

ACCESS FOR ALL: THE ROLE OF DIS/ABILITY IN MULTILITERACY CENTERS

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“Linked to the notion of multiliteracies is the challenge to develop more equitable social futures by redistributing the means of communication.”

– John Trimbur (30)

“For all students to have access to those things composition has to offer—literate ‘skills,’ a voice, the words to write the world—we must ensure that disability is recognized and respected.”

– Jay Dolmage (15)

In David Sheridan and James Inman’s 2010 edited collection, *Multiliteracy Centers: Writing Center Work, New Media, and Multimodal Rhetoric*, Inman discusses designing a multiliteracy center.¹ He writes, “A final, but vital, consideration should be the accessibility of any zoned space for individuals with disabilities. In this pursuit, the idea is not just to make spaces minimally accessible, but instead to consider how the disabled may be able to most fully participate in the uses for which the spaces were designed” (Inman 27). This comes as the last “special issue” of consideration for design (28). Though Inman highlights disability and access, these issues are not taken up further as pedagogical considerations. I believe that we need to explore and broaden our understandings of disability as more than a physical design issue and of accessibility as more than an issue for students with disabilities. The creation of multiliteracy centers, spaces “equal to the diversity of semiotic options composers have in the 21st century” (Sheridan 6), presents an opportunity to position disability within the larger context of diverse learners in order to better understand how we can create more accessible multiliterate spaces and pedagogies.

A writing pedagogy that supports multiliteracies must be spatially and pedagogically accessible to a diverse range of students. In many ways, a multimodal pedagogy² supports accessible practices through its attention to multiplicity in various modes and media and in its focus on flexibility in processes and products. Disability studies offers two lenses that are also valuable for supporting writing pedagogies: Universal Design (UD) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UD is a spatial theory, articulated by architect Ronald Mace in 1988, which emphasizes the importance for all spaces to be physically accessible to all people. UDL, developed by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in 1994, extends UD in order to create equitable and flexible pedagogies. A multiliteracy center that applies principles of UD and UDL can support students’ different physical abilities, modes of learning, types of knowledge, and literacies. Despite advances in accessibility, however, disability remains a troubling binary that creates an us/them framework, undermining the inclusive spirit of multiliteracy centers. I argue that we need to reposition representations of disability in both writing center scholarship and tutoring practices.

Including Disability in Scholarship

One of the first steps in recognizing and respecting disability is including it in writing center scholarship and dialogue. Despite several notable contributions to this dialogue (see, for example, Babcock, 2011; Babcock, 2008; Hamel, 2002; and Hewett, 2000), both disability and access are largely undertheorized with regard to composition. Often, disability is positioned as something that tutors must cope with and that sometimes cannot be helped at all. For example, in her anthologized essay, Julie Neff suggests practices that could help LD students but nevertheless positions such students as Other: “Although learning-disabled students come to the writing center with a variety of special needs, they have one thing in common: they need more specific help than other students” (382). This cues tutors that they need to treat students with disabilities *differently* than other writing center patrons, which can create frustrations that lead to failure. In a reflection of a failed session, Steve Sherwood writes, “I had no training in helping students cope with learning disabilities, much less with the effects of a severe brain injury” (49), concluding that we will continue to encounter LD students who “despite our best efforts, we can’t help” (56). Sherwood makes the argument that tutors are not trained for working with LD students, while he simultaneously argues that writing centers are incapable of helping students with LD. Tanya Titchkosky identifies this impasse as a “You can’t accommodate everybody” attitude that identifies some students, particularly those with disabilities, as “‘naturally’ a problem for some spaces” (35).

All students who enter a writing center are treated individually and, thus, as *different* from one another in terms of what they bring to the center and how they learn and compose, so the issue is not seeing students with disabilities as different. Rather, the issue is to position students with disabilities as so *radically* different from other students that they are beyond help—that they require too much time, resources, or special knowledge. A disability studies perspective asks us to interrogate our centers and practices: What makes it culturally or pedagogically acceptable to say “no” to students with disabilities? Why would we, as people with a shared sense of social justice, contribute to the rhetoric that students with disabilities are beyond our help?

Turning to disability studies scholarship is critical as centers move toward multiliterate and multimodal practices that push against the “‘natural’ exclusion” (Titchkosky 6) of disability within academia. Jean

Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz borrow from disability studies in their article about Universal Design, which they describe as “an approach advocating for the design of products and services so that they are suited to a broad range of users” (50). They recall a moment in tutor training when a disabilities specialist came to talk to their tutors, “encourag[ing] tutors *not* to think of how they might adapt their tutoring for students with disabilities” because *all* students come to writing centers with different types of knowledge and abilities (50). Such a differentiation is an example of treating students as *different*, but not treating students with disabilities *differently*. Kiedaisch and Dinitz do not argue that individual needs should not be met; rather, they advocate adjusting our assumptions about students’ particular abilities and engaging in more accessible practices. Rebecca Day Babcock similarly argues that meeting deaf students’ learning needs can help writing center tutors “rethink their practices in light of others who learn differently” (28). This shifting of assumptions and practices benefits students with disabilities, but it also accounts for *any* diverse, twenty-first-century learner who enters the multiliteracy center.

Shifting assumptions about disability is increasingly important as disability diagnoses rise.³ In a 2010 report, Melana Zyla Vickers claims that two percent of college students have a documented learning disability, not including students with intellectual disabilities, autism, or other “severe” diagnoses (3). It is estimated that only half of college students report their disabilities, and many forego accommodations for fear that they will be treated *differently* by their instructors and peers (Walters 427). These increases in disability, labeled or not, may indicate a larger problem. Cathy Davidson argues that we are more likely to label a student as LD if she fails to fit into our educational system or is unresponsive to our particular pedagogical practices (10). To address this, then, we need to evaluate our writing center practices: How do our current pedagogical practices exclude particular students? How can we make our writing pedagogies more inclusive to diverse student populations?

Creating Accessible Spaces and Practices

More than a decade ago, the New London Group recognized multiliteracies as an opportunity to move beyond the dominating limitations of print- and word-based literacies, to reach other modes of representation such as visual, aural, gestural, spatial, and multimodal (28). Gunther Kress argues that these other modes are embodied, that “[h]uman bodies have a wide range of means of engagement with the world” that occur in various and multiple ways (184). A multiliteracy pedagogy, then, encourages practices that relate to students’ different bodily experiences and promote student agency (New London Group 31). Similarly, a multimodal pedagogy recognizes students as “agentive, resourceful and creative meaning-makers” (Stein 122). This agentive learning is valuable for students of all abilities to take control of what and how they best receive and create knowledge. And indeed, writing centers have traditionally been known for flexible pedagogies that support multimodal practices and active student-centered learning. A writing center reflects a different space than the classroom, one that both physically and pedagogically encourages alternative modes of communication and composition. Yet even as writing centers create these *different* spaces and practices, students with disabilities are still often treated *differently*. In order to truly support students’ different bodily experiences and embodied writing practices, multiliteracy centers must be both spatially and pedagogically accessible.

Universal Design and Spatial Accessibility

Universal Design is useful for considering how to make multiliteracy center spaces more accessible to wider populations. Before a center can support accessible practices, it must be free of spatial features that could disable users from interacting within that space. Bertram Bruce and Maureen Hogan note that physical environments construct disability because, as tools and technologies become naturalized, people who cannot use them are positioned as disabled (297). If we think of chairs as a natural part of the writing center environment, then they disable students who are unable to use them. A universally designed chair has wheels to support mobility and flexibility, allowing students to more easily use the chair or to push it aside if it is a hindrance.

Stairs are one of the most common examples of inaccessible spatial features, for they construct disability by disempowering wheelchair users (Bruce and Hogan 297). However, adding a ramp just for these users would be a retrofit—the act of adding a component to an already-built space (Dolmage 20). Often, these retrofits are forced: they occur only after someone recognizes that the space does not meet standards or is inaccessible. Retrofits also force students to access spaces differently. Rarely do we see ramps at the entrances of buildings; rather, they are on the side or in the back, reinforcing the idea that disability is an “afterthought” (21). UD encourages us to build writing center spaces that are accessible from the beginning, although many centers may retrofit because they lack the finances to design a new center. In this case, it is still beneficial to change inaccessible features. If we return to ramps, a universally designed approach to ramps helps everyone: wheelchair users, people with limited mobility, even strollers and rolling backpacks. The push toward multiliteracy centers provides opportunities for spatial reconsiderations of how well centers support accessible literacy practices.

Though some multiliteracy centers are completely redesigned to support multiple rooms and new technologies, a center does not need to change completely to implement accessible practices. This can be seen with the multiplicity and flexibility of different spatial configurations: long tables, clustered desks, overstuffed chairs, and computer stations. Even something as simple as furniture arrangement is multimodal. Stein writes, “The classroom is itself a multimodal place with visual displays and the arrangement of furniture in space that realizes particular discourses of English” and shapes the way students create meaning (122).⁴ Mobile furniture, technologies, houseplants, windows, and wall décor work to create an environment that is accessible, encouraging students to learn and compose in the ways that most benefit them.

While spatial elements are important, they cannot be separated from a multiliteracy center’s pedagogical goals. Inman writes, “Many centers appear to have been designed around furnishings and technologies, rather than what clients will actually be doing. This approach poses a problem because any

center exists to provide effective services for clients, not to have the grandest furnishings and technologies” (20). As spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre argues, the physical spaces we inhabit affect our actions within those spaces; in turn, our actions and social practices impact those spaces. Thus, the material spaces of writing centers greatly impact what kind of pedagogy those spaces can enact.⁵ Even if a center is physically accessible, students cannot benefit from inaccessible pedagogy.

Universal Design for Learning and Pedagogical Accessibility

UDL offers a way to apply the equitable and flexible spatial principles of Universal Design to writing pedagogies. According to CAST, UDL pushes against a “single, one-size-fits-all solution,” advocating instead for approaches that are flexible, multiple, and adjustable. The principles of UDL—multiple means of representation, actions and expression, and engagement—can help expand our teaching, learning, and composing practices. They can also help us to configure multiliteracies more inclusively. Often, multiliteracies refer to the different technological abilities, or literacies, that a person has for communicating through electronic means. We see this wealth of abilities represented in centers that house computer labs, specialized video and editing software, and OWLs. However, if we conceive of multiliteracies more broadly, as *embodied* practices, we can engage with multiliterate practices that are more inclusive to students with a range of abilities.

A more accessible multiliteracy pedagogy provides multiple and flexible options for all students, including those who may be constrained to particular modalities or have preferred learning styles. Jody Shipka argues for a broader understanding of multimodal texts within our pedagogical frameworks, expanding the definition to include print and digital texts, embodied performances, photographs, videos, physical objects, and repurposed or remediated objects (300). This definition speaks to the multiplicity of UDL and allows for a richer understanding of pedagogical accessibility: if students want to compose essays, collages, videos, or webtexts, these all fit within multimodal pedagogies. Similarly, if students with disabilities are limited to particular modalities—e.g., a blind student who relies on auditory or sensory modes to write or a deaf student who relies more heavily on visual modes—a multimodal pedagogy more easily adapts to these needs, incorporating rather than accommodating them.⁶ Broader understandings of multimodality also extend to multiliteracies, encouraging students to engage with their various literacies, such as traditional writing, technology, music, and visual or studio art.

A typical writing center session inherently encourages a multiplicity of communicative and learning styles: students enter a center, meet with a tutor, and engage with texts in a variety of ways. These interactions could include engaging in verbal discussions, collaboratively drafting, looking up information in books, working on computers, and participating in online appointments. Still, working with such a diverse group of students on widely varying rhetorical projects can be difficult. Patricia Dunn and Kathleen Dunn De Mers admit, “Coming up with alternate strategies that simulate (and stimulate) the complex brain work involved in writing is very difficult—partly because we’re so steeped in ‘writing’ as a heuristic for other writing, and partly because in this society we’re so steeped in a narrow view of what is ‘normal.’” For a tutor or consultant, developing these strategies can be particularly difficult if they have never experienced similar pedagogies. Therefore, it is crucial for writing center tutors and workers to develop multimodal “toolkits”—multiple and flexible practices—that allow them to adapt to different communicative interactions.

Developing a multimodal toolkit involves developing rhetorical strategies that push against fixed communicative interactions and present more opportunities for students. The idea is not to max out all sensory options but to provide flexibility. Shoshona Beth Konstant suggests using multiple channels: “Use combinations of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic techniques—the multisensory approach. Say it and draw it; read text aloud; use color to illustrate things” (7). Konstant takes an early cue from UDL when she argues that *everyone* has learning practices that work best for them (6). Similarly, Dunn and Dunn De Mers promote using a “variety of visual, aural, spatial, and kinesthetic approaches to tap into the intellectual chaos that goes into writing.” This means pushing against singular notions of how to interact with both students and texts, and it requires a negotiation between tutor and student. In her work with deaf students, Babcock suggests explicit dialogue: “Most of all, try to find out what the deaf person needs and wants out of the session, and gear your tutoring toward that” (35). If students are unaware of what they want or need, knowing some multimodal practices can be useful.

A multimodal toolkit does not eliminate the need to identify students’ individual needs, just as UDL does not eliminate the need for accommodations. Instead, both multimodality and UDL ask us to acknowledge that *all* students have multiple ways of learning and knowing and to be flexible to those different needs. If a student prefers drawing, tutors can adapt, asking the student to sketch an outline of their main ideas. Similarly, talking through a text could be more beneficial than reading it word for word. McKinney encourages talking—rather than reading—as a way to interact more holistically with all features of a multimodal text (“New Media Matters” 39). This practice is useful for texts that consist of more than just alphabetic text, but it could also benefit students with disabilities. For example, reading a paper aloud for errors may not be as effective when working with deaf students, students with ADHD, or students with pragmatic language impairment (PLI).⁷ By talking *about* a text, students have more opportunities to engage with the text in ways that reflect overall comprehension and understanding of their particular rhetorical choices.

To engage in accessible multiliterate practices, tutors must adapt to students’ different embodied practices, recognizing that all students who enter the multiliteracy center will learn and compose in different ways for different purposes. Tutors should not be expected to be technology experts to engage in these practices, but they should have basic understandings of different modes and media for rhetorical communication. Because many multiliteracy centers support various technologies, it is useful to know how to locate resources online, work with software to compose and edit multimedia texts—or to communicate with students who use assistive technologies—and even create audio recordings of sessions

that students could replay once they leave the center. Beyond available technologies, however, Teddi Fishman reminds us that “the ability to adapt [is] more critical than any particular or specific accommodation” (65).

All students have a variety of rhetorical, intellectual, and physical abilities, and multiliteracy center spaces and practices must be ready to *adapt* to students’ various needs.

Access for All

Writing centers need a new approach for working with students of *all* abilities as we continue to see advances in technologies, changes in educational practices, and increases in disability diagnoses. I believe that implementing the principles of Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning can help make multiliteracy centers more accessible. Applying UD can create a physically accessible space for a diverse student population, establishing a foundation for flexible tutoring, learning, and composing practices. Similarly, UDL promotes the understanding that all students have diverse needs that writing pedagogies need to address. By applying UD and UDL to multiliteracy pedagogies, we incorporate the important work of disability studies and broaden our understandings of both disability and accessibility.

Providing students with the resources to communicate within different modes, to practice and learn new literacies, and to harness their rhetorical abilities should be the goal of all multiliteracy centers. When we adopt multiliterate and multimodal pedagogies that support these resources, we acknowledge two things. First, *all* students have different abilities, types of knowledge, and literacies. Second, *all* students can benefit from engaging with texts in different ways—visually, aurally, and kinesthetically—and in different contexts. Applying the flexible principles of UD and UDL can make multiliteracy centers more accessible both spatially and pedagogically, allowing us to better prepare students to become effective twenty-first-century communicators.⁸

Notes

1. I use writing center and multiliteracy center almost interchangeably throughout this paper because, as I will argue, all writing centers support multiliterate practices.

2. The term “multiliteracies” refers, in part, to a multiplicity of communication modes and media (New London Group 9). Similarly, multimodality refers to the multiple modes that we use to represent information, and as Kress reminds us, “textual objects—spoken, signed, written, drawn—always occur in a multiplicity of modes” (199). Because multiliteracies and multimodality are so interrelated, it is necessary to discuss both.

3. According to the CDC, one in six children has a developmental disability—e.g., autism, ADHD, cerebral palsy, or intellectual disabilities—a 12-15% increase from 1997 (Boyle et al.).

4. At my institution’s writing center, for example, there is a small room of cubicles at the center’s entrance that can be used for quieter sessions, which could benefit students with ADHD who may be more distracted in larger settings or students with autism-spectrum disorders who prefer to be in less populated areas. Students also have the option to work in a large open room where there are multiple tables, chairs, and computer stations arranged for tutoring.

5. For a more in-depth discussion of how writing center scholars engage with spatial theory and how space can affect pedagogy, see Fishman, 2010; Hadfield, 2003; Kinkead and Harris, 1993; and McKinney, 2005.

6. For example, Shannon Walters reminds us that technology can be harmful if it is positioned as an impairment-specific approach. Audio- or image-only accommodations not only exclude other audiences, they often oversimplify and generalize the person with the disability (439).

7. Students with PLI may struggle with reading and expressing themselves, which can affect listening comprehension (Babcock, “When Something Is Not Quite Right” 7).

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