

PRODUCTIVE CHAOS: DISABILITY, ADVISING, AND THE WRITING PROCESS

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Because many faculty and graduate students pursue disability studies projects in an institutional vacuum (often being the only disability studies person in a department or institution), it's exciting when faculty and graduate students come together to work on disability studies projects. Such has been the experience of the two authors of this piece: a graduate student who recently completed her Master's thesis on hyperactive/ADHD rhetorics (Griffin) and her thesis advisor, whose research area is disability studies, rhetoric, and writing (Amy). As we've worked together, we've excitedly shared research that enriches both our writing projects, and we've exchanged teaching ideas to make our classrooms more inclusive. We've had the chance to work interdependently, including on this piece, where one of us got the project going and the other supplied the creative spontaneity we needed to finish it. Further, in our case, we've had the chance to openly identify as disabled and use crip humor to navigate our work together. Alongside these benefits, there are what we sincerely and euphemistically call generative tensions, which occur when access needs and desires conflict, when power dynamics re-assert themselves, and when attempts at change and adaptation fail.

To parse these benefits and tensions, we write through, around, and about a recorded conversation of one of our mostly weekly thesis meetings at a café, about halfway through the second semester working on Griffin's thesis. With a full agenda and a spontaneous decision to record this particular meeting for this project, we captured our typical routine, complete with big decisions, mis-starts, and disruptive blenders. While our interaction occurred in the context of graduate thesis advising, our experience speaks more broadly to supporting writing and writers in the contexts of disability. This includes one-on-one support provided in writing courses and writing center interactions where one or both participants are disabled. In these contexts, normative assumptions about how (and why) writing gets done can discourage if not prohibit the atypical but successful ways that some disabled students, writing consultants, and teachers approach the writing process.

In an uncomfortable testament to our relationship, we first listened to the recorded conversation we

analyze here on a lazy Friday afternoon in Amy's office. One of us transcribed key moments; then we independently reviewed the partial transcript and met to decide what moments warranted further attention. In line with our amusement, respect, and critique of how we work together, we eschewed traditional collaborative writing and instead selected clips of the conversation to respond to independently, then traded and responded to those responses. The result is a reflective (written) conversation about a (spoken) conversation. We hope readers will inhabit, clarify, and refute our advising experiences within their own embodied contexts, and consider the ways that our experiences map to other advising contexts, particularly writing classrooms and centers.

Spasmodic Business (#1)

Amy: Okay so you don't have to articulate your whole theory of glitch revision especially if it's not relevant. But in terms of our actual working process, like how do I?

Griffin: Help me revise when I need it.

Amy: Yeah.

Griffin: Definitely need it.

Amy: I didn't actually feel like what we did for the lit review worked that well. You know what I mean?

Griffin: Yeah, it was also like, torture.

Amy: We weren't our finest selves. But do I just wait for you to ask me? Also, I have a hard time with your writing, I never know when it's, when you feel that it's at the point where I should read it.

Griffin: Yeah, I know. It's because I draft, it's crazy. It's just, I...

Amy: OCD Amy wants to be like, can you just finish one of these things.

Griffin: Yeah no kidding.

Amy: Then I can tell you? You saw me, I start to - you probably didn't get to it - I started giving feedback on something and then I was like, I'm lost, I don't understand what's happening.

Griffin: If there's three dots underneath something it's not done. I'm done, I'm moving onto the next, cause...

Amy: I forget, I wrote and I was commenting and then I was like, oh, this clearly is not done.

Griffin: Sorry, I'll be more clear about, things. Whatever.

[edit]

Griffin: We should have done it a long time ago. I don't know why I didn't think of it.

Amy: And then later, that's why I said ignore my comments at the beginning, I realize you weren't handing this to me as a final product. Not that there is such a thing as a final product.

[laughter]

Griffin: Totally, there definitely is not. The spasmodic development thing, literally it's what I do and it's way worse than how I describe it, or how I've described it so far. It's even on a more like molecular level, where I'm drafting and I'm like wait, what I said that thing about, and then I go look at it and I end up working on that part for a little bit, and then I go to look up something in one of the things in the articles and then I'm like, ooh, this should go over here and then I work on that a little bit. So then I end up not even with full paragraphs that are in different stages of development. It's hideous.

Amy: It seems very productive for you though.

Griffin: Well it's good, because I just keep moving around. Plus, my spasmodic business is, on a project that's this big, it's, yeah. It's more like just like throwing shit at the wall and seeing what sticks. It gets pretty out of control. And an hour and a half later I was like, what was I working on when I sat down here?

Amy

When I look at this, I can't separate when we're talking about our disabilities, when we're talking about the writing process, and when we're talking about both. When Griffin says "it was also torture" and I say "we weren't our finest selves," we are mostly referring to the struggles that characterized the previous semester for each of us, including the return of depression, a major break-up, medication difficulties, a loved one's opioid addiction, and persistent gastrointestinal turmoil. But these issues were stitched into the writing process too - they influenced how I advised and how Griffin wrote.

Another part of the "torture" was the structured way I asked Griffin to work on the literature review for her thesis. While I do not have a diagnosis of OCD (and probably shouldn't reference as I did), I am widely regarded as "Type A," and I provided what I thought were logical, carefully scaffolded guidelines and deadlines for Griffin. But in our crisp context, my attempts at structure were mostly counter-productive - I didn't (yet) understand that Griffin works best by jumping between parts of her project, rather than

marching along a linear timeline (toward a completed lit review). As I read her thesis's critique of how normative expectations of the writing process flatten the benefits of hyperactivity, and as she talked about her "spasmodic business" in this advising session, I became aware of how normal and normalizing I am in terms of how I write and advise. I can also see that my normative assumptions of the writing process strongly shape how I train graduate students to teach writing, making normative notions of the writing process prevalent for students at my university.

Ultimately, I've succeeded and failed in providing support for Griffin's writing process. The compromises don't feel satisfying to me; it works better when we do it my way part of the time and her way part of the time. So sometimes I write long e-comments and demand structure, and sometimes I hand her a small pink notecard with a few suggestions, decorated with dog stickers.

Griffin

For me, the hardest thing here is Amy's summary of the first semester we worked together on the thesis. It was a very challenging time for both of us. On top of these life events, writing pressures put me in an emotionally unpredictable state that was very unfamiliar since I had never engaged my own lived experience with disability so directly in my work. Maintaining my usual distance was not sustainable. I was unable to draw on my experiences in other classes, at the writing center at my previous university, or even in my other graduate classes, where I had not claimed my learning disability. The "torture" of these first efforts set a precedent where our disabilities were necessarily incorporated into all levels of advising.

At our next meeting (at the same coffee shop and table), Amy really did surprise me with an entirely new and "glitched" approach. She had challenged herself to provide her feedback all on one pink notecard via brief bullet notes and sassy stickers. As I reflect on this, I wonder what the reverse of this might be. How could I similarly switch a weekly response to embody her approach to writing/revising? Have I truly done so yet? While less charming, for me this means openness to organization, linearity, and polish. Amy brought these things into our project in a non-intrusive way and I became less averse.

I agree that the most satisfying reconciliations have come when we work completely in her mode or mine, but several (less dramatic) practices represent regular compromise. For example, I often left a meeting with a "triage list" of three areas to focus my efforts in the coming week, making the development less random. I

have also come to accept that rather than listening to an album that embodies something from the thesis on the spot, it is more time-efficient to email her a subject of analysis that we can then discuss at the next meeting. These small compromises work in conjunction with the bigger shifts between doing it her way and doing it my way, and reflect the middle ground that writing advisors might inhabit when working around and with disability in writing classrooms and centers.

Humor Me (#2)

Amy: And re-read your monologues.

Griffin: Okay.

Amy: Cause maybe, how many are there? Six? Well you call it six monologues. “Six monologues to avoid while teaching comp 2.”

Griffin: Yeah, there’s definitely not six. I don’t know why I put six. Sometimes I like to just put numbers on there. I did this creative writing project in undergrad it was called *The Sound of Me Talking in Five Acts*. It was two. It was two acts. But I never changed the title cause I liked it.

[laughter]

Amy: I’m having such a good time.

Griffin: I have four.

Amy: Four?

Griffin: Yeah.

Amy: Monologues. That’s pretty close.

[laughter]

Griffin

“Crip humor” has an important place in disability studies, which is a field that can require overwhelmingly personal research when confronting past and present discrimination. Humor is a constant way of dealing for me - I use it to ease my anxieties about my ADHD in social contexts, including when teaching writing and when advising students one-on-one in conferences or office hours. For me and I think many of us in disability studies, humor is not the only way we confront disability and difference but it’s an essential way that allows us to connect with one another.

Funny conversations like this one touch on the chaotic state of my drafts, complete with seemingly random number systems, which Amy calls me on but easily accepts with a shrug, revealing the dynamic role of humor. While writing my thesis, I found ways of embedding some of this quirk into my writing, which I then exaggerated and performed for Amy’s and my amusement. This humor sometimes stems from our individual quirks and experiences, and other times, it’s

a way of sharing our frustrations with disability writ large.

Amy

Let’s be clear—Griffin is a very funny person! And for me, such humor is welcome because there is often too much distance between what professors/advisors know and what those new to disability studies know (or what either group thinks they know), which can foreclose playfulness and humor. This happens when students meet with me to get additional help with their writing and disclose their disabilities. They are often reticent to ask for what they know they need, and instead position me as the authority, which I often shun through humor, because we are responsible to return authority back to disabled students, even when they hand such authority to us.

Though it worked for us, “crip humor” is not the only or best way to return authority to disabled students. In fact, engaging in such humor as someone outside the disability community isn’t a great idea. Instead, those who advise writers must create conversations about access that are regular and low stakes, which I didn’t really do with Griffin (or my other advisees). Instead, I have usually mapped my previous experiences with students in my classrooms onto advising relationships, despite the dissimilarity of these (rhetorical) situations. Or, I’ve asked about access at the very beginning, when it may feel risky for students to articulate what they need, much as the beginning of a writing center session may not be the moment that the consultant or student wants to disclose disability. This speaks to the need for long-term writing support relationships, so students and advisors can articulate their access needs.

Normative Chatter (#3)

Amy: I mean you could decide to organize things really weirdly too, if you want to.

Griffin: What do you mean?

Amy: I don’t know, like have all theory review stuff in like weird boxes or?

Griffin: Really?

Amy: I figure at this point you may as well like just go for it, right?

Griffin: Okay.

Amy: I mean what better . . .

Griffin: I need a better program than Microsoft Word because I’m already fighting Microsoft Word all the time. I’ve got to switch to something.

Amy: But I also don’t want you to go down that rabbit hole of formatting yet.

Griffin: I know, but I just need somewhere where I can put that stuff in . . .

Amy

I don't like looking at this again, because I see myself encouraging and supporting Griffin, then pulling out the rug. I encourage her to organize her thesis "weirdly" (my idea), then assert that I don't want her to (also my idea). Because I do this a few times in the transcript, it feels worth digging into though not defending.

Down deep, I want her to "go for it," to push the bounds of rhetoric in how she formats her thesis, much as she breaks new ground with the content of her writing. But as an advisor, I worry about what happens when all the others – the thesis-formatting person at the graduate school, the other members of her committee, those hiring her to teach and advise writing after she graduates, maybe even me – reject her thesis as too "weird." Further, if I think that this formatting task will distract her from finishing the thesis, I worry that I am shirking my role as advisor (as motivator, time-keeper, whip-cracker). In this case, the normative chatter gets the best of me, transforming an idea she was excited about into a "rabbit hole."

But I also pull back because I have no idea what I'm suggesting, though as I hoped, Griffin knew exactly what I meant by "weirdly" and "weird boxes." This is where advising in the space of disability and difference gets tricky, because I want(ed) to encourage Griffin to do what she is good at (in part because of her ADHD), while not understanding what that looks like or means (in part because of my structured nature). I want to say that I always took the risk and ventured into the unknown geography shaped by our disabilities, but I didn't, partly because of my own discomfort, and partly because what I'm encouraging her to do is risky. I do wish we'd talked through this issue, instead of me just shutting it down. But my bigger concern is that the safe road and the normative road to "good writing" often seem to be the same, and I hate that.

Griffin

I would call what Amy does here "qualifying" rather than "pulling out the rug." The thesis now exists because of Amy's confidence in my ideas and the risks they require. Disability discrimination is quietly common but I had not been so discouraged by it until I made the decision to write this thesis and was actively discouraged by another faculty member. Still, Amy's response to this moment in our conversation is somewhat darker than mine, as for me, this exchange represents the evolved state of writing support. I know

that Amy knows that I am likely to hyperfocus on an idea such as the "weird" formatting, allowing it to consume me fully. I consider this hyperfocus to be very useful (as does Amy). It can also be very time-consuming. While anticipating such issues can be helpful, the way I approach writing challenges tightly-timed, staged notions of advising, whether in thesis advising, writing classrooms, or writing centers.

The large-scale, high-stakes nature of my thesis project also magnified the manifestations of my ADHD and hyperactive writing habits, making me less successful at traditional, linear drafting and meeting deadlines. I needed to be very honest about my differently-organized approach. I repeatedly agreed to deadlines, and to me, the idea of "striving toward" a deadline made perfect sense, though Amy wondered why I wanted to create deadlines I didn't fully intend to meet. I had some difficulty resolving this for her and probably never fully will. I strove for completion of our "deadlines" while also letting myself work where interest and creativity fell. Amy was not surprised to receive submissions that partially accomplished what was planned along with developments that were not on the itinerary.

Amy once asked, "So is there a stage when you like . . . polish things?" We both laughed. The answer is that there has to be, at least for almost all parts of the thesis. Amy's systematic (albeit sometimes normalizing) methods made revision and polished writing possible. This is a primary area of tension for me and my ADHD, but I am comfortable discussing the practical implications of my approach and my disability.

Killing It (#4)

Amy: I think it would be cool to throw a section in that's not revised at all.

Griffin: Really?

Amy: Yeah!

[edit]

Amy: That methods statement is going to be something. But I really think part of your methods needs to be explaining how we revise. I'm not screwing with you. I don't fully know how to respond. Because I am both, you know, normal and normalizing in terms of how I write. You know what I mean?

Griffin: I mean so am I... It's having, this [thesis] project or this tenet is having a fun effect on my teaching. You know, "Wooh, you know, whatever your process is you go for it. I support that!" [laughter] Yeah, and I know I can't do it the way you're doing it, but I love it and just go ahead and keep doing what you're doing. A couple of questions...

Amy: I'm trying it with my class, the not having a finished project, they just have to commit to having a certain amount done which is negotiable. Makes me very uncomfortable.

Griffin: Yeah... I bet it does. I love it that you're doing it though. I just liked the end of your Rhetoric and the Body course so much because - well one, because you helped me develop this project but two, because rather than just having a paper and kind of being underwhelmed by it and being done with it. Well, like in [another class] I wrote a paper there - haven't looked at it since. Have I even read [teacher's] comments on it? Nooo, because I'm never gonna go back to it because I don't care about it because I killed it with the final draft!

Griffin

As much as Amy reflects tradition in rhetoric and composition, she takes big risks as a professor and as an advisor. Our advising meetings and my thesis explored the normative practices we both use as instructors. Amy quickly began incorporating these ideas into her pedagogy, something I have done only casually and on smaller assignments. I found it empowering to see my ideas implemented in her curriculum, which was possible because of her experience and position, and is not something I could have achieved yet.

I loved that she was doing this! That can't be overstated. Her experimentation with the aims of my thesis functioned in several ways. I got a glimpse of what my methods look like in practical use, which I was then able to use to inform my writing. I also got a sense of accomplishment that the project might have real effects on writing instruction when it's published (assuming some will have the same willingness to take risks). Amy sees her teaching style as an uneasy fit for my ideas, but the reality is that my teaching style isn't always the best fit for them either. I think most writing instructors and writing center consultants rely heavily on the tradition of the writing process metaphor and the steps it prescribes. Disrupting this pattern is not easy for most of us.

Amy

In what seemed like a brilliant idea before and after I did it (but not along the way), I decided to try out Griffin's thesis-based ideas in my own classroom, as she notes. Her thesis smartly articulates the value of in-process writing and unfinished work as more than a step toward a normative final draft, which I find both engaging and confusing. So in my senior-level argumentation class, I asked the class to work on a

particular project with only suggested goals for the first two, middle two, and last three weeks of the course. More directly drawing from Griffin's thesis, I did not require them to finish the project in a traditional sense. Instead, as we discussed in the first week of class, one week before the project was due, they proposed what they would finish and why.

I typically run a tight ship in terms of class deadlines and polished projects (I kill it, they kill it). But I tolerated my discomfort and regularly trumpeted how this project encouraged students to take charge of their work, begin a larger project they could finish later, and avoid the need to turn in a complete but crappy final draft. And while I was pretty convinced that the whole idea was going down the tubes at the of time of our thesis meeting (with about five weeks left in the semester), in the end, Griffin's ideas hit the mark—students were *far* more enthusiastic about this project than the others. In setting their own goals, students completed better quality work, and much more of it, than I ever would have asked for. With some distance, I can see that my misguided dedication to polished work is much like the idea that writing centers are only for correcting or proofreading student work. We must think more expansively about the ways that expecting perfected writing undoes some of our own goals as writing teachers and consultants.

Without trying out Griffin's ideas in my classroom, I don't think I would have ever fully understood her thesis concepts. I certainly wouldn't have realized how my typical, deadline-driven approach must feel to some of my students (including those with ADHD), assuming it feels something like my discomfort in embracing loose deadlines and unpolished work. What's more, talking through the uneasy fit of Griffin's ideas and my teaching style disturbed the power dynamic between us. In this clip from our conversation, I say, it "makes me very uncomfortable" and she says, "I love that you're doing it though," which, at least temporarily, reverses the typical roles assigned to us as advisor and advisee. Embracing how disability shapes writing occurs in the context of generative discomfort.

Productive Chaos and Advising as Activism

Amy first used the term "productive chaos" to describe Griffin's writing (non)process, and it now seems a fitting description of working with and through disability in supporting writers and writing. The term invokes both mess and motion, an intentional juxtaposition pointing to the normative nature of the writing process and embracing the

creative and threatening value of chaos and of disability. Productive chaos means allowing and even anticipating writing not as a formulaic process but as a highly personal and productive, if sometimes painful, creative act. For Griffin, productive chaos was situated in the context of past experiences with academic writing and a lifelong struggle to reconcile her ADHD and educational traditions/institutions. For Amy, productive chaos occurred fairly far into her professional career, and in a depressive context where disorganization felt distinctly threatening. For writing classrooms and writing centers, productive chaos means a re-investment in rhetorical productivities we may not always understand, and an engagement with the sometimes chaotic ways we learn to write.

Advising with disability in mind is an activist act because productive chaos challenges typical rhetorical sensibilities in unfamiliar and exhilarating ways. Access and equity remain elusive for disabled people in higher education, including tenured faculty and graduate students like ourselves, who are socialized into academic communities and often function as effective self-advocates. For even as scholars with disabilities working on a project in disability studies, we found normalizing writing traditions difficult to avoid, and we have found it valuable to look back at our conversation to laugh at some moments and be troubled by others. We don't pretend that our advising relationship is a model to follow, as the ways disability might impact writing, writing support, and advising relationships are as diverse as disability itself. But we have found great value in articulating and challenging our own writing/advising processes, using humor to confront normative writing practices, and inhabiting complex ideas by teaching with and through them.

We end this piece with one of six images Griffin offered at her thesis defense. Spreading the images on the table, she challenged committee members to match the images up with the written chapters of her thesis. The images she provided reflected both her process and the chapters as final products, and tellingly, Amy got a few right and a few wrong. The image below matched with her introduction chapter, and in the context of our collaboration, serves as a metaphor for how disability helps us rethink what it means to support writing and writers. The image is an abstract blot painting, created on old textbook pages. Mustard yellow and bloodish red are splattered on the page, but not onto a black-and-white, super-imposed, surreal collage of an artichoke-like flower blooming from an antique pharmacy bottle. This image speaks to ways we might take our existing knowledge of the writing process and repurpose it, increasing access through the recombinatory use of familiar concepts (old textbooks)

and new concepts (blooming flower), in the messy context of disability (splattered paint). Embracing disability in supporting writers and writing is a many-layered intervention that sometimes comes together into an engaging work of art and always challenges our common definitions of the writing process.



"Circles Have Their Convexities" created by @hellochaz.

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