

Transforming Access and Inclusion in Composition Studies and Technical Communication

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Disability studies has the potential to transform and reimagine writing studies. When we take access and inclusion seriously, whether in the classroom, the workplace, or on the web, we reconsider fundamental assumptions—assumptions that have typically privileged the perspectives and values of nondisabled “default users” (Yergeau et al.) to the exclusion of people with disabilities. As a bridge between composition studies (CS) and technical and professional communication (TPC), disability studies offers a methodology for reconfiguring the norms of our fields and uniting scholars in the common cause of universal access. The transdisciplinary potential of disability studies is located not in a single reading or assignment (which reduces access to a curricular or scholarly retrofit) but in expansive questions of access and inclusion that can unite our fields and enable new insights. When we read across the disability studies literature in CS and TPC, we build multiple intersections that identify shared critiques of consumptive and rehabilitative access, allow disability theory in CS to find expression in TPC’s practical interventions, reframe examples of transformative access in CS in terms of TPC’s expertise in workplace practices and interface design, and address gaps in disability studies by leveraging contributions from both multimodal composition and technical communication.

Both CS and TPC scholars in disability studies have challenged what Nirmala Erevelles has called the “add-and-stir policy that used to haunt race, gender, and queer studies” (93). Such a policy accommodates disability but only as a single reading in a course, a single assignment or activity, a case for special

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consideration, or a narrowly defined checklist developed simply to comply with digital accessibility mandates (see Browning 97). The add-and-stir problem may go by other names in the contexts of web accessibility and universal design: tack-on, add-on, afterthought, and retrofit, among others (see Dolmage; Udo and Fels). When disability is additive, when it is tacked onto our practices and pedagogies, it tends to reinforce the institutional status quo that positions disability as an exception to the norms of nondisabled bodies and minds.

Scholars and practitioners across CS and TPC have specifically criticized the checklist as a barrier to full inclusion. While checklists in the composition classroom “are useful in some circumstances because they offer a place to start,” they are often reductive (Wood et al. 147). Checklists “get yoked to diagnoses in ways that discipline disabled bodies and minds” (147). They are similar to “tip sheets,” which provide answers (but a false sense of certainty) to “persistent questions about ‘what to do’ with a student with a particular disability that almost always occur at the end of workshops about disability and teaching” (Kerschbaum). Checklists inscribe disability as a problem for individuals to overcome, instead of an “opportunity to rethink our practices of teaching writing” (Wood et al. 148). According to TPC scholars Sushil Oswal and Lisa Melonçon, “reliance on checklists perpetuates an ideology of normalcy.” Although Oswal and Melonçon address writing program administration in “Saying No to the Checklist,” they also name one checklist in particular, the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), that is well known among TPC scholars and practitioners who study and teach web design and web accessibility (see Youngblood).

How do we center disability and accessibility in our practices? How do we address questions of access and ability from the start instead of stirring them in (or tacking them on) later to solve a workplace problem or satisfy the demand for curricular diversity? Scholars in CS have led the way on this question and, I would argue, have provided TPC scholars with theoretical foundations for our workplace and user studies. For example, Margaret Price’s solution to the add-and-stir problem is “not simply to include *disability*; it is to include *disability studies*” (54). For Price, disability studies provides a “critical modality” for composition pedagogy because it “tak[es] on a set of seemingly unmovable stereotypes, assumptions buried so deeply in our students’ and our own language and knowledge that it’s difficult even to see [sic] them” (54). In other words, if we want our students to become aware of and transform their deeply buried assumptions, we need to assign more than a single text about disability and think beyond accessibility checklists that leave norms unchanged.

Alternatives to the reductive checklist, such as Price’s notion of disability as “critical modality,” are grounded in disability studies and create opportunities for transdisciplinary connections between CS and TPC. For example, Tara

Wood, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson argue for a “more holistic, recursive approach, one in which disability becomes a central, critical, and creative lens for students as well as teachers” (148). A disability lens “sharpens our focus on important concepts including adaptation, creativity, community, interdependency, technological ingenuity and modal fluency” (148). Through this lens, we ask how the “classroom community [can] be productively and continually transformed by an orientation of inclusion” (148). As Ella R. Browning puts it: When we “actively integrate disability, in thoughtful and creative ways, into all aspects of our teaching,” we can “transform” our classrooms and pedagogies (100).

This notion of disability studies as potentially transformative is reflected in several scholarly works in CS. For example, Elizabeth Brewer, Cynthia Selfe, and Melanie Yergeau draw on Kristie Fleckenstein’s definition of transformation—a “change radical enough to rewrite the rules supporting a particular arrangement of culture” (151)—to define, in turn, what they call a “culture of access.” To reimagine access as culture instead of an individual accommodation, Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau consider two cases: the Computers and Composition Digital Press (CCDP) and the Composing Access Project (CAP). They summon textile metaphors to suggest how, in the case of CCDP, accessibility is “designed into the fabric of projects from the very start rather than added, reluctantly, at the end” (152); and, in the case of CAP, “access [is] woven into all aspects of a conference, from captioning videos, posting copies of presentations prior to the conference, and providing note cards as a non-verbal channel for audience members to pose questions to presenters” (153). These cases counter the usual “vision of access that has more in common with helping the Other consume inaccessible texts than it does with radical transformation of the profession” (153).

Both cases—the CCDP and the CAP—are likely to resonate with TPC scholars. Indeed, to the extent that CS (1) moves outside of the academy (Yancey) and (2) aligns with notions of rhetoric as “intrinsically technological” rather than concerned primarily with the printed page (Brooke 29), it increasingly merges and blurs with TPC. The “multimodal turn” in CS is compatible with TPC’s core value of designing documents, interfaces, and user experiences with multiple modes and materials to meet audiences’ needs within specific contexts. But both multimodal composition and TPC too often operate automatically from the assumption that the world is made up of only able-bodied students and users. For example, when a classroom study describes how “participants augmented their hand-drawn visual arguments with written texts, oral annotations, digital capture, and animation” (Kitalong and Miner 53), the unstated assumption is that both the participants and their audiences are able-bodied (because everyone is assumed to be able to engage directly and immediately

with multiple modes as they produce and consume media that require nimble fingers and fine motor skills). When the same study extrapolates the behavior of these nondisabled participants to a theory of “personal agency” (Kitalong and Miner 40), it is based on prior assumptions about agency itself (how bodies are presumed to move, think, manipulate tools, and interact in the world). When similar assumptions are enacted in study after study and then generalized to populations of our imagined “students” and “users,” they inscribe nondisabled identity as natural and disability as unusual or invisible, reduced to a “special” topic that occasionally and momentarily disrupts the status quo. Disrupting this hierarchy depends, in part, on increasing the percentages of students, staff, and faculty with disabilities in our programs (on fostering more inclusive mentoring programs, see Eble, this volume).

Disability studies can provide a corrective for CS by expanding our notions of audience and purpose, just as multimodal composition and TPC can challenge the sites, modes, and contexts in which communication is performed. For TPC, a disability-centered approach calls attention to unexamined beliefs about technology in user-centered design. Jason Palmeri draws on disability studies to challenge the hierarchy between so-called “normal” and “assistive” technology. The former is almost always unmarked—companies and users don’t usually refer to their products as normal—while the latter is marked as special or assistive:

Although teaching about assistive technology and Web standards is an essential step in increasing access, we must begin to trouble the binary between normal and assistive technologies. Challenging the naturalization of conventional ableist technologies, we should teach students to view all technologies as assistive. For example, both Internet Explorer and the JAWS Screen Reader can be seen as technologies that assist users in reading Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) code. (Palmeri 58)

Palmeri’s critique is that technical communication is “a kind of rehabilitative profession of experts who assist those with disabilities in accessing information” (55). Disability is merely “something to be accommodated” (55). Note the similarities between Palmeri’s TPC critique of rehabilitative access and Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau’s CS critique of “inclusion for the sake of increased consumption,” which “flattens’ access as rehabilitation” (151). There’s rich ground for trans-disciplinary conversations at this intersection. When we “trouble the binary” to reveal how all technologies are assistive (Palmeri 58), we also challenge the goal of access for the sake of consumption only (see Brewer, Selfe, Yergeau 153).

CS and TPC merge and overlap here as each side—knowingly or unknowingly—draws on the perspectives and resources of the other. Palmeri notably grounds his critique in disability studies, invoking Brenda Brueggemann’s foundational claim for CS that disability “enables insight—critical, experiential,

cognitive, sensory, and pedagogical insight” (“Enabling” 795; and see Palmeri 55). For their part, Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau move out of the classroom and into the institutional spaces and discourses that align with TPC work. At the risk of carrying this comparison too far, I would add that Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau appeal to TPC values of “universal and participatory design” (152), “user-friendly social spaces” (153), “participation and redesign” (153), and the consumer/producer binary that drives the “difference between consumptive access and transformative access” (153–54). These appeals not only line up with TPC’s focus on user-centered design (when that focus is driven by a critique of the default/able-bodied user) but can also, I would argue, be addressed through collaborations between TPC and CS researchers. What TPC can offer CS in support of a “culture of access” are (1) critiques of technology, particularly at the level of the user interface and the algorithms that power it; and (2) practical interventions grounded in rhetorical and design principles that strive to build more accessible digital media and user experiences.

Arguments for digital access are warranted by the critical project of disability studies, but the field of disability studies has been reluctant to explore critiques of computer technology. For example, *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Leonard Davis and now in its fifth edition, usually includes no readings on computer technology or the internet. To be fair, the collection has much to teach us about technology, broadly considered, through such topics as genetic testing (Bérubé), pre-selective abortion (Saxton), infanticide (McBryde Johnson), unnecessary surgery (Kafer), Deaf gain and DeafSpace (Bauman and Murray), prosthetics (Garland-Thomson), film studies (McRuer), and more. Despite the absence of readings on computer technology, I have assigned Davis’ excellent collection numerous times in my graduate-level technical communication courses to expose students, usually for the first time, to disability histories, theoretical foundations of disability studies, and narratives written by people with disabilities. Theory contextualizes and embodies the (in)accessible digital spaces we are studying in the TPC classroom. Students are encouraged to reflect on how the discipline of technical communication itself—as it vibrates between practice and theory, academy and industry, rhetoric and transparency—can be (re)created through our repeated acts of merging disability theory with the practice of making the web more accessible.

The Disability Studies Reader has deeply influenced my own understanding of what TPC scholars can contribute to both disability studies and CS, including multimodal composition. Specifically, TPC challenges the ableist assumptions that produce and sustain digital media production and consumption, performs usability studies with diverse users, intervenes in inaccessible media and practices through web accessibility audits and digital retrofitting, creates best practices for

accessible media production that are grounded in rhetorical theory, and trains students and organizations on those best practices. In other words, the critique of “consumptive access” in CS can be addressed by TPC scholars who teach and study digital production (web design, video and sound production), accessible user experience (AUX), interaction and interface design, coding, and data visualization. User studies can be wedded to participatory design methods and committed to including people with disabilities as researchers and participants. They can be performed with every organization and situation, and they can drive new pedagogies and workplace practices.

Caption studies offers several possibilities for cross-disciplinary research and practice (e.g., see Brueggemann, “Captioning”; Butler; Iwertz and Osario; Zdenek, *Reading*). Disciplinary boundaries become increasingly porous around questions of access. In challenging the traditional view that reduces captioning to an afterthought—an outsourced form of transcription intended merely to meet legal requirements—captioning researchers have begun to explore how to more fully integrate captioning into our curricula and workplace practices. Can we leverage new theories of soundwriting, grounded in inclusion and access, to transform not only our notions of access but also our disciplines? This question does not belong to either CS or TPC but cuts across and unites our diverse fields. Research on new forms of embodied or animated captioning, for example, demands multidisciplinary and multimodal rhetorics, composition pedagogies, document design principles, and advanced video editing techniques (see Butler; Zdenek, “Designing”).

Because caption studies is grounded in technological processes, objects, and agents, it can play a key role in developing deeper critiques of digital technology in disability studies. The “move from text to interface” in multimodal rhetorics (Brooke 23) is an opportunity to reframe transformative access around the myriad and increasingly hidden forms of bias in technological systems. For example, composition and TPC researchers must continue to address the vital need for image descriptions or “alt text” on the web by developing and applying best practices based on our shared rhetorical values. Awareness of web accessibility remains low among social media users. In addition, we must question the dominant values of automation, efficiency, surveillance, profit, and ableism that seem to be driving large scale image recognition projects in artificial intelligence and machine learning. Facebook’s automatic alt text project, for example, aims to provide access for screen reader users to the “more than 2 billion photos uploaded and shared across Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and WhatsApp each day” (Wu et al. 1180). Facebook’s algorithm generates alt text based on three categories: “people, objects, and scenes” (García et al.). A fourth category, actions, was added in 2017 (Candela). The alt text added automatically to a photo

uploaded by a user will take the form of a sentence, beginning with “Image may contain,” that lists the items or actions identified by the algorithm. Because image description, like captioning, is performed within specific contexts, scholars in CS and TPC should have a lot to say about the limitations of trying to describe images non-rhetorically—that is, as a list of decontextualized objects.

TPC scholars can explore these and other persistent biases in computer algorithms. In *Algorithms of Oppression*, Safiya Umoja Noble shows how the photo of an African American couple was tagged as “gorillas” by Google’s image recognition algorithm (7). Noble’s focus is algorithmic racism, but TPC scholars in disability studies can also leverage this example (and others) to raise concerns about the limitations of automating nonvisual access for screen reader users. More than two years after the incident (as of 2018), Google still had not fixed the “gorilla” problem (Doctorow). What is needed—and what TPC and CS scholars can offer collaboratively by merging disability theory, rhetorical principles, and technical expertise—is a companion study that explores how algorithms are (potentially) shaped by ableism as it intersects with racism and sexism in the “lives and experiences of the multiply marginalized” (Jones 521). (On intersections between Blackness and disability, see Pickens).

When we study questions of access through a critical disability lens, regardless of our disciplinary differences, we share not a subject area or an “object of analysis” (Schalk) but a methodology. This methodology, according to Julie Avril Minich, “involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations.” As Sami Schalk explains:

[W]e can understand critical disability studies as a method, an approach, a theoretical framework and perspective—not (exclusively) a study of disabled people. One can study disabled people and not be doing critical disability studies and one can be doing critical disability studies and not be directly studying disabled people.

What matters is that “this scrutiny of normative ideologies should occur not for its own sake but with the goal of producing knowledge in support of justice for people with stigmatized bodies and minds” (Minich). CS and TPC are more alike than different when both are engaged in this common pursuit of justice and universal access.

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