“Opening up Disability Studies: Notes on Inclusion and Credibility”

It is fair to say, I think, that disability studies is a field that is interested and invested in questions about the kinds of bodies that are included and excluded in all kinds of social, physical, and virtual spaces. Inclusion is a driving force in much disability scholarship and activism. However, at the same time that disability studies capaciously imagines the kinds of bodies that are valued, celebrated, listened to, and respected—in another word, included—disability studies has remained a relatively insular field, and its relationship to broader fields of inquiry, including composition and rhetoric, remains vexed.

In this presentation, I focus on two keywords: inclusion and credibility to explore some facets of this issue. I intend this presentation to be a provocation, an invitation to question, explore, and assess the ways in which our personal and disciplinary identifications and scholarly work intersect and engage each other as well as act within broader fields of inquiry.

A story.
Let me begin with a story. It’s a story about how I got involved with disability studies. When I attended the Feminisms and Rhetoric conference in 2003, I experienced a number of presentations addressing the intersections of deaf and disability studies with feminism and rhetoric. At that same conference, I had the experience of having an audience member, during a Q&A session at a lunch keynote, ask me to say something about sign language interpreting and rhetoric (never mind that the topic of the panel had nothing to do with sign language). Deeply embarrassed at being called out, especially since at the time I was still a graduate student, I was immensely thankful when Jacqueline Jones Royster stood up and deflected the question, pointing out that it asked anyone who responded to “speak for” deaf people.

This conference experience was for me the very germ of my awareness of disability studies, a field I did not encounter until I was nearly done with my dissertation. The 2003 Feminisms and Rhetoric conference was not only a space where disability studies came onto my radar, but also a
space where I was made acutely aware of my identification as a deaf scholar—I was aware of it in other venues too, of course, but I had not really interrogated those experiences in the ways that the disability scholars at the conference were doing. Experiencing the intellectual content of the presentations, as well as the explicit access moves—providing scripts, considering interpreters’ needs, querying audiences about lighting and other room elements—that were made by scholars such as Susan Burch, Kristen Harmon and Brenda Brueggemann in particular, significantly motivated my subsequent involvement with groups like the CCCC Committee on Disability Issues in College Composition, chaired by Jay Dolmage, and the Standing Group on Disability Studies, co-chaired by Amy Vidali and Tara Wood. In fact, one of the things that drew me to early disability studies presentations (some of which I reviewed at the 2004 CCCC conference—Kerschbaum “Intersections”) was the fact that they were the most likely to include access moves such as providing a full-text copy of the presentation script for me to read along with.

Even though I was going to a lot of disability presentations, however, I didn’t identify as a disability studies scholar. Amy Vidali still today teases me about how, during the early years of the CCCC Disability Studies Special Interest Group (which is now a Standing Group), I would always begin my self-introductions by mentioning that I didn’t “do” disability studies. I’d go on to explain that even though my scholarly focus wasn’t disability studies, I was deaf, and I was interested in the work people were doing, and I wanted to continue efforts to enhance access at the conference.

I think it seemed funny to Amy that I kept insisting that I didn’t do disability studies because, as she’s said to me, nobody in the group really cared if I produced DS scholarship. I never experienced anyone asking me for a membership card in order to join any of the disability studies gatherings at CCCC. Maybe I didn’t feel I needed to make that kind of explanation because it was always fairly apparent to everyone else that I was deaf, which gave me a sort of automatic credibility where disability was concerned. But despite the disability-cred that being profoundly deaf and working with sign language interpreters gave me, I nevertheless always felt that I had to explain to others that my scholarly focus was on writing classrooms, identity, diversity, and negotiations of difference, and not disability. Somehow, disability got factored out of that equation for me.

Early on, I think I made this distinction in part because back then, I did not have much experience with Disability Studies scholarship: none of my graduate coursework included a single text addressing disability issues or disability studies. Over the last 10 years, though, I’ve been able to read a lot of disability studies scholarship and I’ve spent a lot of time hanging around disability studies folks, who have welcomed me unhesitatingly, something for which I am still incredibly grateful.

However, if I didn’t present as perceptibly deaf, my sense is that people’s wonderment about my interest and how I would have been welcomed into the group would have been different. While I have no way of living another life and testing that claim, my sense of its veracity comes from experiencing numerous—and ongoing—conversations in and around disability studies observing the ways that people are queried about their relationships to disability. Disability studies scholar Corbett O’Toole, who is herself disabled, recently wrote an article published in Disability Studies Quarterly in which she describes how her queries about who was disabled in gathering of
disability studies scholars was considered rude; Leonard Cassuto, whose disability status I’m not sure about, published an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1999 called “Whose Field is it Anyway?” in which he described how the first question he would invariably receive at a Q&A session was about whether he was disabled.

And I have written about my own experience of frequently being asked to account for the relationship between my disability and my scholarship, even in settings where disability is not the topic of my work (Kerschbaum “On Rhetorical”). Indeed, when I presented an earlier version of that article at the 2011 CCCCs, members of the audience reinforced for me that even now, such questions about disability studies scholars, disabled scholars, and their relationships to disability, remain. It is a regular occurrence for scholars who work in disability studies or who are disabled themselves to be called to account for their relationship(s) to disability.

**Inclusion and Credibility**

Here, questions about who is included in disability studies, and who does disability studies scholarship, are key, integral, and still very much a palpable part of discussions about disability and the academy. It still matters if and how you identify as disabled, whether you have relationships with disability, and what those relationships are. These conversations about personal inclusion and relationships to disability are integral to disability studies because they are also about the ways that people build credibility within the field and access the field itself.

They are also questions about the ways that disability studies as a field is included within larger areas of inquiry such as composition and rhetoric studies. More than 20 years ago, writing about the field of literary studies, Lennard Davis, a leading disability studies scholar, noted that when speaking about “culturally engaged topics like the novel or the body I can count on a full house of spectators” but putting “‘disability’ in the title of my talk or of a session” meant attendance dropped radically” (xi). A similar phenomenon has been anecdotally observed within CCCC, when people point out that many disability-themed talks are attended by “the usual suspects.” I would venture to guess that disability studies scholars are not the only ones who may feel that their specific sub-specialty is a small or marginal one within the broader field of composition-rhetoric, but I think the persistence of this marginalization where disability studies is concerned is worth exploring.

I mentioned above the ways that I identified myself as not doing disability studies for quite a few years even while attending the CCCC Disability Studies SIG. This was so despite the fact that I would now say—and absolutely do say—that disability falls under the rubric of my interest in how people engage difference in writing classrooms. That is, my interest in how student writers engage differences among one another is absolutely a question that needs to consider disability as one manifestation of difference as it takes shape interactionally. But I am not only interested in disability, and my central line of inquiry isn’t one about disability per se—it’s about difference as it comes to be identified and negotiated between two or more interlocutors, and how these differences are marked and categorized in myriad ways.

I came back to these recollections when writing my book, *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* and wondering about questions such as, “How much does a book have to talk about disability in order to be a disability studies book?” and “Why doesn’t disability studies scholarship get widely
cited by even scholars who aren’t ‘doing’ disability studies?” A specific case in point that got me thinking on this track is Jason Palmeri’s terrific book, *Remixing Composition*. Palmeri is someone who has published on disability and technical communication, including a 2006 article, “Disability Studies, Cultural Analysis, and the Critical Practice of Technical Communication Pedagogy” that still receives attention from many disability studies scholars. For that reason, when his book came out, I picked it up excitedly, thinking this would be a real opportunity for a text that wasn’t about disability to still engage important disability concepts in some way. However, there is very little, almost no mention, of disability in his book, except for two brief references to Patricia Dunn’s groundbreaking book *Talking, Sketching, Moving*, which itself only indirectly makes disability part of its project. Below I’ve excerpted one such reference, in which I’ve bolded the section that makes the subtlest of nods to disability—by noting that students have “diverse strengths and limitations in their ability to learn”.

“Further demonstrating ways multimodal pedagogy can enhance the teaching of alphabetic writing, Patricia Dunn’s *Talking, Sketching, Moving* outlines numerous ‘aural, visual, kinesthetic, and spatial’ activities that teachers can employ to help students gain ‘metacognitive distance’ on their written work (11). **Recognizing that people all have diverse strengths and limitations in their ability to learn through alphabetic, auditory, visual, and kinesthetic means** (Gardner, *Frames*), Dunn argues that it is important to provide students with multiple sensory pathways—sketching, audio journals, walking a draft—for inventing and revising alphabetic texts.” (9, emphasis added).

Palmeri does also make a nod to disability when he notes that “we must also be mindful that ableist, classist, racist, and sexist power structures continue to negatively influence people’s abilities to access and transform digital technologies” (159, emphasis added), citing here Jay Dolmage’s important article “Rethinking Usability.”

Of course, just because someone writes about disability once does not mean they have to write about disability in everything they publish. But disability arguably remains important to Palmeri’s project of telling a revisionary history of multimodality. It is possible—and I am purely speculating here—that Palmeri did not want to be pegged as only a disability studies scholar, and in seeking to be more broadly identified, downplayed disability studies so that his scholarly identification would be one that highlighted multimodality and multimodal pedagogy instead. To be clear: I don’t see Palmeri as a disability studies scholar. But I do see him as someone who has engaged with disability scholarship and who is well-poised to identify and acknowledge rich intersections between multimodality and disability. To date, however, I have not seen evidence that his work has continued to engage disability studies in any sustained way.

In this case, my disappointment comes out of my sense that disability remains stubbornly marginalized as an identity category and as an area of scholarly inquiry that has bearing on broader aspects of our field, including composition pedagogy, rhetorical performance, and issues of access. Amy Vidali makes a similar observation in “Performing the Rhetorical Freak Show,” an article that appeared in *College English* in 2007. In this piece, Vidali calls out the way that composition and rhetoric scholarship tends to treat disability as “a solely personal phenomenon” (618) rather than as a structural issue or as an identity category that intersects with raced, classed,
and gendered identities prominent in composition and rhetoric research. Indeed, discussing Kristie Fleckenstein’s article, “Words Made Flesh,” Vidali notes, “Paradoxically, disability is everywhere in Fleckenstein’s essay: in her discussion of the ways bodies and literacies interact; in her argument for an expanded conception of imagery; and in her suggestion that polymorphic literacy provides increased access and avenues for student learning. Yet disability is never mentioned.” (618-19)

Disability scholar David Bolt, who edits the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, attributes this phenomenon within the humanities to what he calls “critical avoidance” of disability. While Bolt’s analysis is centered on humanities scholars, his observations could be applied to rhetoric and composition studies as well. Drawing on sociologist Gordon Allport’s foundational 1954 text, *The Nature of Prejudice*, which articulates avoidance as a manifestation of prejudice, Bolt suggests that “critical avoidance” characterizes not only social interactions with disabled people, but also the study of culture and representation, which, he asserts, avoids disability as a topic of inquiry that could productively inform cultural studies.

To return to the specific examples of Palmeri and Fleckenstein’s work, then, we might productively wonder whether the lack of engagement with disability reflected in their projects could be associated with a subtle yet persistent prejudice against disability within rhetoric and composition studies. Indeed, while disability studies has grown in influence and prominence, to the point that Michael Bérubé declared at the 2013 Modern Language Conference that disability studies is not “emerging” but has already emerged, there remain too many cases where we are not called to account for where disability emerges, often in surprising ways, in our work, unless—as in my case—one is perceptibly disabled.

Here it becomes worthwhile to come back to the question of credibility: how does one build credibility as a disability studies scholar? Because I am perceptibly disabled, I already have an obvious stake in disability circles, and may not experience the kind of wonderment or querying that might be directed at scholars whose disabilities may not be as readily identified as mine is. We want, on the one hand, wide recognition that disability is a social and structural force that directly affects the lives, experiences, and possibilities accorded to people who are identified as disabled. On the other hand, we also want that wide recognition to include careful attention to our growing body of scholarship, and I know that it can feel intimidating to move into such an arena. I spent a lot of time watching and experiencing before I tried writing about disability, and I may have had an easier time building credibility than many because of the “obviousness” of my disability.

I don’t have answers for the questions I lay out here, but I believe inclusion and credibility remain important terms for rhetoric and composition scholars to critically engage where disability studies is concerned. These questions are vitally important for us to probe because they speak to the kinds of things we expect to learn from interdisciplinary fields like disability studies. They are also important because they provide a space to continue exploring hard, intersectional questions about how our fields are composed and the relationships between disability, race, gender, socioeconomic class, religious affiliation, geographic location, and myriad other identity categories that matter to the ways we organize ourselves and make sense of our work.
Works Cited


