

WELCOMING AND MANAGING NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WRITING CENTER

Alice Batt

University of Texas at Austin

abatt@austin.utexas.edu

A few years ago, my son was eating lunch in the middle-school cafeteria when a friend who has dyslexia and dysgraphia rushed over to share big news. With a flourish, the boy tossed onto the table the results of his tests for the Talented and Gifted program in language arts. “Check it out,” he crowed. “I’m gifted in the same area I’m disabled!”

I love this moment. I love the boy’s gleeful appreciation of how language fails to capture the complexity of how he learns. Gifted and disabled? Aren’t those mutually exclusive categories? Nope. His test results torpedoed the most basic and pernicious ableist assumption: that people who have disabilities cannot be “able.”

People who work in writing centers are in a better situation than most to know that this ableist assumption is hogwash. Every day we work with students who have disabilities. Sometimes we know it, sometimes we don’t, and often not knowing doesn’t matter because our approach would be the same either way: discern the writers’ main concerns and find out how we can best support them. If that means taking notes on the ideas they express, we do. If it means finding a quieter place to work, we try to find one. If it means giving them time to vent their anxiety, we listen. The very pedagogy of writing centers allows us to individualize each writer’s experience.

Because we appreciate individual difference, writing centers tend to be interested in promoting access. At the writing center where I work, we began by consulting the university’s Services for Students with Disabilities office, which helped us craft a statement about the accommodations we provide, such as back-to-back consultations. When our writing center director and I were asked to help design the new Learning Commons at our university’s main library, we advocated for reduced distraction rooms in the writing center to support consultees with ADHD and PTSD and anyone else who needed quiet to do their best work. The architects and designers made sure all passages would easily accommodate wheelchairs and that at least one table could be adjusted to wheelchair height. We determined that the heavy glass doors on our space would never be closed.

As we designed these changes, we knew the students who use our services wouldn’t be the only beneficiaries. Over the years we’ve worked with incredibly talented consultants and administrators who self-identified as having an array of disabilities. We’ve supervised several who were deaf or hard of hearing and others who had mobility or speech impairments. Increasingly, we’ve had consultants who had differences that are invisible: dyslexia, dyscalculia, bipolar disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, anxiety, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. These consultants might be described as neurodivergent, from the term “neurodiversity,” which was coined by Judy Singer in the late-1990s (Silberman 450). Autistic scholar and speaker Nick Walker offers useful definitions of the terms neurodiversity and neurodivergent. On his webpage, *Neurocosmopolitanism*, Nick Walker defines neurodiversity as “the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species,” and neurodivergent as “having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of ‘normal’” (Neurodiversity).

The term “neurodiversity” neutralizes the stigma that has traditionally been accorded to autism, ADHD, and other neurodevelopmental conditions, and it presents an alternative view: all these conditions are normal variations within a wide spectrum of human neurodevelopment. Many scholars extend the definition to include mental health differences, such as those described above. Subscribing to the neurodiversity paradigm allows people to see disabilities as differences in identity rather than medical issues to be pathologized and treated. That’s the approach I prefer to take when thinking about my administrative colleagues in the writing center and the consultants we employ, train, and support.

My own experience in writing centers suggests there is significant neurodivergence among writing center consultants and administrators, but very little has been written on the subject. In volume 13, issue 1 of *Praxis*, Rebecca Babcock asserted that there are no published studies on disabilities among tutors in the writing center. One important exception—Hillary Degner et al.’s “Opening Closed Doors: A Rationale for Creating a Safe Space for Tutors Struggling with

Mental Health Concerns or Illnesses”—was published in the same issue. The authors published results of a year-long, IRB-approved study of mental health concerns of writing center tutors. They distributed their survey to the Michigan Writing Center, European Writing Centers Association, and WCenter email mailing lists. Out of 127 respondents, 57 percent reported having symptoms of one of the following conditions during the previous six months: depression, anxiety, ADD or ADHD, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, substance abuse, and PTSD. When asked if they had mentioned their mental health concerns to writing center administrators, colleagues, or visiting students, 72 percent indicated that they had not (Degner et al.).

More recently, Sarah Banschbach Valles et al. have investigated various kinds of diversity among writing center administrators. “Writing Center Administrators and Diversity: A Survey” includes answers to survey questions about job function, job title, gender, education level, academic discipline, reasons for becoming a writing center director, type of institution (current place of employment, as well as type attended as undergraduate and graduate student), age, race/ethnicity, language, and (dis)ability. The authors report that 96.8 percent (n=302) of those who replied to the survey indicated that they were not disabled; only 3.2 percent (n=10) reported that they have a disability (Valles et al.).

I find myself wondering if recent and future investigations into the neurodivergence among writing center workers may be impeded by the pressure to keep one’s differences hidden in the academy. In “Psychological Disability and the Director’s Chair: Interrogating the Relationship Between Positionality and Pedagogy,” M. Melissa Elston reminded us that many academics and administrators still assume that disability negatively affects job performance, and the academic who discloses can face lasting negative effects from colleagues. Ultimately, Elston tells us she decided to disclose her disability because “passing . . . reinforces the ableist fantasy that disability and expertise are mutually exclusive categories.” She sees disclosure as a “radical act of rebellion against numerous ableist narratives” and as a tool she can use, when appropriate, to support other writers who have disabilities (Elston).

Some of our consultants may be at the point where they can disclose; others may not be. When I consider the low disclosure rate among tutors in the study by Degner et al., I’m tempted to read it as confirmation that what my experience tells me is true: the pressure to keep quiet about non-visible disabilities extends to our consultants, too. I think of the many times

undergraduates have come to me, (sometimes too) late in the semester, to say they finally decided to go to the SSD office and get their accommodation letter. They always had accommodations in high school, but they wanted to see if they could “manage” without them. The Section 504 system our students experience in primary and secondary school, while well-intentioned, frequently makes them feel other and lesser. One of the most heartbreaking confessions I have heard from a student is that he felt his accommodations were a form of cheating, and if he couldn’t succeed without them, then maybe he wasn’t meant to succeed. Although some students with disabilities come to college with resolved feelings toward their accommodations, many are quite ambivalent.

As a manager of a writing center, I would like to be part of creating an environment where writing center workers feel they can disclose, where they feel they don’t have to “pass” as neurotypical, because neurodiversity is expected. Degner et al. suggest that writing center administrators should continually create opportunities for consultants to disclose if they wish and that addressing mental health issues in training will help create an environment where students feel safe to disclose. The same can be said about addressing all types of neurodivergence. Directors who want to take this route may wish to assign readings from *Writing Centers and Disability*, recently published by Rebecca Babcock and Sharifa Daniels. The first section features articles written by writing center consultants and administrators who have both visible and invisible disabilities: cerebral palsy, brain injury, ADHD, depression, and anxiety. In addition to letting neurodivergent consultants know that they are not alone among their writing center colleagues, the articles in this collection provide salient advice about improving accessibility and developing diversity-friendly consulting practices.

In the closing chapter of *Writing Centers and Disability*, Babcock renews her call for more research on writing center tutors, directors, and staff who have disabilities. I’d like to reiterate that call and amend it to say I think we particularly need research on neurodivergent consultants, for these reasons:

1. Writing about neurodivergent consultants challenges inaccurate perceptions of “helpers” and “those who are helped.” It can also promote the idea that difference in ability can be a strength. When my son’s friend exclaimed, “I’m gifted in the same area I’m disabled,” he meant that his tests showed him to be gifted in language arts along with being dyslexic and dysgraphic. But when I remember

his statement, I'm inclined to hear it a bit differently. I hear it as a refusal to think of giftedness and disability as separable from each other in a single person. In fact, giftedness and (dis)ability are equally powerful contributors to the way the learner or writer experiences the world. As such, one's disability might prove to be exactly what the student needs to know about in order to fulfill an assignment correctly. Consider, for example, a color-blind consultant who is asked to review a student's website and who notes that the colors will be indistinguishable for a portion of the audience; or a consultant with autism who has a gift for pattern recognition, which allows him to notice that each paragraph in a paper is roughly the same length and structure, creating choppiness. Rather than being helpful despite their different abilities, consultants may be helpful because of them.

2. Writing about neurodivergent consultants helps writing center managers grapple with issues that arise at the intersection of accommodation and traditional management practice. For instance, which steps should writing center directors take when a consultant with PTSD is at times verbally aggressive with colleagues? What can they do if the consultant's accommodation stipulates that employers should not address his or her condition directly? The language of accommodation is meant to support the worker but does not always provide clear direction for managers. Another area worth discussing is how to respond when consultants' needs conflict, as when one consultant is allergic to another consultant's service animal. Writing center directors and managers need to discuss challenges of this kind and to brainstorm creative responses, so we can build best practices to support all of our consultants.

The truth is that writing centers, by virtue of our attention to the needs of the individual, are poised to be natural homes for neurodivergent consultants and administrators. We have a chance to be the kind of places where, by valuing people's varied strengths, we can shape perceptions of ability in ways that help make ableist myths a relic from the past. But if we want that to happen, we have more work to do. We can start by encouraging more studies about and by the neurodivergent workers in our midst.

Works Cited

- Babcock, Rebecca Day. "Disabilities in the Writing Center." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/babcock-131>.
- . "Research Review and Call to Research." *Writing Centers and Disability*. Edited by Rebecca Babcock and Sharifa Daniels, series edited by Allison D. Smith and Trixie G. Smith, Fountainhead Press, 2017.
- Babcock, Rebecca Day, and Sharifa Daniels. *Writing Centers and Disability*. Fountainhead Press, 2017.
- Degner, Hillary, et al. "Opening Closed Doors: A Rationale for Creating a Safe Space for Tutors Struggling with Mental Health Concerns or Illnesses." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/degner-et-al-131>.
- Elston, M. Melissa. "Psychological Disability and the Director's Chair: Interrogating the Relationship Between Positionality and Pedagogy." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, <http://www.praxisuwc.com/elston-131>.
- Silberman, Steve. *Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*. Penguin, 2015.
- Valles, Sarah Banschbach, et al. "Writing Center Administrators and Diversity: A Survey." <http://thepeerreview-iwca.org/issues/issue-1/writing-center-administrators-and-diversity-a-survey/>.
- Walker, Nick. "Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms and Definitions." Neurocosmopolitanism: Nick Walker's Notes on Neurodiversity, Autism, and Cognitive Liberty, 27 September 2014, <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/>.