

DISABILITY IN THE WRITING CENTER: A NEW APPROACH (THAT'S NOT SO NEW)

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Introduction

Recently, I met a writing center administrator from a nearby institution at a social event. When she discovered that I am both deaf and a writing center consultant, she became very excited to talk to me. Her institution serves a large population of deaf students and she wondered if I had any tips or advice for working with them. Though her institution offered extra time for these sessions and training on how to work with an ASL interpreter, there were still challenges, she said—like one student who wanted to write back and forth rather than use an interpreter. While it worked, the tutor found it to be cumbersome.

My advice was to simply defer to the student's communication preferences. She wasn't convinced. "But—I can't help but feel like we should be doing something *else*," she said. "What more? What else should we do?" she asked.

This is by far not the only time I have encountered this kind of resistance and desperation for an answer. I get asked often, "Can you tell me how to best work with deaf tutees? How should I communicate with a deaf tutee?" When I reply, "Well, however that student prefers," I can tell the inquisitor feels disappointed, like this is not a real answer—a copout.

Though these interactions have never sat well with me, I admit that the requests usually seem sincere: a genuine interest in improving writing center sessions for deaf students. But, I can't shake the feeling that I'm not really being asked how to make sessions more accessible for deaf students. Instead, it feels like I'm being asked for some magic formula, some kernel of knowledge—if only a tutor could just locate this information, then the challenge of deafness could somehow be neutralized, and the sessions would be easier, more manageable—more *normal*. These interactions sit wrong with me, I realized, because they are evidence that in writing center practice, we are still approaching disability from a problematic standpoint.

What We Claim To Do Vs. Reality

The very foundation of writing center theory is based on the idea of a conversation between two

equals—a space in which we construct knowledge together as peers, not instruct from a position of power. The writing center is not a site of remediation, but rather the ideal tutoring session is one in which egalitarian and collaborative conversation occurs (see Bruffee and North).

Of course, this is a lofty ideal and does not always occur in practice. Many scholars have gone on to richly complicate the tutor-tutee relationship, critiquing the standard of a true balance in power. Trimbur, for example, states that tutors experience a contradiction in roles: They are encouraged to disassemble the hierarchal structure of academia despite that they have been rewarded in the past—and will continue to be rewarded—for observing and upholding this hierarchy (23). Shamoan and Burns likewise complicate the idealized orthodoxy of writing center practices—that is, collaborative, non-directive instruction that is student-centered and does not appropriate the student's text (135). They argue that a one-size-fits-all approach is not sustainable, especially when transmitting discourse community knowledge (Shamoan and Burns 139). Because unorthodox techniques can give tutees access to rhetorical knowledge that is often kept hidden to uphold others' status and power in academia, non-standard tutoring practices can actually empower students (Shamoan and Burns 146).

As complex as the tutor-tutee power dynamic may be, we still strive to uphold the student's power and agency in tutoring sessions. Yet, when it comes to disability, there is something amiss that provokes us to forget about—or at least muddy—these ideals. Though writing center theory stresses that we should adjust our practices to always meet the particular needs and personality of the individual tutee, "there exists a level of discomfort, for tutors as well as tutees, when differently-abled or other-cultured writers visit Writing Centers" (Lockett 1).

Writing center theory has arguably moved beyond the medical model of disability—the dominant view that considers disability to be a medical deficit—and has taken up the question of how to meet the needs of disabled students. However, it still views disability as a

deviation from the norm and students with disabilities as the other. Hitt has termed this the accommodation model: a “well intentioned approach to disability that seeks to meet students’ needs yet positions disability as something *different*” (“#iwca”).

This problematic positioning persists despite that numerous scholars have called for the field to re-envision how we think about disability—for example, Babcock, who herself responds to that call in her work on deaf students (*Tutoring Deaf College Students* iv). In “Changing Notions of Difference in the Writing Center: The Possibilities of Universal Design,” Kiedaisch and Dinitz suggest that to move away from tutor training that others disabled students, we should incorporate elements of Universal Design—that is, designing our spaces and practices to meet the needs of a wide range of students. When a disability specialist came to speak to their tutor training class at UVM, she recommended that in a session with a disabled student, tutors should actively try *not* to think about how they will adjust their strategies for that student’s disability (Kiedaisch and Dinitz 50). Because each student is different, sessions with a tutee with a disability, then, should look no different than any other session (Kiedaisch and Dinitz 50). To impart this to new tutors during training, Kiedaisch and Dinitz prioritize identity over difference: They emphasize that we are *all* different and each brings a wholly individualistic personhood to the table, and they encourage their tutors to inspect and investigate their own identities to better understand this notion (44, 47).

For students, this approach can inspire critical introspection and thoughtful examination of identity in remarkable ways—something I am in a unique position to claim, as I was trained by Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz as a peer undergraduate tutor at UVM, shortly after they integrated Universal Design into their tutor training. In fact, the students quoted in Kiedaisch and Dinitz’s article were my classmates, and the class the disability specialist came to speak to was my own. And while I can see how positively this approach to disability impacted my own tutoring practice, a decade later, I cannot ignore how our discourse still clings to the accommodation model.

Why Does This Model Persist?

In recent years, writing center theory has indeed taken up the task of critically examining how writing centers encounter and engage with marginalized identities, especially race and gender. For example, in *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-To-One Mentoring*, Denny explores the complex implications of

identity in the writing center, highlighting race, class, sex, gender, and nationality. In *Writing Centers and the New Racism*, Greenfield and Rowan note that writing centers have been called to examine how the “material reality” and rhetoric of racism inform our work, though we have often responded to this call with rhetorical moves that recenter, silence, or distract the conversation instead of truly engaging with race (2). In *I Hope I Join the Band*, however, Condon invokes critical race theory and a range of other disciplines to provide a deeply nuanced look at the role racism plays in our lives as educators and rhetors. Condon’s work exemplifies what rich critical engagement with race that extends the conversation looks like—interrogating, critiquing, and reflecting on what it means to perform the labor of authentic anti-racist activism.

These works and others (such as Denny; Sloan and Rihn’s work on gender and sexuality) offer a nuanced and authentic investigation of what it means to serve people of marginalized identities in the writing center. However, this kind of careful introspective work and critical conversation has been largely absent in regard to disability in the writing center.

In some ways this is not surprising, given that disability has been dubbed the “final frontier” (Rieser 118). Condon notes that although race is socially constructed, scholarship doesn’t query whether racism is real, but rather investigates how it operates institutionally and socially (Condon 21). The same does not hold true for scholarship on disability and writing. The label of ableism is still a contested space, and the social construction of disability is rarely invoked as the context from which to negotiate with ability in the writing center. This is evidenced by our literature and our field’s discourse. On listserves, for example, when the topic of disability comes up, it is almost always someone asking for advice on how to tutor a student with a particular disability. Responses are framed as how to surmount the disability—rarely acknowledging disability as an identity with a culture and a shared history of struggle against oppression.

Similarly, Greenfield and Rowan (6) note that tutor training materials have responded to calls for theoretical engagement with race and now include personal narratives and critical analysis (such as “Whispers of Coming and Going: Lessons from Fannie” and “Addressing Racial Diversity in a Writing Center: Stories and Lessons from Two Beginners”); however, disability-related materials have not followed this same trajectory. Though well intentioned at the time of publication, the dated literature on disability that we anthologize and train tutors with contributes

to the persistence of the accommodation model. Kiedaisch and Dinitz note that anthologized texts often start off by stressing that each student is an individual and generalizations about students with disabilities should be avoided (42). And yet, “in all of these textbooks, as in our own class, this explicit sensitivity and positioning are then somewhat subverted,” and a standard approach to dealing with all students in a certain subpopulation is provided (Kiedaisch and Dinitz 43).

Many of these texts include language choices and rhetorical moves that uphold the medical model, including the disability-related essays that appear in the most often used tutor training handbooks. In *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*’ chapter on learning disabilities, one tip does suggest asking the tutee about the best approach. Yet, in line with Kiedaisch and Dinitz’s observations, the other tips go on to offer suggestions that are reductive—assuming that, for example, all students with a learning disability benefit from a quiet place away from distractions (Ryan and Zimmerelli 70). *The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* includes two articles related to disability, the first of which is Weaver’s article on deaf students. Weaver not only relies heavily on audist rhetoric, but she also oversimplifies the language acquisition of all deaf persons: “The deaf acquire ASL, not English, as a first language” (246). The other is Julie Neff’s highly anthologized piece on learning disabilities (382), which, like other problematic literature (see Sisk as another example), positions non-disabled students as “normal,” offers general guidelines that assume all students with a certain disability benefit from the same strategies, and assumes that all disabled students require additional help outside the realm of what “normal” students do. Though Kiedaisch and Dinitz, Hitt, and others have raised concerns with the literature, they remain in our textbooks and continue to inform new generations of tutors, communicating that these sessions are somehow different, harder, and need to be treated with more caution and skill.

In addition—despite Shamoan and Burns and others’ critiques of the orthodoxy of practice—while our pedagogy calls for flexibility, in practice it still leans towards rigidity, especially when we are confronted with tutees whom we’ve been taught to consider “non-standard.” Both Babcock (“When something” 9) and Lockett (3) have argued that when confronted with challenging sessions, we tend to cling to the *shoulds* and *should nots* of writing center practice, and this rigidity has translated to doing a less-than-stellar job of serving disabled students, for whom our mainstream strategies may not work. Thinking back to my conversation with the woman who wanted to

know what *else* she should be doing for her deaf tutee, I think one reason she was so reluctant to accept my answer is that she felt as though the sessions weren’t happening the way they were “supposed” to. Because the student had requested to not use an interpreter and instead write back and forth, sessions were long and drawn out and felt tedious to the tutor. But if this is the communication method that works for the student, why shouldn’t the session look like that? I suspect she may have also been frustrated with the student’s slow progress, despite the adjustments that had been made. Of course, struggles with the mastery of written English cannot be addressed in just a few sessions, especially when English is not the student’s first language (as was the case with the deaf student in question). Yet, because this student had a disability, it was, I think, difficult for her not to see the *disability* as the hurdle that was slowing down progress—if only she could learn how to *overcome* the disability, rapid progress in writing skill could be made. The truth was, though, that the disability meant very little in the context of the writing center session. What mattered was the *student*—the student’s specific cultural background, mood, communication style, learning style, and confidence level. Just like any other student, the student with a disability is an individual, each with her own strengths, weaknesses, and preferences.

The Unsettling Result

As a result of all of this, our current approach to disability is one that is antithetical to the theory of writing center practice. Our theory prioritizes collaboration among equals—granting power to the tutee and letting them guide the session, assert their needs, and come to their own conclusions. Yet, if a student has a disability, we treat the disability as an obstacle or shortcoming instead of a contributor to her agency. The way we have been socialized to view disability leads us to think of the disability as an ailment and of strategy as the cure.

Thus, it’s as if we believe that sessions with these students can be successful only if they follow a procedure: Student comes to the writing center, student discloses their disability to the tutor, tutor taps into their knowledge bank of how to tutor that disability, tutor adjusts accordingly, and everything goes as best as it could have possibly gone—which will never be perfect or easy, because of the disability.

Of course, it doesn’t actually work like that. And, this line of thinking wrongly positions the disability as the most important thing to adjust for, the issue that must be addressed first before the *real* work can begin. Disability then becomes an “extra” component in the

session—one that is negative, challenging, or scary—that must be worked around rather than accepted as a part of that writer.

This approach also moves power and knowledge from the tutee to the tutor. Instead of considering the disabled student as an expert of the self, the accommodation model relies on disclosure and the tutor's knowledge—an outlook gained from problematic literature. We move from asking, "What do you need?" to "What is your disability (so that I can determine what you need)?" When a tutor feels that they need to know a student's disability so that they know how to alter their strategy, the student is effectively erased from the equation. In this context, the two most important things become the tutor and the disability—not the tutor and the tutee.

To think it's only possible to help a tutee once a disclosure has been made not only withholds agency, but also creates risk for that student. According to Kerschbaum, the act of disability disclosure is a complex process that is influenced by many elements, including "circulating narratives of disability and able-bodiedness, relationships among interlocutors, and institutional and environmental contexts" (63). When a student chooses to disclose, they consider each of these things, carefully weighing potential benefits with potential risks. Disclosing "is a risk because students cannot predict how others will react and subsequently treat them when they do disclose" (Alexandrin, Schreiber, and Henry 377). Kerschbaum notes that one of the primary risks of disclosure is that once it occurs, the disability becomes the only relevant aspect of the person (67). In the writing center, once a student discloses, the disability takes center stage as the key piece of information that all other decisions are based upon or filtered through. Suddenly, everything about that writer becomes about their disability.

A New Approach (That's Not So New)

What I propose for how we can improve our approach to disability is simply that we apply the same non-hierarchical, collaborative, student-centered approach to students with disabilities as we do with other students. In other words, we stay true to our theoretical ideals, even when—or especially when—a disability is present. One of the most important things to remember when working with a student with a disability, therefore, is that *they know themselves best*. This means that no matter what we've read about that disability, we should defer to the student because that student's preferences and self-knowledge are far more important than their disability. In fact, I will even go so far as to say that disclosure is not even a necessary

part of the conversation when working with a student with a disability.

Whenever I suggest disclosure is not necessary, I almost always face backlash. I can remember as a graduate student, during a class discussion on disability in higher education in an Adult Literacy class, a heated discussion ensued amongst my classmates on when and how disclosure should happen. As I was presumably the only student with a disability in the class (visibly so, as I had a CART interpreter), the professor asked me to shed some light on the disability disclosure process. Listening to my classmates debate over "when" and never once considering "if" disclosure should happen, I realized they were under the impression that the disclosure process was the same across the board in all higher education institutions in the US—as if it were some easy, formal, streamlined process that had no gray areas. I highlighted the differences between my undergraduate and graduate institutions: My undergraduate institution allowed me to attend a few sessions of a class before deciding what accommodations I would like for that class. As a deaf person who was raised orally—that is, with an emphasis on spoken English over ASL—and can sometimes read lips, sometimes needs a note-taker, and sometimes needs an interpreter depending on the person I'm communicating with, this flexibility was a godsend. At my graduate institution, however, students with disabilities needed to select accommodations before ever setting foot in a classroom. It didn't matter if my needs changed based on the class environment—I had one chance to request accommodations, or else be accommodations-less for the entire semester. Thus, I had a CART interpreter for every class, despite not actually *needing* one for every class. I also brought up how our institution took away my agency in the disclosure process—unlike our graduate institution, my undergraduate institution gave me the option to disclose. I could choose whether or not professors would be told what disability I had, or just told what accommodations I needed, or be told nothing at all.

My classmates were floored—aghast at the suggestion. One piped up, "But, if I'm a professor, I *need* to know your disability. How can I help you if I don't know what kind of disability you have?"

This is the mindset we need to abandon.

I replied to my classmate bluntly: What my disability is, quite frankly, is none of your business. My disability does not impact my knowledge of my self. I will tell you what I need, and you don't need to know my disability so that you can make that decision for

me. They were stunned—and doubtful—about this assertion. My classmates could not discard the idea that a diagnosis and disclosure must occur in order for my needs to be met. What they did not realize was that it is not my disability or diagnosis that determines my needs—it is me.

Conclusion and Suggestions

In suggesting a departure from former approaches to disability in the writing center, really I am suggesting a return to one of the main tenets of writing center theory that should have been guiding us all along. Though my suggestion may seem simple on the surface, I realize that in practice it is incredibly complicated and difficult.

To be sure, I am not suggesting that we stop talking about disability. To have disability go unnoticed and unmentioned in the past was a function of erasure, not one of acceptance. What I'm arguing is that critical conversations surrounding students with disabilities in writing centers should continue, but down a different path. Learning about diverse student populations' cultural differences and frames of reference can indeed be helpful. However, reliance on disclosure, naming, categorizing, and othering of disability should no longer have a place in writing center theory.

Thus, it would be wise to drop the outdated and ableist literature from anthologized texts and training textbooks. Though we may think of some of these works as canonical or foundational, ultimately their use may be doing more harm than good. Instead of relying on scholarship that offers reductive tips written by able-bodied researchers, we need to prioritize literature that provides a treatment of disability as a cultural identity, critical analysis that thoughtfully examines how we've been socialized to accept disability as a medical deficit, as well as personal narratives written by disabled tutors and tutees themselves.

Furthermore, tutor training should incorporate the exploration of identity, especially that of the self, as suggested by Kiedaisch and Dinitz. Through recruiting a diverse tutor population and then having them each bear witness to each other's exploration of identity and how it informs them as readers, writers, and social beings, the Universal Design approach results in tutors who are sensitive to *identity* instead of *difference*.

Finally, to move away from the rigidity of practice, meta-discourse is an extremely valuable strategy. As suggested by Babcock as well as Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll, among others, meta-discourse means to talk about what is happening in the session—which can

include what a tutor or tutee thinks is currently happening, as well as intentions, goals, and fears. Babcock recommends tutors engage in meta-discourse—by explaining why they are asking or suggesting something—when sessions feel like they are not going the way they are supposed to (“When something” 10). During a challenging session, meta-discourse can help tutors to not make assumptions as well as guide them towards non-standard strategies.

In all, if we refuse to treat sessions with disabled students as different, and if we refuse to consider students with disabilities as outside the bounds of normality, then we refuse to uphold the social construction of disability as a problem to be fixed. Because most of all, what I want to happen in those moments when we find out that a tutee has a disability is that we say, “Okay, so how would you like to work together? What works best for you?”

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