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Disability Studies in the Writing Center

In Writing Centers and Multiliteracy Centers around the country, there is a debate involving how to properly tutor students with disabilities. There are questions of whether to provide additional training to the tutors, or to simply have them adapt to the specific needs of each individual. However, the main issue is attracting students with disabilities to the centers. The perception of the Writing Center to the disabled community is the problem in which we should be focusing our attention. The Trinity College Writing Center must be a welcoming, and flexible space that can accommodate students of ranging capabilities; furthermore, we must be able to provide all needed information to these students prior to their appointments in order for them to be willing to visit us.

The book *Keywords for Disability Studies* is a collection of short articles that provide history, and definitions of the various terms in Disability Studies. The first section “Disability”, written by Rachel Adams, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, presents insight on the label. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term as followed: “a physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities [or] the fact or state of having such a condition” (Adams, Reiss, and Serlin 5). Over time, the term broadened into the social realm: “as with segregation, colonialism, and apartheid, shared experiences of social separation and political disenfranchisement ultimately galvanized many people with disabilities and their supporters toward a common purpose” (Adams, Reiss, and Serlin 7). In the 1960s and 1970s, the disability rights movement made many shifts to widening the issue of disability from only a medical

problem, to a social concern. Disability is no longer viewed as an internal concern of the individual, but is now a societal problem of how spaces can influence the lives of these individuals: “our understanding of disability is enhanced by awareness of the term’s complex genealogy, as well as by the enormously varied experiences of embodiment across cultures and socioeconomic locations” (Adams, Reiss, and Serlin 11). Therefore, the importance of how society interacts with the disabled community has become a much more prominent issue, and, furthermore, emphasizes the significance of making the Writing Center space welcoming.

In the chapter “Space” in *Keywords for Disability Studies*, the author, Rob Imrie, discusses the role of public area on the disabled community. To begin, he describes the significance of the subject: “a fundamental part of people’s existence is their emplacement in space and their relationships with objects that are geographically located at difference points or places” (Imrie 170). A major issue in the disabled community is the lack of accessibility in public spaces; however, there is another restriction in the social realm of these areas: “the human body is always emplaced, and its placement is conditioned, in part, by the social content and context of a place. Thus, the impaired body has, historically, been constructed as not normal, unsightly, and “out of place” in everyday environments” (Imrie 171). Therefore, the social construction of a space is equally important in the disabled community as its physical build. Due to this factor, the Writing Center must focus on the social and emotional aspects of its inclusivity. The Writing Center may not be as popular among our disabled students because they may feel unwelcomed or feel that the space is not accommodating. If the space of the center is not viewed as a comfortable area, the students will not schedule appointments in fear of being conformed to the “typical” structure of the appointments we hold.

In disability studies, one major goal is for society to adapt to the needs of the disabled, instead of having the disabled alter their lives to society. In a section of *Keywords for Disability Studies*, “Accommodation”, the author, Elizabeth F. Emens, discusses this idea: “in the disabled context accommodation means changing society in response to disability” (Emens 18). The Americans with Disabilities Act defines the expectations of places of work and service and how they should adapt: “reasonable accommodations” that are needed for those with disabilities to obtain the same workplace opportunities that those without disabilities automatically enjoy. By definition, any special accommodation requires the employer to treat an employee with a disability differently” (Emens 19). Therefore, the ADA does not require or suggest that areas act differently for these individuals; it wants them to only provide a reasonable amount of assistance. As a Writing Center that is available for students of all abilities, we should be making such accommodations, as well. In addition, making the Writing Center a more accommodating space would help all students. Whether the accommodations included physical design alterations, or changes in approaches and characteristics of space, every individual using the area could be benefited because they would be viewed as unique students instead of having to form to the “typical” session (Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll 5).

Many students with disabilities find sanctuary in Writing Centers because the learning approach is less overwhelming than a classroom setting. The one-on-one approach of the center is very helpful because the appointment can focus on the individual’s needs, which often are swept aside in a larger classroom atmosphere. In addition, by the time students with disabilities have entered college, they have learned the best ways in which they are able to complete their work with their condition. When these students enter Writing Centers, they are hoping to direct the appointment in a manner that incorporates their learning style (“Important”). Therefore, as a

Writing Center, we must be able to adapt to the learning styles of our students in order for them to gain the most out of their appointments. We want to Writing Center to continue to be a place of positivity for students and, therefore, we must be flexible to their needs.

Flexibility proves to be the most important and efficient skill for Writing Centers when tutoring students with disabilities. These disabilities and disorders vary greatly in severity and type; furthermore, each disability interacts with the individual differently. Therefore, it would not be logical or fathomable for Writing Centers to form a set of rules or tutoring formats dedicated to disabled students. For students with Learning Disabilities specifically, there are numerous recommended approaches for tutors that include the use of computers, extended time for appointments, and visual techniques (Babcock). The methods for assisting these students are wide-ranging, making it difficult for a Writing Center to develop a set of tactics for when LD students make appointments. In addition, these tactics may not even be compatible for some LD students, for there are many unknown variables. Every student is different, and every student interacts with his/her disability uniquely. Therefore, it would not be helpful to make a rulebook of any sort, but instead remain flexible and adapt to every students' individual needs.

Allison Hitt analyzes the role of accessibility in Writing Centers in her essay "Access for All: The Role of Dis/Ability in Multiliteracy Centers". She describes the importance of focusing on "flexibility in the process and the products" (Hitt 382). In order to be adaptive in this manner, Hitt states that Centers must apply the principles of Universal Design, and Universal Design for Learning. UD "emphasizes the importance of all spaces to be physically accessible to all people" (Hitt 382). UDL "extends UD in order to create equitable and flexible pedagogies" (Hitt 382). Hitt claims that if a center applies both of these methods, it can support students' different "physical abilities, modes of learning, types of knowledge, and literacies" (Hitt 382). Though

this is a beneficial approach to working with disabled students, it can lead to tutors treating these individuals too differently. Therefore, tutors must remember to not approach an appointment with a student with disabilities any differently than an abled-bodied individual:

All students who enter a writing center are treated individually and, thus, as *different* from one another in terms of what they bring to the center and how they learn and compose, so the issue is not seeing students with disability as different. Rather, the issue is not seeing students with disabilities as so *radically* different from other students that they are beyond help [...] such a differentiation is an example of treating students as *different*, but not treating students with disabilities *differently* (Hitt 383)

Therefore, centers are not encouraged to separate these students in their approaches, but instead, they should keep an open mind to every individual and be ready to adapt to the specific learning styles.

Though it is encouraged that Writing Centers are flexible with the methods of tutoring students with disabilities, these tactics can also help support other students. With Writing Centers being a more open atmosphere, students would be more willing to try different approaches to learning, or suggest an altering format for the appointment. As Hitt argues, “this agentic learning is valuable for students of all abilities to take control of what and how they best receive and create knowledge” (Hitt 384). Students should be encouraged to attempt and feel comfortable “engaging in verbal discussions, collaboratively drafting, looking up information in books, working on computers, and participating in online appointments” (Hitt 386). If all students are encouraged to try different forms of learning, and the center is open to various tutoring styles, disabled students will feel less out of place. There should be no structure in learning styles, and therefore, we must stay flexible as a center.

Though the Writing Center at Trinity College is structured, it is flexible in its methods of tutoring. Our system is constructed so our sessions are either half an hour, or an hour with one tutor per student. Other than the set-up, there are no other rules involving the appointment, for

we want the students to determine how the session is ran. As a center, we are flexible to what students bring in, as well as how they want us to tutor them. In addition, we have a closed off section in the back part of the room that has a partition between the table and the rest of the center. Tutors are also allowed to take their student to an adjacent room, if they want a quieter atmosphere. Therefore, I would consider our center flexible in its methods of approach, and I can confidently claim that we would be willing to make appropriate adjustments based on whatever would benefit the student. However, the issue I have discovered is not that our center is not welcoming to disabled students on campus, but that these students do not understand the adaptability of our center. Therefore, the goal of my project is to establish a presence of the Writing Center in the disabled community on campus, and inform those students of the resources we can provide.

At Trinity, we have an Accommodation Service for students with disabilities. When I began my project, I grew curious of whether this center recommended our service to its students. Therefore, I arranged to meet with Lori Clapis, the coordinator for the center. When I met with Lori, I asked if she told her students about the Writing Center. She replied in the positive, claiming she greatly encouraged her students to meet with the associates. However, she admitted she had a feeling few listened to her advice. She explained that many of the students had preconceived prejudices that the Writing Center was only meant for students who were struggling, or were not intelligent; students with disabilities are especially sensitive to those kinds of labels (Clapis). However, our Center is meant for all students, whether an individual feels he/she is not doing well on a paper, or simply wants another set of eyes reviewing his/her work. Though this is the case for many tutoring centers, this concern of being viewed as unintelligent spreads wider than just Writing Centers; it is reported that only half of students with

disabilities report their conditions to their school, and those who do often refuse accommodations due to the belief they will be treated differently (Hitt). The students at Trinity should not be ashamed of coming to get tutored, and, therefore, we must make it clear that all students use the Writing Center.

As I continued talking to Lori, I asked if she had any information about the Writing Center that she would normally give out to her students. She then showed me the two papers she would give to her students: the general brochure, and the bookmark that describe the Writing Center that can be found anywhere in the school. Though it was better than having nothing, I was not happy with the materials. I asked her if she would prefer having a pamphlet that more specifically targeted the disabled community on campus. Lori quickly agreed, stating that it would be very beneficial for the students to be informed about how the center can adapt to their needs. She also said it would be a great piece for parents, as well, so they would be more comfortable knowing their child had these resources (Clapis). Due to her request, I constructed a pamphlet specifically for the disabled community at Trinity College.

When developing my pamphlet, I attempted to follow the patterns I had seen for the Purdue OWL Online Writing Lab page. The page was constructed for students with disabilities, and, therefore, took into account the importance of the physical structure of the page. The page consists of a basic three-color set up: orange, green, and light orange. The colors are simply highlighted on the page so that the eye is not distracted; the two titles, “The Purdue Online Writing Lab” and “The Writing Lab at Purdue”, are in orange and green, while the other information is in light-orange boxes. In addition, these details are set up in bulleted lists, with black text and short sentences. There are limited images, all of which are animated. The set up of the page was very easy to read, and did not leave room for distraction or misinterpretation

(Brizee, Sousa, and Driscoll 10). When I designed my own pamphlet, I wanted to follow a similar pattern.

The pamphlet I constructed consists of two pages, which will be developed into the front and back. The front of the brochure reads “The Trinity College Writing Center Welcomes You!”. I chose this phrase because it illustrates our center in a warm light. In addition, one of the concerns within the disabled community is that the students will not feel included due to the typical constructed sessions set up; therefore, by stating that we “welcome” the individual, they will hopefully feel less inclined to worry about lack of resources for he/she will know we are ready to help. Furthermore, by directing the pamphlet at the specific person reading it, it becomes personalized. The page itself is very simple, with an image of the Allan K. Smith building at the top, the welcome banner, and three lists of information. The image of the building is to notify the student of where the Writing Center is located, which I hope would relieve any extra stress of trying to find the building. The building is also very colorful and illuminated by a great deal of light, which creates a welcoming image to go along with the slogan. Below the grey welcome banner, I have two lists which are titled “What We Offer” and “Where We are Located”. The first list gives the basic information of our Writing Center, including the length of appointments, our hours, the scheduling format, and the ways in which we tutor. I included this information because I felt it was best for the students to have a complete vision of the set-up; therefore, they will not be caught off guard by any aspect of it, which is often a concern many disabled individuals feel when entering a new situation. Furthermore, I discussed how we have one-on-one tutoring and that our associates will help students with any form of writing, including essays, creative pieces, applications, lap reports, etc. The inclusion of this information was so the students know we are not strictly an essay-based tutoring center, and they should feel

comfortable bringing in other pieces of writing. I believe this information would serve any individual well, despite being able bodied or not, for it is a common belief at Trinity that our Writing Center is strictly for English papers, when it is meant to reach a wider audience.

The second list is titled “Where We Are Located” which gives detailed information about the placement of the Writing Center. The first bullet point simply states our address, including the building name and the street number. The next bullet point describes where the center is located in the building in specific detail, so the students know exactly where they are being sent, and they do not need to have anxiety over finding the room. I also included its location in reference to the wheelchair ramp, for students who are physically impaired. I also included online information, so if the students wish to do their own research before entering, they may do that, as well.

To the right of the front page, I have a section titled “More About Our Writing Associates”. This section is dedicated to more information about the tutors to give the students a better idea of who they will be working with, and, hopefully, opening up to. I described how the Writing Associates have been properly trained to tutor every student to the best of their abilities; therefore, the students understand that the Associates are up to the task to help them. I also included that the Writing Associates are students at Trinity College, so they are aware that their peers will be working with them, which would be a more relaxed relationship than if we had professors or other individuals tutoring them. Finally, I have also listed that we have tutors covering a wide range of majors. I included this detail because there is a misconceived belief that we are all English majors, and cannot help in areas of math, science, etc.

The back of the pamphlet is broken up into three columns. The page is set-up very simply with three grey boxes and black text. My hope is that the pamphlet will be as easily read as

possible, and the students will be able to focus on the information in its plain setting. The first column is a comment to the students reading the pamphlet. At the top, there is a thought bubble with the words “How We Can Help You” positioned within it. As I was searching for a way to make this page pop, I was looking through hundreds of images of pencils, papers, and students completing work. However, I kept asking myself if those images applied to everyone and came to the conclusion that they do not. It is quite possible that a student will enter our Center and not be able to write with a pencil. Furthermore, the images of students sitting down while working was too structured; we want to encourage students to be comfortable, and that may be pacing as they work. The one image I found that was universal, was a thought bubble, for no matter the form it is released, every human being has thoughts that are legitimate and meant to be heard. Ultimately, it is our job to help these students get those thoughts in writing, whatever the process.

The section beneath the thought bubble is a blurb written for the students. The paragraph states that it is the Writing Associate’s job to help the student to the best of our ability; we want to have the student leave the Center feeling better about their writing than when they entered. In addition, I included a statement about how the student will determine the direction of the appointment, and the tutor is simply there for support. I included this detail to present our sessions as flexible, so the students would not feel as if they were stuck within a certain structure of learning. Following this statement, I wrote in bold “All students are welcome!” for I wanted to stress several ideas. First, I wanted to confirm that we are inclusive to students of all abilities. Secondly, when I spoke to Lori, she told me that some students have the belief that only “dumb” students get tutored, and, therefore, they would be embarrassed to go to the Center. Through this statement, I hope that the students will understand the Center is not limited to those who are

struggling. I also included an additional statement in this section that describes the many stages of writing one can bring in. Lori expressed her concern that many students will only go to the Center when they are almost done with his/her paper, and how she would prefer students visit us at the beginning to receive help with the organization aspect. We have also discussed this desire in the Writing Center, for we want students to visit us throughout the process, and not just for an editing job the night before a paper is due. The more students come into the center, the more help they can receive.

The next two sections of the page are dedicated to a list of ways in which the Writing Center can accommodate various needs. The list begins by describing the partition we have in the back part of the room, as well as the adjacent room that we are able to use when needed. I also listed that the student is able to make a standing appointment by emailing the head of our center, Tennyson O'Donnell. I also stated that we were able to help the student write out or organize his/her ideas. Finally, I concluded by encouraging the students to inform us of anything that would make them feel more comfortable during the appointment, for every student is unique in his/her learning style, and our best option is always to be flexible.

Below the list, I included an image of two figures holding hands while standing on puzzle pieces. I wanted to include a picture of people holding hands to represent how we will be helping the student, and this image was the best I found for neither figure represents a gender, or have any specific features. Therefore, they are as applicable as possible besides their visibly abled bodies. In addition, they are standing on puzzle pieces, which are the universal symbol of autism awareness, which I believe emphasizes our desire to be inclusive to all students.

The pamphlet I have created for the Accommodation Service Center on campus is a way for our Writing Center to reach out to the disabled community on campus. Overall as a

Writing Center, we must be flexible to include all learning styles; this adaptability must be taken on in all areas on campus in order for disabled students to feel more accepted and appreciated.

With the help of Lori Clapis, the Accommodation Service Center, and the Writing Center, Trinity College can become a more inclusive space for those living with disabilities.

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