meeting students' needs. They suggest that access for people with disability will be increased when a Universal Design to Learning (UDL) approach is taken to teaching and assigning writing. Such an approach includes incorporating multi-modal digital writing that makes use of aural, visual, design, and textual elements. This call for a UDL approach in writing centers has gained support and grown in strength in recent years. Allison Hitt, for example, encourages the use of multiple teaching and learning formats when working with students with disabilities and argues that it is critical that writing center tutors develop multimodal "toolkits."

The principles of Universal Design (UD) are closely linked to accessibility. With UD, physical and educational spaces are designed to accommodate and to support all students rather than exclude those who learn differently (Ryan, Miller and Steinhart; Hitt). An “add-in” instead of an “add-on” approach is followed and instead of “adapting to personal needs and strengths after the fact,” these considerations are made right from the start (Michael and Trezek 312). By applying UD principles to writing center spaces and pedagogy, equitable and accommodating environments can be ensured and more students will be able to access and benefit from such resources.

Babcock and Daniels’s review of writing centers in southern and northern hemisphere HE institutions confirm that there are many examples of successful and inclusive programs in place and that the creativity of some of these programs provides students with authentic learning opportunities. The few examples that we refer to, we selected based on their applicability in educational contexts and across student populations. The UD ideas of Holly Ryan, Georgie Miller, and Shawn Steinhart for tutoring students with differing learning styles requires tutors be trained to work with visual, aural, and kinesthetic learning styles. Thus, equipping tutors with tools to focus on the learning style of the student, instead of the disability, helps towards disrupting the barriers that are established by traditional instructional and tutorial pedagogies. For each of the learning styles writers are provided with strategies for pre-writing/generating ideas, for drafting, and for revision. The value of this approach is that by using differentiated instructional techniques, access for all students is facilitated, and students thrive by learning in a “setting” and in the “style, mode, and presentation” (Michael and Trezek 313) that they are most comfortable with.

Another example of creative, flexible, and non-traditional approaches to the teaching and learning of students with disabilities is that which Marie Stevenson describes in *Writing Centers and Disability*. When working with students with mental disorders she advises several preventative strategies to reduce these students’ anxiety about writing or “traffic jam” strategies to unblock their writing barriers and make the task less overwhelming and more manageable. These strategies are categorized as organizational, analytic, unblocking, and anxiety-reduction (strategies). An example of an organizational strategy would be to map out with students their assignments for the week, the month, or the semester and assist with planning and time management. An analytic strategy would be to break the writing task down into a sequence of smaller, “doable” steps that the student can tackle one

by one without feeling overwhelmed. An unblocking strategy would consist of gently questioning the student, making suggestions, and taking notes until a firm plan for writing emerges. Finally, many writers suffer from anxiety, whether mild or severe. A suggestion that Stevenson gives for anxiety reduction is to impose a work break. The tutor can physically take the student’s papers, notes, and research for a day or a weekend while the student takes a “time out” from the assignment. The student can then return to the assignment with a fresh outlook. Even though Stevenson’s strategies are aimed at students with mental disorders, they are inclusive strategies that could be adopted when working with all students.

A strategy suggested by Rebecca Babcock in her work with deaf students is the use of explicit dialogue. She stresses the importance of establishing what the person wants and needs from the session and then tailoring the tutoring to suit those needs (“Tutoring” 35). Occasionally a student with a disability may need the tutor to point out errors verbally (Babcock “Outlaw”). In these cases knowledge of multimodal practices can be extremely valuable. This strategy is also useful when working with students who are self-conscious about reading aloud in a confined space, in front of another person, or who struggle to read in general.

Babcock further calls for more research in “technological options” for assisting students with disabilities (“Tutoring” 35). Computer software and “apps” for hand-held devices hold much promise for tutoring. Since these technologies are changing at lightning speed, we will not mention any by name. The call for technological options was also supported by Kiedaisch and Dinitz (2007) and Brizee, Sousa and Driscoll (2012) who all argue that writing centers should develop programs and materials that are universally accessible. The advantage of developing such programs and materials is that it would be beneficial to all students (including disabled students). However, Brizee et al stress that when developing such technological interventions and options for students, collaboration with and participation of administrators and students are essential. In their research about the usability of the Purdue OWL, the feedback showed that more than expected numbers of students with disabilities accessed the site to seek help with their writing. The researchers reported that by following this user-centered approach and participatory design they were able to better understand the needs of users in their “physical space” and “Purdue OWL users in [their] virtual space.” According to the user-centered approach, designers must investigate the needs and expectations of the

users irrespective of the technology being developed. Furthermore, participatory design is a “design methodology that takes users and their feedback into consideration in the production process.” Thus following a user-centered approach and participatory design is in line with writing center pedagogy that puts people first and where the needs and expectations of the writers are priority and take precedence.

Hiring Tutors and Directors with Disabilities and Hearing Their Stories

A challenge that writing centers face is the (lack of) hiring of staff with disabilities. If we are to make a shift to more inclusive pedagogies and practices, then institutions will need to actively recruit competent disabled writing center directors to enhance diversity. Catherine J. Kudlick claims that “Disability only rarely figures into hiring decisions and discussions of diversity in curriculum, and the resulting invisibility of disabled colleagues reinforces the topic’s marginality to academic inquiry” (561). One of the authors in *Writing Centers and Disability* tells of how after an accident and surgery that left her with brain damage, instead of accommodating her, her supervisors gave her new, difficult, and even impossible tasks, seemingly in an effort to frustrate her or to show that she was no longer qualified for the job (Ellis).

A recent survey (Valles, Babcock and Jackson) found only 3.2% of writing center directors identified as having a disability, yet the U.S. Department of Labor reports that as of August 2014, 19.8% of the participants in the labor force had a disability. According to Cheryl Shigaki and colleagues, less than 1% of faculty at her home institution identified as disabled at their time of hire, yet 15% identified as disabled at the time of their survey. In addition, Robert Anderson proposes that disability should be considered as a minority status and claims that institutions of higher education are more interested in offering accommodations to students than faculty.

The low numbers of writing center directors with disabilities in the above survey could be a result of several factors. Directors could be afraid to disclose, even in an anonymous survey. Or their statuses could have changed from the time of hire to the present, and perhaps, those with mild disabilities may not consider themselves to be disabled at all. Finally, discrimination against people with disabilities may affect the hiring process, or those who acquire a disability during their work lives may be pushed out of their jobs.

The importance of hiring workers with disabilities applies for tutoring staffs as well. Many directors may strive for a representative gender, racial, or ethnic mix

of tutors, but how many writing center directors consider the importance of having disabled tutors on the staff? It may even be the case that writing center hiring practices are exclusionary to tutors with disabilities. We can talk about serving students with disabilities in the writing center and taking a disability perspective, but we have to look at whether or not disabled people actually work in the writing center. Perhaps a question to this effect could be added to the Writing Centers Research Project survey.

Acting on our writing center mission statements and policies can also result in positive outcomes. Nancy Grimm reports that once their writing center made a commitment to changing as a result of what they learned from working with diverse students, it became easier to attract diverse staff. She further states “the vision of transformative diversity has not only resulted in personal learning for those who work in the Center and those who use the Center (often the same people now), but has attracted the attention of the higher administration ...” (“The Uses” 2).

Most articles written about disability in the writing center focus on serving tutees with disabilities and are written as reports of, “I tutored a student and here’s what happened.” Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz point out that in treatments of disability in the writing center “it is almost always the student writer, not the tutor...[who] has the learning disability, suggesting that such differences disqualify a student from being a tutor” (43). The forthcoming edited collection *Writing Centers and Disability* contains writings by directors and tutors with disabilities; and some writers did decide to tell their own stories, such as a writing center director (now retired) who is hard-of-hearing, a peer tutor (now a librarian) who has Cerebral Palsy, and a writing center director who acquired a brain injury in an accident. However, even in a collection such as this some authors chose not to disclose their disabilities. The fact that people would find this risky shows that discrimination is still real. Even with these risks, the literature would be enhanced by the inclusion of even more experiences of tutors, tutees, and directors with disabilities in the writing center.

Although writing center directors may not have control over their own hiring, they do have control over the hiring of their staffs. Writing center directors can strive to create an open, welcoming environment and can work to recruit, hire, and retain tutors with disabilities. Directors should especially interrogate hiring practices and requirements to determine if they are discriminatory.

Including the Topic of Disability in Tutor Training

Despite coverage and interest in differences in culture, gender, language, non-standard dialect, learning disability, and learning style, few tutor training texts mention tutoring students with physical or sensory disability. Since tutor training courses and sessions rarely focus on helping students with a sensory or physical disability, these would be the ideal places to include training on working with students with disabilities. However, tutor training textbook authors should resist the temptation to just “Add Disability and Stir” or package it as an “add on” rather than fully integrating it into the discussion (Martin).

It is our contention that through training, tutors can be conscientized about diversity and equipped with skills and strategies to work with all students. Furthermore, the presence of a diversity of students in the writing center presents opportunities, not “problems” to be dealt with. Despite sometimes extensive discussions about the unique challenges posed by other cultural and minority groups, including the Learning Disabled, the literature on tutoring students with sensory, physical, and cognitive/mental disabilities in writing centers is practically void. In accordance with the IWCA *Position Statement on Disability*, we propose that tutoring students with disabilities be included in all tutor training texts and programs.

Conclusion

While higher education institutions have started acknowledging and addressing the challenges faced by disabled students, there is concern that the accommodations made for such students tend to be theoretical and that at the implementation and practical level much work remains to be done. Writing centers, because of open access and inclusive philosophies, can respond to the needs of students with disabilities. Policies and position statements about disability have already been developed and writing centers are beginning to address structural accommodations and to ensure that our pedagogy is inclusive and collaborative.

However, we should be cautious that our response and approach to working with students with disabilities is not by default. By saying that we are inclusive, flexible and collaborative, the needs of disabled students could often be lumped with other diversity categories. Furthermore, following a collaborative approach does not mean a one-size-fits-all approach can work for all students. Being inclusive allows for multiple formats and practices.

While we agree that there is a need for universities to provide assistance to individual students, there are instances when the environment or instructional design could be changed rather than the students and where barriers could be removed to benefit all students. In particular we propose that structural and instructional planning should follow designs that from the outset take the needs of all students into consideration.

Writing centers, if we are true to our ethos and values, should be at the forefront of tirelessly working for policies that take disability into account and for the implementation of these policies. We should advocate for structural accommodations as well as pedagogical accommodations. We should constantly monitor, evaluate, and re-examine our practices. Writing centers therefore have a dual charge: claiming that the writing center is a place where students with disabilities can feel at home and that our pedagogy can meet their needs, and then to make sure that it does.

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