Disabling Composition: Toward a 21st-Century, Synaesthetic Theory of Writing

Dissertation

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By

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Abstract

My dissertation examines the ways in which composition pedagogies have, both in theory and in practice, systematically worked to exclude individuals with disabilities. Persisting in composition studies is the ideological belief that traditional writing and intelligence are somehow inherently linked, that traditional literacy is central to defining one’s intellectual worth. This privileging of composing as print-based, I contend, masks the notion that writing is simply one among many systems of making and conveying meaning, that among our readers are those who cannot always access the messages delivered within print-based texts.

I argue that disability studies can enable us to reconceive the rhetorical triangle and what it means to compose. Disability studies allows us to perceive the ways in which traditional writing—and composition studies’ investment in traditional writing—normalizes and has been normalized by our understanding of “the” rhetorical triangle. But disability studies also allows us to regard the ways in which multimodal composing normalizes and has been normalized by our understanding of “the” rhetorical triangle. In order to create the inclusive, radically welcoming pedagogy that so many teacher-scholars strive for, I suggest that we disable composition studies—what we think we know about composers, composing, and composition(s).

Disabling Composition presents three case studies in which we can re/vision this disabling move. In the first case study, I interrogate new media conceptions of
synaesthesia, which, in current scholarly literature, has become synonymous with multimodal composing and has been separated from its original, pathological position as a sensory impairment. This configuration of synaesthesia as a non-severe, non-pathological heuristic, I argue, embodies what I term the “rhetoric of shininess”—a concept that sounds wonderfully robust and inclusive in theory, but is often empty and exclusionary in practice. In the second case study, I use critical discourse analysis to explore how two recent usability-centric articles from *Technical Communication Quarterly* and *Computers and Composition* assume an able-bodied audience and segregate disabled users into “accessibility” clusters. In the final case study, I analyze literacy narratives of three autistic writer-activists. These individuals, I argue, serve as one example of disabling composition at work, and they have much to teach us about our conceptions of audience.

In my final chapter, I consider universal design and how its principles of flexibility and equitability work in service of disabling composition. Here I emphasize the importance of accessibility to composition studies, of the ways in which our choices—at conferences, in our syllabi, in our scholarly work—reflect who it is we value as audience members.

Finally, my dissertation is a born digital project. Though it is by no means fully accessible, it experiments with universal design and accessibility in its very form. I recognize that my audience likely contains individuals who work best with print-based texts, as well as individuals who work best with other modes of expression. Individuals who in other contexts might be considered able-bodied may, at many points, feel disabled
as they encounter this dissertation, something that I explore, trouble, and play with throughout.
Dedication

Dedicated to Rich
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank Cindy Selfe, who has been my advisor since I first began at OSU. Cindy has been patient and unbelievably generous with her time—always allowing me to stop by her office and ask her, quite literally, 47 questions in rapid-fire succession. Her comments have always been challenging and rigorous, yet kind and encouraging, which is incredibly hard to find in a person. But my description here doesn’t do her justice. If I were forced to describe her in one word, I would need to use lots of (probably grammatically incorrect) hyphens: I-want-to-be-like-you-when-I-"grow-up"-because-you-are-such-a-prolific-scholar,-such-a-thought-provoking-teacher,-but-,most-of-all,-such-a-good-person.

I’d also like to thank my dissertation co-chair, Brenda Brueggemann. I began my graduate school career with a focus in creative writing. It wasn’t until the end of my first year that I decided to become a compositionist—in large part because I read an essay in JAC by Brenda. I remember thinking, “Wow. I want to do that!” I wasn’t sure if I wanted to “do” disability studies for-realsies when I first came to OSU, but taking 891 with Brenda sealed the deal, as it were. Brenda has been an unbelievable role model, and I’m continually amazed by (and I’m continually taking mental and literal notes on) the ways in which she weaves disability into the classroom and other facets of academic life. In
many ways, Brenda has modeled for me what it means to simply be. (Hopefully that sounded profound and not cliché.)

I also want to thank Louie Ulman, the third member of my committee, and a wonderful mentor. In spring 2008 I shadowed his 269 class, and I’m forever in his debt for that experience, which has taught me so much about teaching and technology. Throughout coursework, exams, and the writing of my dissertation, he has generously provided kind, but always challenging, feedback. I also want to thank Louie for his spreadsheets, which are just about the most awesome thing ever.

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There have been a number of people, at Ohio State and beyond, that I’d also like to thank here. The space I’ve allotted them doesn’t do them justice. I’d like to thank my dissertation writing group, Genevieve Critel, Paige Van Osdl, and Lauren Obermark; the friends I’ve made here in the RCL program, including Elizabeth Brewer, Katie DeLuca, Katie Comer (we’re alive!), Erika Strandjord, Nick Hetrick, Jen Michaels, Cate Sacchi, Jen Herman, Annie Mendenhall, Julia Voss, and others who I know I’m forgetting to mention; folks from Aspirations and the Nisonger Center, including Tom Fish, Jeff Siegel, Angela Denny, Renee Devlin, and Pat Cloppert. I’d also like to thank the many wonderful mentors who’ve graciously “shown me the ropes” at one point or another: Scott DeWitt, Eddie Singleton, Jenny McKeel, Beverly Moss, Michael Harker, Cheryl Ball, Hugh Burns, Patrick Berry, Gail Hawisher, Karl Stolley, Amy Spears and the DMP, Susan Delagrange, and Sue Webb.

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To members of the Disability Studies SIG— including Amy Vidali, Cindy Lewiecki-Wilson, Sushil Oswal, Franny Howes, Stephanie Kerschbaum, Jay Dolmage,
Bre Garrett, and Michael Salvo—our conversations have been invaluable, and I appreciate all that you do.

To my friends and mentors at DePaul: Peter Vandenberg, Carolyn Goffman, Sarah Bowman, Darsie Bowden, Christine Skolnik, Anne Bartlett, Craig Sirles, Shaun Slattery, Chris Tardy, Lesley Kordecki, Jan Hickey, Colby Cuppernull, Katie Wozniak, and Grete Scott—thanks for sending me down the rhet-comp path.

To Liz Coughlin: My office is worse than yours. This makes me proud, indeed!

To Rich: You put up with me daily. And you also will hold no judgment over this final thank you—to the Electric Light Orchestra. What would this acknowledgments page be without the Electric Light Orchestra?
Vita

1984 ................................................................. Born, Manchester, NH
2002 ............................................................. A.A. Liberal Arts, New Hampshire Technical Institute
2005 ............................................................... B.A. Writing, Geneva College
2007 ............................................................... M.A. Writing, DePaul University
2007 to present ................................................. Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, The Ohio State University

Publications

Fields of Study

Major Field: English
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Instructions

My dissertation is a multimodal, born-digital text: essentially, it is in website form. I composed this project in HTML and CSS and used a variety of web authoring programs, including Dreamweaver, iWeb, and Wordpress. My project can be viewed with web browsers such as Safari, Firefox, or Internet Explorer (8 and higher).

To begin reading, please download yergeau_diss.zip. Once you open the file, the contents should unzip into a folder: open the folder, and from there double-click on index.html. My dissertation splash page should load in your preferred web browser. The splash page (pictured below) functions like a table of contents page. Because this is a webtext project, I have labeled my chapters as nodes. To view a chapter/node, simply click on the desired link (e.g., node 1, node 2).
Each node/chapter is its own self-contained website. You can click on hyperlinks in an order of your choosing, i.e., you can read this dissertation linearly or rhizomatically. All hyperlinks are internal to this dissertation, unless they are marked with a white pop-up arrow (pictured left)—in which case, the links go to an external site.

Some links have up and down arrows attached to them (pictured left). These links are internal to my dissertation—clicking on them will reveal drop-down boxes with additional text, video, and/or images.

My bibliographies and appendices are in PDF form. You can read these in the pages that follow or download them from the dissertation splash page.

If you have any questions or need to view my dissertation in an alternative format, please contact me at myergeau@gmail.com.
References


(Eds.), *Disability and the teaching of writing* (pp. 216-223). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s.


Rogers, S. (2010, June 23). Intervening in the first three years of life. Paper presented at the Nisonger Autism Institute, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.


Media Bibliography

What follows are credits for all media used in my dissertation—video, still image, and audio. I’ve listed items according to the order they appear in my dissertation. Unless noted in this bibliography, all other media were created by me.

For nodes 1 and 2, I used and modified iWeb and Wordpress templates, respectively; nodes 3, 4, and 5 were designed and hand-coded by me.

Node 1
Note: I used iWeb for this node’s design.

Printophilia

Synthetic design. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.

Dissertation teaser


**Space as designed, designing space**

Designer synth. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.

**Disabling “the” rhetorical triangle**


Catwalk long. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.

Chaise lounge short. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.

**Usability & accessibility**

Breakbeat long. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.

Breakbeat short. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.


**Autism 2.0**


Borealis. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.


Node 2

Note: I modified a Wordpress template (Nanoplex) for this node’s design.

Shiny identities


Node 3

Usability & accessibility

Breakbeat long. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.

Breakbeat short. Apple Inc., iLife sound effects.


Node 4

What is autism?


**Autistics online**


Appendix A: Foregrounding and Backgrounding

While reading Shannon Walters’ “Toward an Accessible” pedagogy, I coded statements that, I contend, foreground ability (and often, whether explicitly or implicitly, background disability in the process). As I discuss in Node 3, Walters argues that technical communication instructors should bring universal design and accessibility into the classroom. Walters’ primary argumentative strategy, however, is this: universal design and accessibility benefit everyone, disabled and nondisabled alike.

In the below quotes, there are some examples that more obviously fit under this foregrounding/backgrounding umbrella than others. For example, Walters writes that her students identified as able-bodied—and, at several points, her argumentative strategy involves getting those able-bodied students invested in accessibility-as-topic (e.g., #13, “persuade students to understand how disability pertains to them and their audiences,” p. 435).

Additionally, there were points where I had to determine whether or not universal design itself should be considered a foregrounding construct, given that it focuses on inclusion of all, regardless of dis/ability. This notion, to me, is something that extends beyond Walters’ piece, and would represent an interesting topic to explore further and in future projects. In the case of this analysis, I made my UD inclusion decisions based on the context in which universal design appeared. That is, if UD’s focus on universals was placed in contrast with other ways of designing (i.e., designing for disabled people), I included it in this list.

1. flexible in meeting disabled and nondisabled users’ needs (p. 428)
2. fundamentally alter pedagogies for disabled and nondisabled students and for the diverse audiences for which students learn to write (p. 428)
3. encouraging more comprehensive understandings of disability and ability (p. 429)
4. scholars leave unaddressed how disabled and nondisabled students and their audiences might benefit from the study of disability (p. 429)
5. practices designed for students with disabilities benefit all students (p. 432)
6. UDL comprehensively changes curricula and pedagogies to include the widest range of students, both disabled and nondisabled (p. 432)

7. the importance of including everyone (qtd Dolmage, 2008, p. 25) (p. 432)

8. a broad examining of how all technologies are assistive for all users (p. 433)

9. guide students—disabled or not—to consider the needs of users, readers, and audiences of a wide range of abilities (p. 433)

10. make disability relevant for increasingly wider audiences (p. 433)

11. more attentive to broader notions of accessibility (p. 433)

12. not one student identified as disabled at the outset (p. 435)

13. persuade students to understand how disability pertains to them and their audiences (p. 435)

14. I consider disability and ability to be part of the same overarching system (p. 436)

15. the study of disability necessarily includes the study of ability (p. 436)

16. offer students and users with a wide range of dis/abilities (p. 437)

17. inherently accommodating to the material needs of users, audiences, and students of dis/abilities (p. 437)

18. communicating with audiences of different abilities (p. 438)

19. Impairment-specific accommodations also elided the benefits that nonimpaired audiences or users may reap from alternative modes (p. 440)

20. disabled users with varying levels of impairment, nondisabled users with varying levels of abilities or learning styles (p. 44)

21. broad ranges of ability and use in the design of products (p. 440)

22. results in better design for everyone, average or not (p. 440)

23. but it also makes it easier to use for everyone (p. 440)

24. provide the same means of use for all users (qtd, Center for Universal Design) (p. 440)

25. Students, most of them nondisabled, remarked that they believed these devices and technologies would be helpful to them (p. 441)
26. so they, too, could benefit from outlining software in Inspiration Pro, even though it is ostensibly design for students with learning disabilities (p. 441)
27. even though they are primarily designed for those who are visually impaired (p. 441)
28. Students with attention disorders or those who simply stay up late to study (p. 442)
29. explore how other audiences might benefit from their accommodations, making their projects more universally accessible (p. 443)
30. blurring of boundaries between assistive technologies and technologies in general (p. 443)
31. this student began noticing ways in which she, a nondisabled user, benefits from accessibility (p. 443)
32. becoming aware of how wider audiences benefit from accessibility and UD (p. 443)
33. is not only inaccessible for users with disabilities but also not fully usable for users without disabilities (p. 444)
34. this more universal approach (p. 445)
35. an emphasis that can accommodate a wider range of people, independent of impairment (p. 445)
36. more universal audiences (p. 445)
37. Similarly, nondisabled persons may be limited by this same product (p. 445)
38. or people who work in noisy environments (p. 445)
39. the usability and accessibility of Web spaces for people with disabilities and varying abilities (p. 445)
41. provide the same means of use for all users (p. 445)
42. equality among disabled and nondisabled users (p. 446)
43. equality for the widest range of users (p. 446)
44. text-equivalents for nontext content “could also benefit nondisabled people” (p. 447)
45. how porous definitions of disabled and nondisabled had become for the class (p. 447)
46. a much wider audience (p. 448)
47. “This helps people with cognitive disorders but also anyone who likes things to just be simple and clear cut” (p. 448)
48. Students argued for the benefits of accessibility for students with and without disabilities (p. 449)
49. an accessible pedagogy for disabled and nondisabled students (p. 450)
50. wider audiences (p. 450)
51. more accessible to the widest range of people—disabled, nondisabled, temporarily able-bodied, and everyone in between (p. 451)