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Beyond Binaries of Disability in Writing Center Studies

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In her introduction to the anthology *Writing Centers and Disability*, Allison Hitt argues for the importance of honoring the nuances and complexities of disabled student writers in writing center work (viii). In our provocation, we center these nuances and complexities of disability, not only for disabled people/people with disabilities¹, but also as these complexities might shape writing center praxis. Too often disabled experiences are *not* relayed in their complexity but are flattened by binary understanding

of disability. We worry about the ways in which an understanding of disability in writing center studies is haunted by the stories nondisabled people tell about disability, about how Disability discourse in writing center research both opens and forecloses possibilities for disabled student writers and writing center instructors.

In this article, we highlight how binary stories about disability flatten disabled experiences and uphold ableism in writing center spaces. We echo Jay T. Dolmage, who carefully lays out how the narratives we tell about disabled students are frequently deployed in support of ableist practices and attitudes. Dolmage argues that it's important to understand how these narratives of disability "are created in service of particular cultural narratives [. . .] especially as they impact the roles that we make available to any student" (114). We apply Dolmage's argument about disability narratives to writing center research, asserting that the narratives writing center research tells about disability shape the roles we make available to disabled student writers and writing center instructors and can create and reinforce false binaries.

In what follows, we interrogate binaries that permeate disability narratives and haunt writing center scholarship, binaries that we believe flatten discussions about disability in writing center contexts, and especially erases the experiences of multiply marginalized disabled students and writing center professionals. In this article, we write as disabled scholars, each exploring a binary around how disability is discussed: Nicole writes beyond the binary of "Us" vs. "Them"; Ada writes beyond the binary of "Accessibility" vs. "Inaccessibility"; and Melissa writes beyond the binary of "normalcy" vs. "subnormalcy." We argue that certain binaries in

how we discuss disability in writing center contexts flatten conversations about disability and erase the nuance and complexity of disabled experiences, and reorient ourselves to disability as a site of pedagogical invention.

I. BEYOND “US VS. THEM”

--Nicole

I was in my first semester serving as our Center’s graduate student Writing Center Assistant Director when I attended my first state-wide annual writing centers consortium. Attended by directors and administrators, along with a handful of undergraduate and graduate consultants from nearly all of the state’s colleges and universities, the annual meeting began with the requisite introductions in which we were each asked to stand and share, along with our names, one challenge and one success we had experienced that year in our center. As the train of introductions snaked around one round table and to the next, one woman, whose name and institutional affiliation I do not remember, boldly explained her challenge was working with difficult students, like the “ones with disabilities.”

“What?!” I mouthed dramatically at my director who sat beside me, as we both exchanged looks of dismay. When my turn came, while I considered introducing myself as “Nicole, ‘one of those difficult students with a disability,’” I swallowed my sarcasm and opted for what felt like a more professionally “safe” introduction. I nevertheless fiercely hoped that the woman would later notice me navigating the remainder of the consortium with the help of my German Shepherd guide dog and (though not likely) cringe in shame and regret as she recalled her words. Now, more confident in my professional

identity (and my identity as a professional with a disability), I would like to think if given the chance again, I would resist the urge to “play nice” and would have the courage and wherewithal to publicly point out the multiple problematic aspects of her statement.

Most obviously problematic is her construction of students with disabilities as “difficult,” which writing center scholars attending to disability have identified as problematic (Babcock, “Disabilities in the Writing Center”; Hewett; Hitt, “Access for All”). However, an even more troubling aspect of the consortium comment was the speaker’s implicit assumption that none of *us*—the other writing center administrators and tutors in that room with her—could ourselves possibly be one of *them*—those “difficult” people with disabilities. While such a blatant framing of my disabled existence as a “difficulty” others must overcome was a somewhat new experience for me (at least within a professional context), I was far too familiar with her binary approach to disability within the academy—one that understands *us* (writing center professionals and academics more broadly) as a mutually exclusive group separate from *them* (those with disabilities whom we “serve”). Both Molly McHarg and M. Melissa Elston point to the prevalence of this us versus them binary. While McHarg broadly highlights that “very little has been written about writing center tutors with disabilities” (p. 14), Elston goes even further to argue, “As with most writing about disability and the academy as a whole, the focus in many articles is on how the (presumably able-bodied/-minded) tutor can serve disabled students, ... rather than exploring the possibility that tutors—as well as other writing center professionals, such as administrators and

reception staff—can themselves be writers with disabilities” (16).

While this us vs. them binary has long troubled me, as I write this, I have come to realize that I, myself, have been unwittingly reinforcing it within the culture of my own Center. Looking back across my own professional development as a consultant, I am retrospectively aware that no one—no fellow consultant, administrator, or mentor—ever discussed, either as part of staff development or with me individually, the role disability might play in our lives as consultants. Instead, I spent the first several years of my consulting career feeling that I needed to pass in order to create the least inconvenience to the writer. Then, as I grew in my confidence as a writing center professional and, with the help of the incredible community of disability studies scholars and several gracious and insightful writers with whom I worked, I developed my own strategies for disclosing my disability and communicating to writers what I would need in order to best help them. Now as a writing center administrator myself, I realize that while I regularly include discussion of disability in our staff development activities and share my own experience with my staff, I have only done so in service of conversations about how disability and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) should help in shaping our pedagogical practices and approaches. In spite of my own experience—feelings of professional exclusion and desire for mentorship—I have never once considered including in my own design of staff development any activities or conversations that explicitly address our staff’s own experiences with disability, how it might affect their work in the center, and ways we can work together as a staff to create a more accessible and supportive environment for both writers and

ourselves. Thus, along with echoing Hitt, McHang, and Elston's arguments for significantly increasing our awareness of disability and revising our approaches to it in order to deconstruct the us vs. them binary within writing center scholarship and our professional conversations, I would also suggest that another significant move toward deconstructing this false binary involves explicitly acknowledging in our staff development the potential role disability may be playing in the lives of our staff. By acknowledging this possibility we stand to learn from the experiences of our colleagues, potentially develop richer pedagogies, and become a more inclusive *us*.

II. BEYOND "ACCESSIBILITY VS. INACCESSIBILITY"

--Ada

At the 2019 College Composition and Communication Conference, a large signpost in a central walkway read, in large letters, "CCCCs is Accessible!"

I grimaced, annoyed. *Well that's that, then. Mission accomplished, I guess.*

I was grateful for the opportunity to join several disabled conference goers and nondisabled allies in responding by pointing out the many ways they experienced inaccessibility at the conference. Affixing sticky notes to the sign, we noted a range of access issues including childcare, inaccessible technology, presenters not using microphones, missing access copies, and other issues (see Simpkins). While institutions might declare their spaces as accessible or inaccessible, this binary framework too-frequently ignores the material

realities of *actual disabled people* (Hubrig 234-235). Put another way, institutions should *not* unilaterally decide when disabled people's—or anyone's—needs are met: “accessibility” is not a finished, achievable state but a constant series of negotiations.

We hope writing center professionals might learn from the “CCCCs is Accessible!” sign—and crip critique—both the importance of seeking out disabled perspectives in working toward accessibility, but also in understanding that no arrangement is ever totally accessible: the binary between “accessibility” and “inaccessibility” is too reductive, and ignores real, lived embodied experiences (Cedillo; Rice-Evans and Stella). Rather, writing center theory and practice must be open to *negotiation* and *consent* around issues of access.

It's necessary to recognize that nothing is universally accessible. Here I echo disability scholars including Aimi Hamraie and Dolmage, who point to the importance of Universal Design (UD) while productively critiquing it. Hamraie points to how UD design does not consider actual disabled experiences while centering whiteness and other markers of privilege, arguing that “Intersectionality must consider how the normate template for the built environment is a system of exclusion that segregates spaces and people along the axes of disability, race, class, and gender (among others)” (np). Dolmage similarly points to these issues with UD, and argues that UD shouldn't be abandoned outright, but argues “student learning differences should drive design” (134). As Hamraie's and Dolmage's work highlights, UD frameworks too often treat disability as a monolith rather than consulting disabled people. That doesn't mean writing center professionals shouldn't *attempt* to create more inclusive writing centers through our policy,

sessions, and instructor training (Elston 18), but it's necessary to understand the limitations of UD and seek feedback from multiply marginalized disabled people, rather than proclaiming writing center spaces accessible because it adhered to a premade UD checklist.

And these limitations of UD are exactly why the Accessibility/Inaccessibility binary fails us, bringing us back to why careful attention to negotiation and consent is necessary. In "Articulating Betweenity: Literacy, Language, Identity and Technology in the Deaf/Hard-of Hearing Collection," Brenda Brueggemann inverts the notion of "overcoming" disability and instead suggests that teachers take a "coming over" stance. Hitt (*Rhetorics of Overcoming*), who more fully elaborates on the pedagogical issues of "overcoming" vs "coming over," juxtaposes the overcoming narrative with a *coming over* narrative, "that embraces disability, difference, and nonnormative practices—a narrative that informs the crafting of pedagogical practices that welcome a wide range of embodied experiences to *come over* and join the conversation on accessibility" (20). In moving beyond the accessibility/inaccessibility binary, I hope to move *toward* configurations like "betweenity" and "coming over" that engage disabled embodied experiences.

While I draw attention to the limitations of accessible/inaccessible binaries, I underscore that whiteness and white supremacy in writing centers and writing center scholarship make accessibility impossible. As Asao Inoue has argued, much of writing center studies has failed to provide "an explicit account of how whiteness and whitely ways of being determine much of what happens in writing centers" (95). In centering whiteness, writing centers become inaccessible for people of color (see

García). We echo disability justice advocates who have argued that ableism is inseparable from cis-heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, colonialist, and capitalist oppression (Sins Invalid 18), and ableism can only be addressed in conjunction with other forms of oppression.

With these threads in mind, I return to the “CCCCs is Accessible!” sign: rather than working with an “accessible” vs. “inaccessible” binary and proclaiming our spaces accessible, I’d like to push us toward *conversations* about accessibility in writing centers (Babcock 42), taking our cues about access needs from those *seeking* access. I echo Tara Wood et al who have advocated for “accessible course design and emphasize a dynamic, recursive, and continual approach to inclusion rather than mere troubleshooting” (148). Rather than a limiting binary of accessibility/inaccessibility writing centers should seek dialogue with disabled people—not imagining disability as something to be diagnosed and accommodated, but as a site of pedagogical invention in the writing center, understanding that closer attention to diverse embodied experiences may make writing centers more accessible for disabled and nondisabled people alike.

III. BEYOND “NORMALCY” VS. “ABNORMALCY”

--Melissa

2021 is a hell of a year to write about disability.

I still remember a conversation I had with a colleague in 2020, just before Spring Break, as initial reports were filtering in from overseas. We were standing near a refrigerator in a common break area, retrieving food.

Neither one of us knew that this was the last in-person conversation we would have for 18 months.

“You shouldn’t really worry about the virus,” my colleague confidently remarked. “They say it’s only killing old people and people with serious pre-existing conditions.”

I stared back, flatly. “I’m in that last group.”

There were blinks. An awkward, fumbled “Oh!” Then: “Really? You are?” A pause. “Oh.”

Despite our normally good working relationship, I didn’t attempt to smooth over the gaffe. After a few more words, we both exited the room. On the drive home that afternoon, I was troubled. In addition to seeming dismissive of marginalized lives, my colleague’s offhand comment echoed the oft-repeated wish that Dolmage describes: “There are no people with disabilities here” (43). This is, of course, a fantasy, built on a number of faulty underlying *endoxa* about higher education, normative public spaces, and the people one encounters within them.

When Covid-19 arrived in the weeks that followed, this fantasy became unstable. After all, if disability can be understood as a product of the physical and social environments that we build, then the abruptly inaccessible, virus-laden public spaces of 2020 disabled an awful lot of us — at least according to the social model of disability (Hamraie; Wendell 46).² Indeed, the pandemic has served as a grim demonstration that circumstantial shifts can, in turn, alter the organism-environment relationship and render anyone less able to function in a given space.

In 2020, a number of journals addressed our new situation directly. Muriel Harris acknowledged the “difficult academic year” we had entered, as well as the “challenges of a pandemic” (1). As the semester dragged on, we all watched colleges and universities rapidly pivot, in response to the virus’s threat.

Accommodations that a number of Disabled people had long lobbied for – but had been told weren’t feasible – were suddenly the *de rigeur* standard, across the board for many campuses:

working/teaching from home, videoconferencing with students and tutees, offering more generous extensions (Krishnaiah and Hermann.).

Writing centers are not exempt from this critique. As J.M. Dembsey has argued, adoption of online writing-center support has been slow and uneven, across the field, despite evidence that such support makes writing centers more accessible to a spectrum of Disabled and other frequently marginalized writers. “Only after an international pandemic threatened the health, safety, and education of non-[D]isabled, white, and/or monolingual writers did the writing center community take quick interest in promoting and implementing online writing center work,” Dembsey charges (3, capitalization mine).

Writing center professionals are frequently uncomfortable with the presence of Disabled writers, a phenomenon that Dembsey tracks through the extant professional literature (4). Some of us are even more unsettled by the experience of situational disability we have just lived through, as well as the possibility that we ourselves may be considered disabled. Indeed, now that many of our campuses are physically reopening for 2021-22, a “return to normal” discourse has emerged – from headlines to hallway conversations – one which adopts the

ableist *lexis* of our broader public conversations about Covid-19. The word “normal” is frequently, eagerly invoked as the standard that an ideal post-Covid educational experience should meet, implying that anything outside of “normal” is abnormal (*subnormal*, really) and therefore less desirable or a failure.

It is worth reflecting on how much of this public response is rooted in our own collective anxieties about, and rejections of, disability. Additionally, this preoccupation with achieving a “normal” state echoes the “normalcy/abnormalcy” binary articulated by Lennard Davis. The scholar in me is exhausted by the fact that we haven’t collectively moved past this dichotomy, decades after Davis and other scholars first identified it. The Disabled person in me — the person who has spent the better part of the last year and a half dealing with an additional pandemic-era layer of ableist nonsense — is even *more* exhausted.

In the rush to regain “normal,” many schools (and political bodies) are once more jettisoning accommodation measures — from masking to videoconferencing — framing them as unnecessary or even an intrusive threat to individual freedoms. Our writing centers would do well to resist this pendulum swing and re-examine the binary that drives it. Otherwise, we’ve squandered an opportunity to practice the pedagogical invention that Nicole and Ada both endorse.

BEYOND DISABILITY BINARIES: DISABILITY AS SITE OF INVENTION, NOT A MONOLITH

While writing center scholarship is often haunted by binaries that present disability as a challenge to be

accommodated, through our own embodied experiences we suggest that disability can instead be a rich site of invention in writing center studies, inviting deeper engagement with disability scholarship and disabled embodied experiences in writing center studies.

We also consider the material conditions in which this article was drafted, noting the tensions between academic schedules and our own range of disabled embodied experiences—some of this article was written in the bathroom, on bedrest, in the hospital, or transferred between documents as workarounds for screen-reader issues with different word processing programs. Considering our embodied experiences of disability, we also hope to move beyond disability binaries in creating new spaces for disabled writing center scholars and professionals, and ways to honor the often invisibilized work of supporting disabled scholars (Hubrig). We urge writing center scholars to take up disabled embodied experiences, reimagining and reinventing academic practices and academic publishing through disability.

In pushing beyond the binaries of “us” vs. “them,” “accessibility” vs. “inaccessibility,” and “normalcy” vs “abnormalcy,” we hope to wade deeper into a fuller range of embodied experiences. We echo disability activist and author Alice Wong, who writes “To me, disability is not a monolith, nor is it a clear-cut binary of disabled and nondisabled. Disability is mutable and ever-evolving” (28). In our desire to move away from the ways institutional use of disability narratives still haunt disabled experiences and flatten disabled experiences, we push toward a less monolithic and more expansive notion of disability in writing center practice and scholarship that

breaks down binaries as a site of pedagogical invention.

NOTES

1. In the process of writing this piece, collaborators were committed to different terms, with some preferring “person with disabilities” and others preferring “Disabled person.” Rather than choosing one or the other, this became a productive site of conversation for us as collaborators, prompting us to reflect more fully on how different models and our differing embodied disabled experiences shape these preferences and our understanding of disability. We feel strongly that this, too, is an example of moving beyond disability binaries.
2. A quick note on language: Disability has been theorized a number of different ways in contemporary scholarship. According to the social model, it is a product of the accessibility of a given environment. However, there is another important way in which the word “Disabled” is frequently used: as a marker of identity or natural mode of human difference (Price). In cases where this sense of the word is intended, I will denote its use with capitalization.

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