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Review: *Writing Centers and Disability* by Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels

The intersections of writing center pedagogy and disability studies, particularly in the latter's advocacy for universal design learning (UDL), promise to advance inclusivity in our work, and Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels's (2017) *Writing Centers and Disability* lays important groundwork for considering the potential in bringing these two disciplinary foci into conversation. This book works to establish writing center disability studies as a field of study in and of itself, with disability studies acting as a terministic screen that engenders analytical frameworks, critiques, and identification of practices. With this publication, the anthology aligns with a recent trajectory in disability scholarship, exemplified by *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory* (Ray & Sibara, 2017), *Pedagogy, Disability and Communication: Applying Disability Studies in the Classroom* (Jeffress, 2017), *Disability Media Studies* (Ellcessor & Kirkpatrick, 2017), and *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability: Looking Towards the Future* (Ellis, Garland-Thomson, Kent, & Robertson, 2018), that contextualize disability within specific disciplines.

The volume begins with Babcock and Daniels making the case for critical attention to the intersections of writing center studies and disability studies, especially for the possibilities of enriching pedagogy. The

editors discuss the importance of UDL when working with individuals with disabilities, referring to composition/rhetoric and disability studies scholar Allison Hitt, who advocates for writing center consultants to “develop multimodal toolkits” so as to attend to the needs of writers with different interactional and learning styles (p. 6). They note that this approach aligns with foundational writing center tenets that assume each writer we encounter is an individual with a unique learning style and approach to the writing process, and within that individualization is also variation, as sometimes approaches must be modified dependent on the writing situation. Simply put, homogenizing definitions of who a writer is—basic, underprepared, traditional, accomplished, ESL, multilingual, disabled—are unproductive for our practice. While the focus of the argument seems to be primarily to convince writing center practitioners that disability studies can contribute to our practices to support diversity, I contend that the inverse, while not fully explored in this collection, is equally promising—I also see potential for writing center studies to contribute to and expand disability studies, particularly in identifying best practices for accommodating various writers and learning styles that go beyond responding to labels.

The book draws attention to areas of overlap between the two fields that suggest a natural pairing, particularly in efforts to resist harmful classifications and terminology. Sarah Mucek’s explication of the problems of employing disability as a category in her chapter “Identity and the Disabled Tutor,” for example, draws parallels to the oversimplified categories that have been ascribed to writers: “The defining characteristic of the category of disability, then, is exactly that no one characteristic unites it outside of the category itself” (p. 106). Margaret Price further clarifies this point in a later chapter, emphasizing that disability, like other minority or marginalizing markers, is often inaccurately used as a homogenous category rather than as an umbrella term for a vast grouping of different circumstances, abilities, and physical and cognitive challenges (p. 130). Similarly, the contrasting models of disability bring to mind perceptions of our centers as fix-it shops where writers go to be diagnosed and treated. In the chapter “Clearing the Traffic Jam,” Marie Stevenson explains the differences in the two dominant models of disability in terms of their representation of the individual: in the medical model, “disability (mental or physical) is regarded as an illness located in an individual, who is perceived as deficient” (p. 84), whereas in the social model, “disability is that which is socially created through social structures or practices that disadvantage or exclude people with impairments” (p. 85). The progress we have made in writing center studies to educate about the inaccurate and potentially harmful homogenizing and stereotypical images of writers and the work

of writing centers aligns with similar work by disability scholars. In this area, as in many others, we can learn from each other's experiences to strengthen these efforts.

A notable contribution of the book is its deployment of autoethnography, which works to humanize discussions of disability. The opening section, "Narratives: Descriptions of Experience, Advice, and Suggestions," features accounts by individuals working in different writing center positions (tutor/administrator) and self-identifying as having a disability. These chapters present the authors' own experiences negotiating their disability and supporting writers, many of whom are also described as having disabilities. By beginning with autoethnographies, the editors capture individual lived realities, foregrounding people over practice. As several of the authors in the volume note, in this way *Writing Centers and Disability* departs from how disability has too often been treated, especially in training manuals that provide (albeit well-intentioned) bulleted lists of dos and don'ts in response to specific dehumanized behaviors. The early focus on presenting individuals gives them voice in their representation and provides nuance to challenges they experience, thus giving context for adapting practices. Equally important, their stories afford access into ways of being and knowing practitioners might not have. As Babcock explains in her concluding chapter that calls for more research, she sees this kind of narrative as indicative of our focus on the individual and encourages us to use such stories to incite research.

Indeed, the autoethnographies presented in Section I paint vibrant pictures of real multidimensional individuals experiencing a wide array of emotions as they negotiate their varied institutional contexts and nicely set up the research and critiques that follow in Sections II and II.I "Research on the Intersection of Disability and Tutoring Writing" and "Policies, Practices, and Programs for Students with Disabilities in the Writing Center." Babcock owns this intentional progression: "The normal trajectory of writing center knowledge is from lore to research. The current volume unapologetically displays this trend" (p. 330). The particularly poignant story shared in the chapter "Her Brain Works," by Carol Ellis, of an administrator who, following a car accident, developed a brain injury, surely encourages an uncomfortable inquiry into policies and best practices—or lack thereof—to support our colleagues who may have an "invisible" disability. Similarly, the empirical research presented in Section II, which includes several case studies, provides models for conducting such research so as to identify best practices and policies. For me, this collection represents effectively the reasons this movement beginning with narrative and moving to research works so well. It makes tangible the implications of what we are researching and whom we are researching for.

It keeps us grounded in our focus on collaboration, inclusivity, and being student centered, and those stories remind us of how much work we have yet to do.

A significant challenge in efforts to support inclusivity and diversity is how to tailor practices to address a writer's needs without othering or outing the writer. Indeed, issues surrounding disclosure are raised in several chapters, with some explaining how to use caution in eliciting this information and others acknowledging that eliciting it could be problematic, pointing to the inconsistencies across our contexts (which in the case of this book span several continents). I posit that many of the practices identified for working with writers with disabilities advocated in the chapters are simply good practices. By adopting them as part of our repertoire, knowing whether a writer is negotiating a disability and whether they need to disclose it in order for a session to be productive becomes irrelevant. I argue that some of the "Practical Applications" laid out by Julie Garbus in the chapter "Mental Disabilities in the Writing Center," such as asking the writer to describe how they learn best (p. 74), or acknowledging that sometimes we need to change the location of our consultations so it is quieter or provides a different set of physical structures (p. 73), are beneficial for all writers. UDL demands that a full spectrum of learners be considered when designing pedagogy and corresponding practices and should provide strategies and tools to deal with a wide scope of learning situations. Of course, being prepared to satisfy all demands is highly unlikely, but adopting the position that our goal is to meet all needs sets practitioners up to experiment with new approaches and strategies to meet the idiosyncratic demands presented in almost every session.

A particular strength of this collection is its attention to the variability of learning styles and contexts and the necessity to reassess blanket application of any pedagogical approach. So, although some critiques, such as the limitations of reading aloud mentioned in several chapters, have long been problematized in writing center scholarship, more often the scenarios effectively illustrate how *what we know* manifests in potentially unfamiliar situations. Babcock, in the chapter "Interpreting Writing Center Tutorials," reminds us that ASL is its own language, and, therefore, all acts of putting it into written English involve translation. This is not new information, but the description of Kali finger signing (spelling out words using alphabetic symbols) captures how deaf individuals may use finger signing in particular instances when corresponding codes are not readily accessible in ASL by one or both interlocutors. In that same piece, Babcock's description of a deaf student's challenges in discussing Janet Jackson as a singer rather than a dancer is provocative in its ability to illustrate the extent to which certain

experiences (in this case hearing experiences) are normed and validate specific ways of interacting with public discourse as abled.

As a majority of the research represented across the chapters is conducted by individuals who themselves negotiate a disability, these authors not only provide a model for ethical practices when conducting such research within the disability community but also point to the kinds of issues salient for them. The autoethnographic theme consistent throughout the anthology foregrounds that, as writing center practitioners, our work involves first and foremost interacting with and responding to individuals who bring with them a wide array of lived experiences, which may include a disability. Babcock and Daniels give us an impetus for critical reflection, and I see the approach of foregrounding narrative and moving to research and then policies and practices also working well for training. Each chapter gives consultants and administrators tangible scenarios to ponder and respond to. The key takeaways summarized in bullet-point form concluding each chapter, followed by “Critical Questions to Ponder,” reinforce the editors’ position “that practice will be in dialogue with research, and one will influence the other” (p. 10). I found the questions to ponder particularly useful and succinct in capturing some of my own thoughts after reading, and I am already imagining lively discussions on several of the book’s themes with my staff. While I came to this reading feeling pretty good about the efforts toward inclusivity we have enacted in our center, the stories and research shared in *Writing Centers and Disability* have definitely pushed me to think harder about ways to more fully support all the diverse writers we encounter.

References

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