

NAMING ABLEISM IN THE WRITING CENTER

J. M. Dembsey
Northcentral University
jdembsey@ncu.edu

Abstract

Taking inspiration from Maria R. Palacios' poem "Naming Ableism," this article attempts to name some of the ways that ableism has and continues to manifest itself in writing center discourse. Topics discussed include writer "independence," diagnosis of disabled writers, impairment-specific practices, negative discussions of disability in writing center literature, incorrect use of the word "accessibility," inaccessible space, and access fatigue. This article concludes by suggesting that writing centers can move from a culture of ableism to a culture of access by applying concepts of interdependence and access intimacy. Readers are given suggestions for how to move forward, based on their role(s) within the writing center community.

"Ableism is the fact that you're afraid to tell the truth." – Maria R. Palacios

We need to tell the truth: writing center discourse has a long history of discriminating against disabled people. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided the most recent example. Prior to the pandemic, writing center organizations offered little support for online writing center work, and some writing centers were still avoiding or limiting online writing support (e.g. Brubaker; Reardon; Widen and Prebel), despite evidence that online tutoring can benefit disabled writers in addition to writers of color and multilingual writers (Camarillo; Ries; Schultz). Only after an international pandemic threatened the health, safety, and education of nondisabled, white, and/or monolingual writers did the writing center community take quick interest in promoting and implementing online writing center work.

Many scholars have already challenged writing centers to better consider the needs of disabled writers and tutors in their pedagogy and training (e.g., Babcock; Hitt; Kiedaisch and Dinitz; Kleinfeld; Rinaldi). Allison Hitt, Kerri Rinaldi, and Jean Kiedaisch and Sue Dinitz have even critiqued discussions of disability in writing center literature. In this article, I build upon these critiques to connect writing center norms with discrimination against disabled people and to clearly give this discrimination a name: ableism. This article will attempt to name ableism in the writing center, taking inspiration from Maria R. Palacios' poem "Naming Ableism." In this poem, Palacios describes the overwhelming, interconnected, and repetitious ways that disabled people experience ableism throughout

their lifetimes. Several lines in Palacios' poem clearly overlap with writing center work, such as an entitlement to deny help to others; attempts to "fix" or diagnose individuals; incorrect use of the word "accessibility"; and use of inaccessible spaces. In each section, I begin with lines from Palacios' poem to help name some of the ways that ableism has and continues to manifest itself in writing center discourse. I end this article by offering some first steps to incorporate accessibility, interdependence, and access intimacy into local writing center work and the larger writing center community.

Entitlement and Independence

"Ableism is when I ask you for help and you feel entitled to choose for me." – Palacios

Whether for brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing, or proofreading, when writers come to the writing center for help, many writing centers feel entitled to choose what is best before even working with them. Most prominently, the writing center community has chosen that writers should be independent. Michael A. Pemberton explained this choice back in 1994:

"True, we offer help and assistance to blocked or struggling or novice writers, but our goal is to foster 'independency,' to empower writers with the tools they need to work through texts themselves, not to rely on others inordinately for help with their writing." (64)

This goal of independence likely evolved from the mantra of "better writers, not better writing" and shaped preferred writing center practices: reading out loud, asking indirect questions, focusing on global issues, and avoiding editing and proofreading are all tactics to encourage writers to work independently and not depend on the writing center.

What many writing center professionals have neglected to recognize is that "independence" is an ableist myth (Chatterjee; Mingus). All people depend on others consistently across their lifetimes. Mia Mingus explains:

"The myth of independence reflects such a deep level of privilege, especially in this rugged individualistic capitalist society and produced the very idea that we could even mildly conceive of our lives or our accomplishments as solely our own."

(“Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice”)

For example, anyone involved in writing center work has depended on others to hire them, teach/mentor them, publish articles and books, host conferences and webinars, and answer questions on the Wcenter listserv. Those with masters or doctoral degrees have depended on thesis chairs and dissertation committees who likely edited their thesis or dissertation for them. Published authors, including myself, have depended on colleagues, peer reviewers, and editors to edit their articles or books for them. And yet writing centers hold writers, particularly student writers, to a higher standard and expect them to eventually write on their own, undermining the claim that all writers need readers and negating the very need for a writing center.

According to Dom Chatterjee, “Reaching for this unattainable goal of total independence harms all of us – and most impacts disabled folks.” In the writing center, a false idea of independence can encourage writing tutors to limit or deny help to disabled writers under the guise that they have to “earn” their success by doing it all themselves. In Rebecca Day Babcock’s research, for example, Squirt is a writer with a learning disability who needs direct help but receives indirect help from her tutor instead. Babcock notes: “[Squirt’s] aggravation with the assignment was compounded by her impatience with Newby’s nondirective tutoring technique. Squirt wanted to be given answers, not to be asked questions. In one session, Squirt answered, ‘I don’t know’ to Newby’s questions *twenty-eight times*” (155, emphasis mine). The “seasoned” tutor (86) in this example chose to apply an “independence”-producing approach that was contrary to the writer’s needs. There is no agency for writers when tutors choose not to help them or decide they should meet a mythical standard of independence.

Some writing center scholars have admitted that writers aren’t *truly* independent, but still draw an arbitrary line at “too dependent” (Healy; Nolt; Walker). Dave Healy, for example, makes a strong argument against Pemberton’s view of independence, but still concludes that “dependency can be debilitating” (3). As recently as 2011, Kim R. Nolt argued that “overindulging students” is a “dangerous trap” (14) and that tutors can “skillfully apply their training to *plan their escape* from overly dependent students” (15, emphasis mine).

This disdain for dependence can be linked to a disdain for disability. Mingus argues that many people know “disability only through ‘dependence,’ which paints disabled bodies as being a burden to others, at the mercy of able-bodied people’s benevolence” (“Access

Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice”). This benevolence is documented in a published Wcenter listserv conversation from 1993, where one contributor breaks down three profiles of dependents in their center: (1) the ESL dependent, (2) the *disabled* dependent, and (3) the very unsure writer (Crump). While the very unsure writer is noted as being non-aggressive and needing nurturing, the ESL dependent and disabled dependent are described as smart, aggressive, and manipulative. In 2001, Karen Sisk similarly describes an ESL and disabled writer as manipulative for wanting too much help, while also noting that independence “is *our* goal for all students” (7, emphasis mine). Entitlement in the writing center community has encouraged tutors and staff to preference their own goals, to question whether disabled writers actually need the help they request, and to judge and blame disabled writers who have sought their help.

Diagnosis

“Ableism is believing I need to be fixed. Ableism is you refusing to fix what’s really broken.” – Palacios

Instead of reflecting on how writing center practice can be more accessible or inclusive, many writing centers have chosen to identify impairments and then tailor practices based on the impairment, rather than on the person. Following the medical model of disability, writing center literature has provided lists of characteristics for recognizing dyslexia (Corrigan; Lauby), learning disabilities (Mullin; Schramm), and “mental disorders” (Jackson and Blythman; McDonald; Stevenson), along with listing strategies specific to these impairments. This trend continues in the *Writing Center and Disability* anthology published in 2017. In the foreword, Hitt argues against both diagnosing and linking practice to impairment:

“In response to inaccessible best practices, writing center scholarship has often adopted an impairment-specific approach to disability. This approach focuses on identifying the characteristics of a particular disability diagnosis and then developing practices that are specific to those characteristics. There is a robust field of disability studies theory and pedagogy that pushes against the medical model, which positions disability as an impairment that must be diagnosed and treated. Learning about and attending to the material needs of disabled student writers is vital, but the development of impairment-specific practices—although well intentioned—does not honor the

complexities, nuances, or strengths of disabled student writers.” (“Foreword,” vii–viii)

In contradiction to both Hitt and their own arguments, two articles in the anthology encourage diagnosis and give impairment-specific practices. While Marie Stevenson argues against a medical approach to disability, she also argues that tutors “need to be able to recognize when students’ cognitive functioning has been impaired” and then provides impairment-specific strategies for anxiety and depression (83). Similarly, Sue Jackson and Margo Blythman admit that “diagnosis should be left to trained professionals” before proceeding to list “key warning signs in student behavior” that can be used to diagnose writers with mental health impairments (244, 245). One of their warning signs is a writer who “appears to be ‘lazy’ or shows lack of commitment” (246)—a tip that is subjective and encourages disability stereotypes.

Hitt, Rinaldi, Margaret Price, and Stephanie Kerschbaum, among others, have strongly argued that pedagogical strategies and even accommodations should not be tied to specific impairments. Linking strategies to impairments poses three problems. First, the strategies are implied to work mostly for writers with that specific impairment, when the same strategies could also be useful for other disabled writers and nondisabled writers. For example, John Corrigan’s suggestions for working with dyslexic writers include using a hands-on approach, breaking down information in steps, telling writers to write how they talk, and complementing strong areas in their work. None of these strategies are unique only or mostly to writers with dyslexia. Second, all writers with the same impairment are implied to benefit from the same strategies. In reality, writers will experience impairment and disability in different ways and will have different needs. Lastly, in order to apply impairment-specific practices, tutors must know that a writer has that specific impairment, which leads back to diagnosis.

While Stevenson and Corrigan both identify as having the impairments they discuss in their articles, they don’t explain why tailoring practices to their impairments is preferable over fixing what’s really broken—writing center pedagogy. Both authors actively push tutors towards diagnosing and/or encouraging diagnostic testing without acknowledging that some writers may not want to be diagnosed or may view their disability as a private matter. Diagnosis is also completely unnecessary in a writing center context. Rinaldi explains:

“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.” (12–13)

Discomfort with Disability

“Ableism is when your discomfort becomes a bigger barrier than a flight of stairs.” – Palacios

Diagnosis and impairment-specific practices encourage approaching disability not as an identity but as an individual “problem” that causes discomfort with the unknown, either in the form of not knowing if a writer is disabled, not knowing the writer’s disability, or not knowing how to work with them because of their disability. In the 1980s and 1990s, some writing center scholars debated whether their tutors had the proper training to support disabled writers or whether they should refer these writers to other departments or “experts” instead (Lauby; Mills; Mullin; Sherwood). Helen Mills even argued that disabled college students should be placed in separate classrooms, because they need too much extra help, and “The regular students feel they are being held back or deprived of the teacher’s attention” (3). In other words, some writing center scholars have supported *segregated* classrooms and academic support services to ease their discomfort.

Writing center literature also documents discomfort in the form of frustration, avoidance, and even fear. Anne Mullin reflects that her tutors became frustrated when writers with learning disabilities took too long to sort through their belongings or spent too much time venting during their appointments. Babcock notes in her research that “some of the tutors [...] actually shied away from and tried to avoid tutoring the deaf women” (1). And in 2009, Katherine Schmidt et al. claim it is normal and expected to fear disabled writers:

“Feeling out of your element the first time you work with a deaf student-writer is not only normal—it’s expected. For you as a hearing consultant, the experience can evoke the same kind of anxiety that working with a senior-level student-writer on a paper in a discipline with which you are completely unfamiliar evokes: *fear may overtake your ability to read, speak, and think like a writing consultant.*” (9, emphasis mine)

In the examples above, writing center staff were so focused on themselves that they neglected to consider how their discomfort may impact disabled writers. Disabled writers come to the writing center for assistance with their writing, and in doing so, may have to deal with a tutor’s impatience, frustration, or fear; or with being diagnosed without their consent. It is naïve to believe that a disabled writer cannot recognize these

emotions and tactics, which may be all too familiar to them. When writing center professionals become concerned with the “problem” of disability, they forget they are working with actual people.

Discomfort with Disability

“Ableism is our story told by nondisabled voices captured through a nondisabled lens.” – Palacios

In writing center scholarship, several (seemingly) nondisabled writing center tutors and administrators have written *about*, rather than written *with*, disabled writers. These authors use a nondisabled lens to overgeneralize and offer “lessons” about helping disabled writers, without including the disabled writer’s voice. Here are three examples.

Joe is a learning disabled writer who is the focus of a *Writing Lab Newsletter (WLN)* tutor’s column in 1991 (Schramm). Joe is scheduled to work with a tutor who has bought into stereotypes of learning disabled writers and had “pictured the arrival of a clumsy, stooped shouldered student with unkempt hair, papers sticking out of his notebook, totally disorganized” (9). Joe does not fit this stereotype, so he surprises his tutor by being “very intelligent” with a “wide and advanced vocabulary” (9). Despite Joe’s intelligence, his tutor uses a checklist of learning disability characteristics (provided in the article) to better understand how to work with Joe, rather than just asking Joe himself. Joe’s tutor suggests he record and re-play his verbal ideas during the session, but his tutor later complains that it is “tedious and time consuming” (9). Joe doesn’t return for his last two sessions, and his tutor blames this on one of the diagnostic characteristics for learning disabilities. Joe’s story is used to argue that tutors can help writers to “compensate for their learning disabilities” (9).

In 1996, Byron appears in an article in *The Writing Center Journal (WCJ)* (Sherwood). Byron has a brain injury, but his tutor later diagnoses him with an additional disability, since he suspects that Byron “suffered from a number of what we now call learning disabilities” (49, emphasis mine). Byron’s story is eerily similar to Joe’s. Byron also records himself thinking aloud and replays the tapes during his session, which his tutor describes as unnerving, unsettling, and frustrating (49). Eventually, Byron also stops coming to his appointments. Byron had such an impact that his tutor notes spending “several years dreading another encounter with a student with severe learning disabilities” (55). Byron is described as his tutor’s “most glaring failure” (49), and his story is used to argue that some people just can’t be helped.

Lastly, in 2001, Inna makes a brief appearance in a *WLN* article (Sisk). Inna has a visual impairment and is an ESL writer. She is alleged to have told different stories to three different people in order to receive additional help. As such, she is labeled by a writing center administrator as “*masterful at manipulating* not only faculty and staff, but also tutors and other students into providing more than the assistance clearly outlined in our Writing Center Contract” (7, emphasis mine). Inna’s story is used to argue for better communication between writing centers, instructors, and disability offices about the extent to which disabled writers should be helped.

While these disabled writers appear in our scholarship, they don’t get to hold the role of co-authors or even as participants in IRB-approved research projects, leaving several important questions unanswered. Why did Joe and Byron stop attending their writing center appointments? Could they tell that their tutors were frustrated by the methods they needed to participate in the session? Did Inna purposely tell different stories, and if so, why did she feel that was necessary? And how does she feel about being called “*masterful at manipulating*”? The perspectives of these writers could have encouraged the authors to better reflect on their assumptions about disability and to consider how the writing center might have been a barrier for these writers. Instead, the authors expanded their resumes at the expense of disabled writers who likely don’t even know they appeared in a publication.

Denial of Existence

“Ableism is when you can pretend disabled people don’t exist.” – Palacios

While writing center scholarship acknowledges that disabled *writers* exist, several writing center scholars have written about disability as though disabled *tutors* and *professionals* don’t exist. In other words, the negative writing center scholarship that I’ve quoted and cited is written as though disabled people will never read it, as though writing center scholars can’t be disabled. In the previous section, the cited authors assumed that readers would identify with frustrated writing center staff, rather than identifying with Joe, Byron, or Inna. The authors did not act independently here: they likely sought advice from colleagues or mentors, and their *published* articles were approved by multiple reviewers and editors who also didn’t recognize disabled people as an intended audience for writing center publications. Writing center journals and books have played a role in publishing and distributing these problematic articles and by doing so, have given credibility to ableism.

Julie Neff's "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center" is a prime example. In this article, learning disabled writers are compared to "normal" and "average" learners and are associated with an onslaught of negative terms, including "problem," "compensating," "debilitating," "malfunction," "defect," and "failed" (82-87, 92). Despite this, Neff's article was originally published in an edited collection in 1994 and was re-published three times in *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* from 2003 to 2011. In another example, Mary McDonald invokes the stereotype of violence to encourage diagnosis and impairment-specific practices for writers with "severe mental disorders." Even still, her article was published by *WLN* in 2005 and then re-published in 2008. A peer-reviewed publication should make sure that offensive, inaccurate, and stereotypical arguments are not given credibility through publication, yet some writing center journals and edited collections have created a "safe" space for ableism to persist across decades.

Incorrect Use of "Accessibility"

"Ableism is when words like affordable and accessible are too good to be true." – Palacios

In addition to publishing ableist work, several writing center publications have not accounted for disabled professionals in their very design. In *Open-Access, Multimodality, and Writing Center Studies*, Elisabeth L. Buck analyzed the archives of *WCJ*, *WLN*, and *Praxis* for accessibility. In her analysis, Buck applies a broad understanding of access that considers usability for the general user: "Access is consequently not only a matter of whether digital records are obtainable, but involves the extent to which they are easily navigable and straightforward" (59).

On the one hand, this definition of access leads Buck to rightfully critique *WCJ* for being unaffordable, unobtainable, and thus inaccessible by not providing a free public archive. Scholars can read and download unlimited articles from *WCJ* only if they belong to institutions with a subscription to JSTOR. Some participants in Buck's research note that *WCJ*'s archives were not available to them through their institutions, and they had to turn elsewhere for their research. Other avenues to *WCJ* exist but are limiting. A paid annual subscription to the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA) will give only partial access to the most recent *WCJ* issues, and a paid individual subscription to JSTOR limits the number of article downloads per year. Restricting information based on finances or employment negatively affects any disabled

scholars who are unemployed or work outside of academia due to ableism (Price).

On the other hand, a broad understanding of accessibility leads Buck to erroneously conclude that *WLN* is accessible just because their archives are free and generally easy for her to navigate:

"What can be said for *Writing Lab Newsletter* specifically is that its content is almost wholly accessible, with the exception of a few missing issues throughout the publication's history. This access enables multiple discoveries about not only a topic's trajectory, but about how the journal itself evolved both visually and in terms of its content." (60)

Buck's claim of accessibility in *WLN* is too good to be true, as her analysis neglects to consider whether the archives are accessible to disabled users specifically. Elizabeth Brewer, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Melanie Yergeau have critiqued composition studies for continuing to design texts and digital resources that are inaccessible to disabled writers and scholars, such as scanned PDFs that can't be read by screenreaders and videos without closed captions. My own analysis of writing center journal archives reveals a similar state of inaccessibility, as of September 2020. On *WLN*'s website, 44% (165 out of 376) of the PDFs in the archives are scanned images, and none of the online webinars have edited closed captions. On *Praxis*'s website, the first eight volumes are available only through a program called ISSUU, which is not screenreader friendly (Demirgian). I could not analyze *WCJ*'s archives due to lack of access.

Before labeling a document, product, or service as "accessible," scholars must consider the experience and needs of disabled people specifically. Information can be publicly and freely available, but still not provide everyone with the same opportunity to conduct research (Dolmage). For example, *WLN*'s scanned image PDFs contain 46% (18 out of 39) of their articles on disability, meaning that scholars with disabilities may not be able to access scholarship on disability. Scholars using screenreaders or similar technologies may be excluded not only from reading past scholarship but also researching the history or trends of writing center scholarship over time.

Inaccessible Space

"Ableism is when you make plans that do not include accessible venues, accessible spaces so it becomes easier to erase me from your list." – Palacios

In *Mad at School*, Margaret Price discusses conferences as a genre that often poses barriers for disabled professionals. She states,

“Professional organizations as a whole do not prioritize the inclusion of persons with disabilities at conferences; and where inclusion is attempted, it tends to imagine the disabled conference-goer as a person in a fairly narrow defined position, with little concern for the flexibility of design that could enable access-as-practice.” (124–125)

Professional writing center organizations are no exception and tend to design conferences around the expectation that attendees will be nondisabled.

In the past 10 years, I’ve experienced several noteworthy inaccessible writing center conferences in the United States, but a regional conference from 2018 stands out the most. Accessibility issues began at the registration table when printed programs were not provided, without prior notice. The conference program was only available as an inaccessible PDF embedded on the conference website. Attendees who needed or preferred a print program were told to travel to the university library and pay to print out the conference booklet themselves. Attendees were also expected to walk for at least 15 minutes to the keynote and then stand on a flight of stairs to wait in line for lunch. These planning decisions did not account for lack of smartphones, laptops, battery life, or data access; use of screenreaders or speech-to-text programs; mobility impairments; non-normative walking paces; chronic pain; or stamina. Even worse, the conference organizers had access to multiple disability-focused departments and disability studies scholars at their institution. The conference design was so inaccessible that it sparked the two years of research that led to this article.

In addition to providing inaccessible conference programs and using inaccessible venues, writing center conferences follow the tradition of being exhausting and grueling (Price). Attendees go to back-to-back sessions all day, while navigating unfamiliar locations, supervising accompanying staff, and preparing for their own presentations, along with balancing their usual teaching load, administrative tasks, or coursework. Furthermore, in the presentations, information is almost always presented quickly and orally, and resources to follow along and take home are rarely given, even for presentations on diversity, inclusivity, or disability. Because information is only shared in that time and space, missing a conference session, or missing the conference as a whole, means missing out on the conversation.

The expectation of physical presence at physical avenues further erases the participation of many

disabled professionals. Melanie Yergeau et al. explain that “many mental and physical disabilities make such [physical] presence difficult or impossible.” The writing center community has avoided virtual conferencing to the extent that they have avoided online writing consultations. Many writing center associations did not offer a virtual conference option until the COVID-19 pandemic affected *all* of their members. The end result is that post-pandemic many disabled scholars will continue to be excluded from participating in conferences and similar onsite professional development opportunities.

Access Fatigue

“Ableism is expecting me to shoulder your ableist beliefs because the weight of my differences are too heavy for you to carry.” – Palacios

In each of the previous sections, disabled people have had to shoulder ableist beliefs within writing center culture. When a writing center believes that all writers should be independent and benefit from a pre-determined set of practices that promote independence, disabled writers at that center assume the burden of requesting accommodations. They may have to self-disclose to writing center staff when they would otherwise prefer not to. They may have to provide proof of a diagnosis, which means paying for testing, waiting for acceptable proof, and completing paperwork to register with the disability support office (Kleinfield). Even after all this work, accommodations may still be limited to what is “reasonable” under the law, at least in the United States. If writers don’t disclose, they must then shoulder being diagnosable by checklists in writing center literature. If disabled writers try to self-advocate for additional help or if they rely “too much” on the writing center (which is likely funded by their tuition), they are labeled as aggressive and manipulative.

When writing center conferences are designed for nondisabled attendees, some disabled professionals similarly have to shoulder the weight of disclosure. Writing center conferences have placed the responsibility for access on disabled attendees (Price). In other words, disabled attendees are expected to request accommodations while conference organizers are not expected to plan accessible conferences and conference presenters are not expected to design accessible presentations. Writing center professionals have further had to spend time and energy fighting ableism in writing center literature. Several scholars have self-disclosed their own disabilities in order to fight against the idea

that disabled writers should be treated differently or diagnosed (Hitt; Rinaldi). And yet the work continues.

All of this extra work is exhausting and leads to what Annika Konrad calls access fatigue (*Arguing for Access*). Asking for access is not as simple as stating one's needs and having these needs met. Instead, those with access needs have to perform consistent rhetorical labor to convince, educate, and remind others that their needs should be met. This labor is exhausting, leading many disabled people to decide which events and exchanges are worth the energy and which are not. Saving energy might mean not going to the writing center, not using a particular writing center journal, or not attending a writing center conference, because all of these scenarios require arguing with people who view access as someone else's responsibility. It's time to share that responsibility instead.

Call for Culture of Access

"Ableism is when you turn your head the other way and say that your able-bodied privilege is not privilege and refuse to see that *your* privilege is the face of *my* oppression." – Palacios

Now that this article has named some of the ways in which writing center culture has been and continues to be ableist, writing center professionals cannot continue to turn their heads the other way. As a community, we need to move from a culture of ableism to a culture of access, where participation is not dependent upon privilege, or a pandemic. We also need to be careful that we don't just approach access as a method to increase consumption but instead as a way to transform the methods of participation. Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau explain:

"A culture of access is a culture of participation and redesign. To put it simply: There is a profound difference between consumptive access and transformative access. The former involves allowing people to enter a space or access a text. The latter questions and re-thinks the very construct of allowing." (153–154)

There are three big steps the writing center community can take to change who is "allowed" to participate in our spaces. First, we need to acknowledge that writing centers are not inherently accessible. In a 2018 book review of the *Writing Centers and Disability* anthology and *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Mike Haen claimed that writing center studies has had an "ongoing commitment to issues of inclusivity and accessibility" (218, emphasis mine). I disagree. While individual authors and professionals have been

committed to accessibility, the larger discipline has not, as my article has shown. We must accept this truth before we can move forward.

Second, we need to embrace the concept of interdependence, which "challenges the independence/dependence binary by assuming that all humans are inherently and necessarily dependent on each other, regardless of their abilities at various moments in time" (Konrad, *Arguing for Access*, 115). As part of interdependence, we recognize that we all depend on others and others depend on us: we don't accomplish anything alone. For Konrad, embracing interdependence has been empowering, giving her patience and helping her to build collaborative relationships with other people. She explains:

"All our lives, we are conditioned to be as independent as possible. Living with a disability has forced me to ask myself, do I really want to live that way? Most of the time, I find that my experiences are richer because I need to involve another person. [...] If I relied only on myself, even if I weren't visually impaired, I would never have been exposed to those ideas and I wouldn't have had the opportunity to connect with another person." ("What Disability Has Taught Me")

Third, from interdependence, we can move towards creating what Mingus has named "access intimacy." Mingus explains access intimacy as "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs" ("Access Intimacy: The Missing Link"). Access intimacy, then, operates as the opposite of access fatigue: we can acknowledge others' access needs, work to meet these needs, and share responsibility for creating access, without expecting self-disclosure, documentation, or other forms of justification. We can also anticipate common access needs—such as captioning, sign language interpretation, screenreader-friendly materials, breaks, and quiet spaces—and incorporate them from the beginning without requiring people to ask. Access intimacy can happen with both disabled and nondisabled people, with people you don't yet know, and with people who don't have "a political understanding of disability, ableism or access" (Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link"). Mingus elaborates:

"Access intimacy is interdependence in action. It is an acknowledgement that what is most important is not whether or not things are perfectly accessible, or whether or not there is ableism; but rather what the impact of inaccessibility and ableism is on disabled people and our lives. In my experience, when access intimacy is present, the most powerful part is having someone to navigate access and

ableism with.” (“Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice”)

Access is a shared responsibility among us all. We all have a role to play in moving from a culture of ableism to a culture of access. Here is what each of us can do, depending on our role(s).

Tutors, Consultants, and Coaches

If you are a writing tutor, consultant, or coach, you and the writers you work with are equally dependent on each other for knowledge and growth. Writers are dependent on you for feedback and insight, and you are dependent on writers to understand their needs and to reflect upon your approach as an educator.

The key to accessible pedagogy is that it is *flexible* to the needs of the learner (Hitt). Instead of making all the choices before you even meet a writer, you can involve the writer in the decision-making process. Rinaldi and Manako Yabe suggest negotiating learning and communication needs with writers, including your own needs as a tutor, consultant, or coach. You can begin each session by asking questions about the writer’s needs and preferences, which eliminates any perceived need for diagnosing or knowing one’s disability. Rinaldi suggests asking, “How would you like to work together? What works best for you?” If the writer doesn’t yet know what they need, that session is an opportunity to explore different strategies and find what does and doesn’t work for that writer.

Training Leaders

If you train writing center staff, then staff are dependent on you for their approach to writing tutoring, and you are dependent on them to revise your own understanding of writing center work. You can design training and learning opportunities that are centered around disability, accessibility, and interdependence, as a way to encourage flexibility and refrain from establishing a pedagogy that necessitates making exceptions or accommodations. You can normalize disability by assigning articles written by disabled tutors (e.g., Rinaldi, Yabe) and avoiding articles that discuss disability in problematic ways through a nondisabled lens. The course itself can also be designed accessibly, by presenting information verbally and visually, choosing materials that are screenreader-friendly, sharing videos with closed captions, and offering options for participation in discussion and coursework. Your training can even encourage group projects, to align with the collaborative and interdependent nature of the writing center.

Directors, Coordinators, and Managers

If you direct, coordinate, or manage a writing center, then writers and tutors are dependent on you to foster an accessible and inclusive community, one that can be there for them if they have no other support systems. And you are dependent on writers and tutors to better understand the communities you are serving. Conducting an inclusivity audit, similar to Elizabeth Kleinfield’s, is a place to start. An inclusivity audit invites others to analyze your physical space, digital space, pedagogy, services, hiring practices, training, and other areas that may create barriers. Developing an inclusivity committee is also an opportunity to develop interdependence with other departments, such as the disability support center, office of inclusion, or student-led organizations.

As you apply suggestions from such a committee, remember that just like pedagogy, flexibility is key to increasing access. Flexibility may mean providing options for scheduling and cancelling appointments, relaxing no-show or late policies, and offering services in different locations, formats, and modalities. Flexibility may mean conducting interviews in-person, over phone, over chat, or email. And instead of valuing high GPAs or letters of recommendation, you can recruit tutors who can foster access intimacy with writers and who have their own access needs.

Researchers

If you conduct human subjects research, you are dependent on participants to collect your data, and your participants are dependent on you to create an accessible study design they can participate in. More primary research is needed to include disabled voices in writing center work and to challenge and disprove assumptions, rather than create new ones. Even if your study is not focused on disability specifically, disabled people should still be eligible to participate, and your study design should allow them to do so. For Konrad’s dissertation, participants could choose to be interviewed in-person, over telephone, over video call, or over email. Providing multiple options for participation will increase the number of people who can participate and increase the diverse perspectives that will be included in your study.

Conference Presenters

If you present at conferences, you are dependent on attendees to engage with your work, and attendees are dependent on you to present information clearly and accessibly. As a presenter, you should always expect that disabled people will attend your session and design your session accordingly. The very beginning of your session can address accessibility by letting attendees know how

they can follow along with you and welcoming them to do whatever they need to be comfortable and participate. Your presentation can account for verbal and visual needs by sharing your slides and other presentation materials, providing a written transcript of your talk, verbally describing images, clarifying the beginning and end of direct quotations, and only using videos with edited closed captions (Composing Access Project).

You can share electronic copies of your materials by using a free website builder, such as Wordpress. I initially used a free Wordpress site to create blog posts for each of my conference presentations and link attendees to my PowerPoint slides, a Word document version of my transcript, and an HTML-version of my transcript, which can work better with mobile devices and tablets. A website also gives you a memorable URL to distribute during your sessions and holds your conference materials in one place for those who could not attend. As writing center culture moves toward accessibility, your presentation can inspire others to lead their own sessions more accessibly.

Authors

If you write an article or book for publication, readers depend on you for information, and you depend on readers to use and cite your work. Similar to conference presentations, you should expect that disabled people will read your work. If you're nondisabled and planning to write about specific disabled writers or staff, invite them to co-author with you or to participate in a research study so their voices can be included in your work. Furthermore, stories of disabled writers/staff should not be shared without their consent: if you've written about a disabled person in a way that you wouldn't share directly with them, then you shouldn't be trying to publish it. Even if your work does not discuss disability specifically, you can attempt to anticipate how your work may impact disabled writers and tutors.

You can also be mindful of the publication you are submitting to and how accessible or available that publication will be to a disabled audience. While prestige is attractive (I've fallen for it as well), you owe your audience the opportunity to read your work regardless of ability, disability, institutional affiliation, or financial status. If you're writing an article, consider publications that share work for free and in HTML, such as *Praxis*, *The Peer Review*, *The Dangling Modifier*, *Another Word*, and *Composition Forum*, to name a few. If you're writing a book, The WAC Clearinghouse and University of Michigan Press publish books online for free. Jay T. Dolmage, for example, published *Academic Ableism* both

in print and for free in HTML through the University of Michigan Press.

Interdependency is realizing not only how we can better depend upon and support each other but also how to *resist* those in positions of power. Journal and book editors depend on authors and readers. Thus, authors can refuse to submit to less accessible journals, and readers can refuse to buy subscriptions until such journals take appropriate steps to be more accessible.

Journal and Book Editors

If you're a journal editor or book editor, professionals are depending on your publication to stay current in writing center studies, and you are dependent on the engagement of authors and readers. In your position, you can actively recruit reviewers with disabilities and from disability studies who can provide assistance and education to those wanting to publish on disability. In addition, you can work towards prioritizing usability for disabled readers and making your publication available in a variety of formats, including free in HTML and Microsoft Word documents. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, for example, has published its issues for free in HTML since 2000. Writing center journals should similarly provide accessible ways for readers to access their archives. *WCJ* can work towards a free public archive, both *WCJ* and *WLN* can offer HTML alternatives to their PDFs and print publications, and *Praxis* can stop using ISSUU and make their older issues available in HTML. While such projects don't happen overnight, building this access could be possible within the next few years. If the archives continue to grow in their current state, it will only take longer to remediate for accessibility.

Writing Center Organizations

Lastly, if you serve in a writing center organization, you need members, and your members need to feel represented by your organization and need an accessible environment in which they can connect with other professionals. Writing center organizations who host conferences should expect that disabled people will attend and should prepare accordingly. You can advocate for an accessibility committee in your organization to help design and budget for accessibility from the beginning of conference planning. You can also encourage a greater virtual conference presence in your organization. Virtual participation and websites for publicly sharing conference materials can help to mitigate the financial, physical, and mental barriers of onsite conferences and increase the participation of disabled scholars.

Conclusion

“Ableism is the fact that you don’t even try.” – Palacios

With any article like this, you may assume that the author has always been enlightened on the topic, but that is certainly not the case here. I was not aware of the content of this article even five years ago. I do not identify as disabled at this point in time, I am not an expert in ableism, and I still have much to learn. Even still, I’ve made an effort to notice the impact of ableism around me, and it’s disheartening to notice the impact so prominently in writing center work. Once enough of us start noticing, we can work towards change on a larger scale. There is always the risk that we won’t do enough. I’ve struggled with that in writing this article: there are works I haven’t read, works I haven’t cited, and connections I haven’t made yet. I’m exhausted, but I still tried. And that’s all we can ask of each other: to at least try.

Works Cited

- Babcock, Rebecca Day. *Tell Me How It Reads: Tutoring Deaf and Hearing Students in the Writing Center*. Gallaudet UP, 2012, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/21238>.
- Brewer, Elizabeth, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Melanie Yergeau. “Creating a Culture of Access in Composition Studies.” *Composition Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2014, pp. 151-154, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43501861>.
- Brubaker, Anne. “Stories and Reflections on the Impact of Covid-19 on Writing Center Work.” *Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders: A Blog of WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, 4 Aug. 2020, <http://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/2020/08/stories-and-reflections-on-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-writing-center-work/>.
- Buck, Elisabeth H. *Open-Access, Multimodality, and Writing Center Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, <http://lib.uok.ac.ir:8080/site/catalogue/216770>.
- Camarillo, Eric. “Cultivating Antiracism in Asynchronous Sessions.” *South Central Writing Centers Association Blog*, 30 Apr. 2020, <https://writingcenter08.wixsite.com/scwconference/post/cultivating-antiracism-in-asynchronous-sessions>.
- Chatterjee, Dom. “Independence Is an Ableist Myth: Unlocking the Power of Community in Healing.” *The Body Is Not an Apology*, 4 Jul. 2018, <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/independence-is-an-ableist-myth-unlocking-the-power-of-community-in-healing/>.
- Composing Access Project. “Composing Access: An Invitation to Creating Accessible Events.” *Ohio State University*, 2019, <https://u.osu.edu/composingaccess/>.
- Corrigan, John. “A Guide for Working with Dyslexic Students.” *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 21, no. 10, 1997, pp. 1-3.
- Crump, Eric. “Voices from the Net: The Causes and Consequences of Writing Center Dependency.” *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 17, no. 10, 1993, pp. 12-14.
- Demirgian, Andreea. “The Issue with ISSUU: A Full-Screen Reader Is Not a Screen Reader.” *Is It Accessible*, 6 Dec. 2018, <http://www.isitaccessible.ca/the-issue-with-issuu-a-full-screen-reader-is-not-a-screen-reader/>.
- Dolmage, Jay. T. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. U of Michigan P, 2017.
- Haen, Mike. “Centering Research, Practice, and Perspectives: Writing Center Studies and the Continued Commitment to Inclusivity and Accessibility.” *Composition Studies*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2018, pp. 212-218, <https://search.proquest.com/openview/19da050eeeba14e7da365006e30ab0e3/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=26283>.
- Healy, Dave. “Countering the Myth of (In)Dependence: Developing Life-Long Clients.” *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 18, no. 9, 1994, pp. 1-3.
- Hitt, Allison. “Access for All: The Role of Dis/ability in Multiliteracy Centers.” *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2012.
- Hitt, Allison. “Foreword.” *Writing Centers and Disability*, edited by Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels, Fountainhead Press, 2017, pp. vii-x.
- Jackson, Sue, and Margo Blythman. “‘Just Coming in the Door Was Hard’: Supporting Students with Mental Health Difficulties.” *Writing Centers and Disability*, edited by Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels, Fountainhead P, 2017, pp. 233-252.
- Kiedaisch, Jean, and Sue Dinitz. “Changing Notions of Difference in the Writing Center: The Possibilities of Universal Design.” *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2007, pp. 39-59.
- Kleinfeld, Elizabeth. “Taking an Expansive View of Accessibility: The Writing Center at Metropolitan State University of Denver.” *Composition Forum*, vol. 39, 2018, <http://compositionforum.com/issue/39/msu-denver.php>.
- Konrad, Annika. *Arguing for Access: Everyday Rhetorical Labor of Disability*. Dissertation. University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2018.
- Konrad, Annika. “What Disability Has Taught Me about the Limits of Independence.” *The Outlook from Here*, 14 Mar. 2018, <https://theoutlookfromhere.wordpress.com/2018/03/>

- [14/what-disability-has-taught-me-about-the-limits-of-independence/](#).
- Lauby, Jacqueline. "A Reader Responds: Understanding the Dyslexic Writer." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 9, no. 5, 1985, pp. 7-9.
- McDonald, Mary Murray. "Assessing and Responding to Clients with Severe Mental Disorders." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 32, no. 10, 2008, pp. 8-9.
- Mills, Helen. "Writing Lab Programs for the Learning Disabled and Handicapped." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1980, pp. 3-5.
- Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy, Interdependence and Disability Justice." *Leaving Evidence*, 12 Apr. 2017, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2017/04/12/access-intimacy-interdependence-and-disability-justice/>
- Mingus, Mia. "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link." *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May 2011, <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/>.
- Mullin, Anne E. "Improving Our Abilities to Tutor Students with Learning Disabilities." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994, pp. 1-3.
- Neff, Julie. "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center." *Intersections: Theory-Practice in the Writing Center*, edited by Joan A. Mullin and Ray Wallace, National Council of Teachers of English, 1994, pp. 81-95, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED374464.pdf#page=95>.
- Nolt, Kim R. "Can I Say That?" *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 35, no. 7-8, 2011, pp. 14-15.
- Palacios, Maria R. "Naming Ableism." *CripStory*, 1 Apr. 2017, <https://cripstory.wordpress.com/2017/04/01/naming-ableism/>.
- Pemberton, Michael A. "Dependency in the Writing Center: Psychological Profiles and Tutorial Strategies." *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1994, pp. 63-70, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42802466>.
- Price, Margaret. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. The U of Michigan P, 2011.
- Reardon, Kristina. "Rent-a-Fellow, How We Engaged Students at the Moments They Needed Writing Support Most." *Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders: A Blog of WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, 10 Aug. 2020, <http://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/2020/08/rent-a-fellow-or-how-we-engaged-students-at-the-moments-they-needed-writing-support-most/>.
- Ries, Stephanie. "The Online Writing Center: Reaching Out to Students with Disabilities." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, pp. 5-6.
- Rinaldi, Kerri. "Disability in the Writing Center: A New Approach (That's Not So New)." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, pp. 9-14.
- Schmidt, Katherine, Marta Bunse, Kynzie Dalton, Nicole Perry, and Kayla Rau. "Lessening the Divide: Strategies for Promoting Effective Communication between Hearing Consultants and Deaf Student-Writers." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2009, pp. 6-10.
- Schramm, Mary Jane. "Just like Joe." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 15, no. 10, 1991, pp. 9-10.
- Sherwood, Steve. "Apprenticed to Failure: Learning from the Students We Can't Help." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1996, pp. 49-57, JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43442015>.
- Schultz, Matthew. "Synch or Swim: (Re)Assessing Asynchronous Online Writing Labs." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2010.
- Sisk, Karen. "Assisting the Visually Impaired in the Writing Center." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 25, no. 7, 2001, pp. 6-9.
- Stevenson, Marie. "Clearing the Traffic Jam: Enabling Higher Education Students with Depression and Anxiety Disorders to Complete Written Assignments." *Writing Centers and Disability*, edited by Rebecca Day Babcock and Sharifa Daniels, Fountainhead Press, 2017, pp. 79-98.
- Walker, Kristin. "Difficult Clients and Tutor Dependency: Helping Overly Dependent Clients Become More Independent Writers." *Writing Lab Newsletter*, vol. 19, no. 8, 1995, pp. 10-12.
- Widen, Bethany, and Julie Prebel. "Pandemic Adaptations: Time, Connection, and Inclusivity in Online Writing Center Work." *Connecting Writing Centers Across Borders: A Blog of WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, 21 Aug. 2020, <http://www.wlnjournal.org/blog/2020/08/pandemic-adaptations-time-connection-and-inclusivity-in-online-writing-center-work/>.
- Yabe, Manako. "The Journey of a Deaf Translingual Writer." *Writing on the Edge*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2018, pp. 73-85.
- Yergeau, Melanie, et al. "Multimodality in Motion." *Kairos*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2013, <http://kairos.technorhetic.net/18.1/coverweb/yergeau-et-al/>.