# Saturday Plenary Address: Creating a Culture of Access in Writing Program Administration

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I have no pronouncements to make, or perhaps I have many. But rather than thinking through this essay as an argument, I want us to think through questions and crises, in all of the resonances that questions and crises might summon. Put alternatively, I want us to dwell on the stories our field tells about disability. The title of this paper, "Creating a Culture of Access," is one such story. This title borrows from Elizabeth Brewer's work on mental disability, *ethos*, and the design of campus spaces. A culture of access, she notes, is a culture of participation and redesign (Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau). A culture of access, then, stories disabled people as cunningly present, as rhetors who crip and dismantle the material and conceptual structures of our field, structures that are, to put it mildly, woefully problemed. Admittedly, I am about to linger on these problems, on the ways in which the very design of writing studies works to promote ideologies of hyper-ability. But I linger on the badness, as it were, because in order to redesign our field, in order to foster a culture of access, we need first to recognize that disability is not the problem. Rather, we are.

## Non-Experts Who Decide They Are Experts

When the Americans with Disabilities Act passed in 1990, non-disabled people started panicking. Journalists claimed that the ADA offered a "life-long buffet of perks, special breaks and procedural protections" for people with "questionable disabilities" (qtd. in Colker 5–6). Politicians, Ruth Colker notes, complained that the ADA was an invitation for an "avalanche of frivolous lawsuits" (7). Celebrities also joined the panic wagon. At one point, Penn and Teller (in)famously claimed that the ADA coddled disabled people (because goodness knows that when we think about ramps and Braille signage, we instantly think about coddling).

Higher education was not exempt from ADA outcry. Faculty and administrators complained that so-called reasonable accommodations would only enable lazy students and fakers to game the system and lessen the rigor of a college education. Perhaps one of the more iconic stories of ADA backlash is that of Somnolent Samantha. In 1995, then-provost of Boston University Jon Westling severely restricted accommodations for learning disabled students: among other moves, he forbade the disability services office from approving accommodation requests and instead moved all authority to his office. During the course of the school year, Westling delivered a series of talks that warned of the excesses of accommodation. As one example, he described Somnolent Samantha, a student in one of his classes who, because of her supposed learning disability, required accommodations. With disdain, Westling proclaimed,

> The letter explained that Samantha had a learning disability "in the area of auditory processing" and would need the following accommodations: "time and one-half on all quizzes, tests, and examinations;" double-time on any mid-term or final examination; examinations in a room separate from other students; copies of my lecture notes; and a seat at the front of the class. Samantha, I was also informed, might fall asleep in my class, and I should be particularly concerned to fill her in on any material she missed while dozing. (Blanck 36)

Notably, Westling later revealed that Samantha was a fiction: he completely made her up. When several students sued Boston University over disability discrimination, the court ruled in their favor in 1997 in large part because Westling's Samantha stories "expressed certain biases . . . about learning disabled students" (Guckenberger et al. v. Boston University). After losing the lawsuit, Westling continued lambasting the ADA and disabled students, claiming, among other things, that Somnolent Samantha "symbolized real learning disabled students," that "learning disabled students are victims of overblown and unscientific claims by . . . disability advocates," and that "Universities have acceded to demands from extremists to exempt students from a growing range of academic requirements" ("Rule of Law").

It is now 2016, and yet these remain familiar arguments.

## Microaggressions

Shortly after a psychologist remarked that my IQ was too low for me to become a professor, I moved to Ohio and entered a PhD program in Rhetoric and Composition. When I started a PhD program, I had no intention of becoming a disability activist, despite always having been disabled. I dabbled in online forums, even started a disability blog. I lurked on list-

servs. I ignored the voicemail messages from the disability services office and instead scoped out the autistic island in Second Life. Stigma imposed distance. Was I a faker? Was I worthy of an education?

This essay veers toward the angry, much like the photograph pictured. In this image, the iconic wheelchair user logo has been vandalized on an access sign, the stick figure's face penciled in with an angry glare—complete with downcast eyebrows and a triangular frown. The figure's chair faces the right, while an arrow identifying the accessible entrance points to the left. Rage.



Fig. 1

As someone who is multiply disabled and whose primary disability is often profiled as a condition afflicting school shooters, this anger is borne out of a frustration that has been building over the past decade, or, more realistically, my whole life. While I am using personal narrative as a means of arriving at larger points, I am by no means suggesting that disability is individual or individualistic. Stephanie Kerschbaum maintains that "storying is an important move toward practices that are inclusive, rather than

exclusive, of disability." All too often, she describes, the stories we tell about disability are told from a nondisabled perspective: that one student we had that one time way back when; that really weird colleague; that technology that's killing our brains; those creepy people and those creepy conditions "over there" (Yergeau et al.).

To be clear, as far as disabled people go, I am relatively privileged. I made it. I am afforded privileges based on my whiteness, based on my transition from childhood poverty to the gainfully employed middle class, based on how others perceive my speech and bodily comportment—I can sometimes pass as non-disabled, thanks to years of drill and repeat exercises and abusive therapies. (I mean the *thanks* sarcastically. As in, "thanks, mom!")

I am hoping, then, that we might story together, that we might collectively and angrily survey a disciplinary landscape that is not only inaccessible or inhospitable to disabled bodies, but a landscape that also actively hides disabled bodies from view and perpetrates exponential violences on those who are multiply marginalized. We might, for instance, begin with the very room in which this plenary takes place, with our very conference space, in order to apprehend how the design of this space makes particular statements about the bodies it values. The arrangement of tables and chairs, the lack of aisle space, the positioning and placement of screens and speakers, the way in which our bodies are packed into this room, the line setup of our food stations, the proximity of our exhibition tables to the walls, the un-ease or uneasiness or sheer mortal peril in which certain groups of people can or cannot access restrooms, the absence (or presence) of prepared materials and handouts during sessions, the unspoken belief that all participants are ready to engage, in the words of Jay Dolmage, in all modes at all times ("Disability").

To be clear, in making these statements about this space, I am not laying blame at the feet of our amazing (truly amazing) conference organizers, nor am I trying to claim that our space here is somehow more emblematic of ableism than other spaces. Rather, I am making the claim that ableism is a structuring logic of Rhetoric and Composition, of higher education writ large, and we can keenly feel that ableism even in a well-meaning, mentorly space like the CWPA Conference. As Asao Inoue made clear in his plenary, there are people missing from this space, people who have been violently absented from this room. Inaccessibility is among the primary topoi of college discourse: Without inaccessibility, we would not be rigorous. Without inaccessibility, we would not have placement. Without inaccessibility, we would not have assessment. Without inaccessibility, we

would not have literacy. Without inaccessibility, would we even know ourselves as a discipline?

Disability Activism

*Nothing about us without us*: There is a reason that this is the disability rights rallying cry.

I wasn't a *we* until graduate school. I had never knowingly met anyone with my disability until that point in time, despite the fact that two percent of the population is supposedly autistic. My experience isn't unique to myself nor is it unique to my disability: Rarely do disabled people grow up around other disabled people. Clinicians frequently worry that putting multiple disabled people together in a room might cause them to act more disabled. Disability is a problemed currency, a contagion, blight. So, segregation, whether physical or conceptual, is part and parcel of the disabled experience. As disabled people, we often have non-disabled families, are tracked into special education classes or residential schools, are forced into life-skills curricula or sheltered workshops, are prevented from accessing spaces due to physical and social and sensorial and financial obstacles, are murdered by our caregivers and blamed for our own deaths. According to university provosts and *Salon* columnists alike, our want of social change is merely a want of unearned handouts and perks.

But my focus here isn't on the nuances and breakdowns of disability history. As I mentioned earlier, my focus, rather, is on the *we* of disability and the *we* of the non-disabled. And, among other examples, I want us to examine how we—as WPAs, teachers, and colleagues—operationalize and reinforce ableism in the very design of our programs. But I don't want to end there. How might we contest that ableism? Audience is a treasured rhetorical concept, a concept that often organizes how we talk about the work we do as WPAs. However, I remain unconvinced that audience-as-concept is meant to include the so-called cripples and the feeble-minded among its ranks. I want us to consider, to deeply consider, the ways in which we propagate a non-disabled default in our professional and our pedagogical spaces. I want us to consider, as many of our colleagues have claimed about whiteness and heteronormativity, whether writing program administration, whether the very act of administering or teaching, can ever be anything but ableist.

This, I realize, is a long prelude. But the systematic segregation of disabled people has not been emphasized enough. Disability is, to quote Tanya Titchkosky, a "reasonable exclusion" (78). Titchkosky's use of the word *reasonable* is a wry one, a sarcastic one—a belabored and despondent and

annoyed invocation of the ways in which disabled people's absence from the body politic is all too often represented as a public and moral good. In WPA work, disabled people are reasonably excluded through multiple modes and means. We are reasonably excluded from first-year writing because we read with sound. We are reasonably excluded from health insurance plans because we are contingent. We are reasonably excluded from receiving job accommodations because being disabled and being older than twenty-one is impossible—we must be faking. We are reasonably excluded because interpreters and real-time captioning are too expensive, and imagine what the writing program could buy were it not for deaf scholars. We are reasonably excluded because we cannot afford a $2,000 diagnostic assessment for ADHD and the university will not provide services without it. We are reasonably excluded because the beginning-of-the-year program reception is hosted at the WPA's house—and it is more important to have a homey party than it is to consider the mobility and transportation needs of our graduate students and colleagues. We are reasonably excluded because conference presenters do not distribute scripts or handouts of their talks nor do they describe their slides and images. We are reasonably excluded because if a full-fledged faculty member cannot hear, process auditory information, or maintain attention, then she should not be a faculty member. We are reasonably excluded because the DSM isn't real. (It's Tinkerbell. It sports a wand and tights, even.) We are reasonably excluded because our course management and e-portfolio systems are inaccessible.

We are reasonably excluded because, as Amy Vidali suggests, disabling writing program administration involves disabling and cripping and fucking with everything that writing program administration holds dear. Disability is a defiance of standards. Notes Vidali, "If disability is only ever something bad that happens to WPAs and programs, there is scarce space for the disabled WPA to articulate her value and perspective" (40–41).

## Haven't You Overcome That Yet?

Upon arriving on campus as a new assistant professor, I begin searching for information on how to request disability accommodations. To my surprise, there is nothing that I can find about this online. The campus disability services office only serves students. The hospital's autism center only serves individuals under the age of twenty-five. The university HR website might as well be the seventh circle of hell. Photos of shiny happy presumably able people holding hands in a cubicle. Who smiles in an HR cubicle? Are they holding hands because they need a love contract? Whither disability policy? Disabled faculty and staff seem not to exist.

In desperate need of disability support, I make several inquiries. I ask my new colleagues about who the disability services contact is for faculty, and one colleague tells me there's no such thing. I am eventually routed to the mother of a friend who used to TA at my university fifteen years ago, who then routes me to an administrative assistant, who then routes me to a singular name at HR: The university's ADA coordinator, whose office is located on another campus in a lonely administrative building near the football stadium. I take two city buses to get there. The ADA coordinator is lovely, kind, welcoming. She asks what I need. I describe the accommodations I received at my previous institution, and she stops me. "I don't grant requests," she explains. "I mediate disputes over requests." I need to contact my chair and/or direct supervisors, she tells me. I need to request accommodations from the body that, in part, determines whether or not I receive tenure.

In her work on mental disability and writing studies, Margaret Price has argued that mental disability is rhetorical disability. In making this claim, Price is not suggesting that disabled people are rhetorically impaired. Rather, following the work of Brenda Brueggemann, Catherine Prendergast, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Price is suggesting that we are all culturally primed to understand disability as a force that negates rhetoricity, communicability, and humanity. The braining of discourse, she contends, wields particular violences on those who are neurodivergent. Disability chips away at something, and in higher education, that something is teacher-scholars' *raison d'etre*: If you are non-rhetorical, how can you succeed in a writing program, much less administer one? If others believe that you pathologically lack *ethos*, how will you ever be believed?

Post-Newtown discourse on mental illness has added interminably soul-crushing layers to how faculty and administration have come to understand—and treat—disability. In the days after the shootings, I began collecting any news article I could find relating to mental disability. Within three days' time, I'd amassed sixty-five articles that in some way connected mental disabilities with planned violence, plus a half dozen that blamed school shootings on de-institutionalization and the disability rights movement. Lock up the crazies, the articles said. Sterilize the crazies, the articles said. Most striking to me about the media coverage, though, were the assumptions made about audience, authorship, and competence. We heard from parents and psychologists, neighbors and siblings, news anchors and politicians, teachers and administrators—all with theories to offer, all with suggestions for restructuring the mental health system, some with suggestions about how to read student poetry and disturbing writing assignments. Find the warning signs. Student writing might be predictive. Inter-

pret a student's villanelle like it's *Ulysses*. Put your literature PhD to work. Some months later, staff from a dean's office visit a department meeting, and we discuss how to handle students in crisis. One of the speakers relates a story about a former student who started hearing the voice of God. The faculty are supposed to be fearful of this anecdote, even as some in the room nervously laugh out of discomfort. Memory transposes me. "I don't grant requests," the ADA coordinator explains. "I mediate disputes over requests." I need to contact my chair and/or direct supervisors, she tells me. I need to request accommodations from the body that, in part, determines whether or not I receive tenure.

I wonder: Do I really need an accommodation? Am I too crazy to be here?

Designing Futures

When our field talks about access in the context of disability, we often talk about universal design—a concept that harbors local histories, given the work of Ron Mace and the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University. UD is, in short, a design process that endeavors to include the maximum numbers of bodies possible. UD's histories are architectural, but its current trajectories are interdisciplinary and are especially present in scholarship on pedagogy and education more broadly.

There have been some notable and important critiques of UD, many of them emerging from scholars in writing studies. Jay Dolmage, for instance, has argued that "universal design has become a way to talk about changing space to accommodate the broadest range of users, yet consistently overlooks the importance of continued feedback from these users" ("Disability" 172). Importantly, Dolmage observes that, pedagogically, UD often functions as little more than a series of checklists, items that instructors and WPAs can simply check off and then contentedly ignore ("Universal Design"). Building upon Dolmage's work, I would also add that UD does not, in the words of Vidali, disable, crip, or dismantle WPA work. In centering universality, UD ironically de-centers disability. What's more, as Sami Schalk and Aimi Hamraie have made clear, UD not only de-centers but flattens disabled people's experiences: UD often assumes that all blind people experience blindness similarly, that disabled people are by default white, that a nondisabled person's assumptions about disability constitute disability.

Here is where I would like to close. Vidali's call for interdependence in "Disabling Writing Program Administration" presents us with a timely challenge as well as a call for action. Although there is no saccharine, easy

mechanism for us to categorically undo ableism in one conference meeting, we should by no means feel exempted from or defeated by the work of disability activism. Vidali's point, rather, is that disability disclosure is often interpreted as a welcoming of discrimination—that, in admitting disability, our colleagues and students are forced to make themselves vulnerable, subject to institutional violences. Interdependence, she maintains, is coalitional work that disables the everyday and mundane work of writing program administration. Indeed, Vidali is not alone in making this claim. Tanya Titchkosky, Lydia Brown, and Isaac West, for example, have each independently advocated for coalitional activism around resonant social issues, noting that both trans people and disabled people are routinely denied access to bathrooms and other spaces that are necessary preconditions for comfort, safety, visibility, community, and life. As Titchkosky notes, the question of "to pee or not to pee" has become an ordering logic for how disabled and queer people are forced to navigate the daily world, concerns that structure one's minute-to-minute life, concerns that nondisabled and cisnormative others might on some level understand, yet can never gutturally or fully or emphatically know (69).

In this vein, in *Disability and the Teaching of Writing*, Brenda Brueggemann, Cindy Lewiecki-Wilson, and Jay Dolmage describe an exercise in which their classes formed human chains around the inaccessible (or, most trafficked) entrances of a campus building, forcing non-disabled pedestrians to take the accessible route. Nondisabled people were, of course, confused and inconvenienced, as accessible entrances as well as accessible and/or gender-neutral bathrooms are typically located in the most awkward and difficult to access of places. These are spaces and structures that are generally and purposively designed to reside in the back of buildings. Locating these entrances and spaces up front would ruin the beauty of a structure. Disability, non-normativity—our architecture and our discipline considers them blight.

How might we interdependently say otherwise? What might be resonant or shared in our grievances, in the multiple oppressions that those in our discipline routinely face and often at the hands of that very discipline?

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