Reframing Literacies of Success: The Importance of Access and Transparency in the Communications Classroom

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Accessibility in the classroom is an all-encompassing approach to education that is necessary and beneficial not just for students with disabilities (visible and invisible), but also for students with different learning styles, students from different class backgrounds, and students whose first language may not be English. The root word of *accessibility* is *access,* and when we choose to foreground this in our teaching, all students benefit. As stated by disability and design scholar Bess Williamson, access is "most powerful when interpreted broadly, bringing notice to mobility and communication barriers that may not be as tangible as sidewalk curbs and public announcement systems."[1] It is most powerful when interpreted broadly because it catalyzes an understanding of barriers that various communities face and allows for the beginning of this barrier removal. Pairing this broad understanding of access with a sense of transparency is important for fostering trust and accountability, something I have come to believe is necessary in my own teaching practice.

My first semester of teaching Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Kansas forced me to think a lot about these concepts. I am a physically disabled woman who uses a motorized wheelchair, and as I entered the classroom each morning—hyper aware of the fact that I was, at most, five years older than my students—I had no teaching persona in the form of armor to distance myself from my students, or to form a shield of authority around me. I was overly conscious of my physical presence in the classroom as a small, young, wheelchair using woman, an identity I could not hide. I didn't know how to pretend an authority of my students I felt I did not have (due not to my disability, but rather my age, and also a healthy dose of imposter syndrome), and so, instead, leaned into transpar-

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ency and honesty as my teaching practice. In order to do this, I had to develop a certain level of self-awareness as an instructor, which then became an important skill for my students to develop as well.

Applying the concept of access to teaching is not simply about responding to individual students' accommodations, but rather designing a course and approach to teaching proactively, in which disability (i.e., "othered" bodyminds) are considered and integrated from the beginning. This means utilizing many different formats of material, such as video with closed captioning, transcripts, audio, etc. This doesn't just benefit students who are blind or deaf, but also students with different learning styles. In addition, having video or audio along with a transcript and closed captions allows for more access for speakers of other languages.

Because I am unable to hide my disability, and because I believe strongly in increased representation and discussion of disability, I chose to incorporate material that deals with disability into my curriculum, something which I continue to do today. Structuring course content around diversity and working to highlight voices of marginalized communities is especially important when discussing communication and storytelling. For instance, I have used famed blind model Molly Burke's Instagram account as a way to discuss how image descriptions in captions are another form of communication that are also a point of access for visually impaired individuals. I also always incorporate Chimimanda Agozie's well-known Ted Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," into my writing classes, as a way to get students thinking about the ways in which literacy is "socially constructed and enacted," as rhetoric scholar J. Blake Scott asserts.[2] Incorporating material that centers diverse voices *and* being proactive about providing material in different formats is a two-pronged approach to access, which looks at both course content and design, and allows for a broad interpretation of access, one which benefits all students.

When looking at a course on communication, specifically, access means we must rethink our preconceived notions of what "communication" is, beyond simply vocalized speech or written text. I taught four semesters of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Kansas, a course which has an emphasis on rhetorical flexibility and multi-modality. Integrating accessibility into this class and the other classes I taught means fostering an understanding of communication in its many different forms, including artforms like dance, design, and music.

If we think of disability and communication, our first thought may be of American Sign Language, as ASL is its own language and mode of speech. But the intersections of communication and disability are so much more than this: slurred speech, typing vs. handwriting, blinking, etc. This "cracking open" our definition of communications necessitates an understanding that there is no *right* way to communicate. Indeed, as celebrated disability educator, speaker, and writer Emily Ladau points out in her book *Demystifying Disability,*

> We're so often taught that there are rules for communicating effectively—firm handshakes, direct eye contact, responsive fa-

> cial expressions and body language, and so on. However, these so-called skills aren't always accessible to disabled people, and we shouldn't expect them as the norm.[3]

So, where do transparency and openness intersect with access? Ultimately, both of these approaches center trust—trust of our students, and the students' trust of us. If we are going to design and implement course material that honors different learning styles and abilities, we would do well to trust that our students know what they need in order to succeed and that diversifying our understanding of communication benefits everyone. And likewise, for our students to actually engage *and* create their own material, they must be able to trust us. This is where transparency comes in.

Throughout my time teaching writing courses, the ability to be transparent with my students has ultimately led to a deepened sense of relatability between everyone in the classroom, a heightened level of trust, and thus an increased feeling on my end that I am in a spot to facilitate learning and writing. The wonderful side effect of this, then, is that my students begin to develop their own self-awareness, which leads to further critical thinking in regards to their own work. By modeling my own self-awareness as an instructor through transparency and openness, I have been better able to impart this self-awareness on my students.

For example, a key component of Composition & Rhetoric courses I have taught in the past is the Cultural Literacy Narrative, which asks students to reflect on their own communication practices and draw conclusions about how this has been influenced by a culture or cultures they are a part of. Beginning the course with this unit effectively sets the tone for the remainder of the semester, in which we interrogate our own perceptions of language and communication, and forge new pathways.

To introduce the Cultural Literacy Narrative, I ask students to bring to class their own definition of writing. I then have my students get into groups and discuss their definitions, while coming up with a new definition that they can all agree on as a group. These definitions are then shared, and a class-wide discussion on what writing is ensues. Ultimately, the goal of this activity is to introduce to students how very broad "writing" can be, and very flexible the term "text" can be as a result.

To follow up on this activity, I have my students do this again, except in regards to literacy. The goal of this activity is to cultivate discussion and reflection on what we view literacy to be, what we mean by "literate," and how some literacies are privileged over others. I use this opportunity to discuss how Standardized Edited English (SEE) is privileged in Western-academia, who it benefits and who it hinders, and how my role as their instructor is to cultivate an awareness of this in them, and help them learn the rules *if they choose*—that is, if they would like me to mark for grammar, spelling, and punctuation on their papers, I will, but only if they would like me to, as a way for them to gain access to the communities SEE advantages (as education scholar Lisa Delpit posits).

This is then an appropriate time to introduce and question the idea of literacy as success, referring to those narratives that assume, as rhetoric scholar Kara Poe Alexander states, "the more literate one is, the more successful he or she will be."[4] What does this mean? How is "literate," in this context, actually defined? Have they experienced this narrative in their own lives? Or witnessed it? This ties in perfectly, then, with conversations of access and disability, and why it is crucial to broaden our definition of communication.

In addition to all of this, a level of self-awareness also promotes a sense of ownership for a student and their work. If they can consciously make choices about their writing and then explain how and why they made those choices, they will likely see the work they have produced as theirs and take pride in it, as it has required a deeper level of understanding to create. Fostering a student's self-awareness ideally not only creates a heightened feeling of ownership over the work they produce, but also over their ideas and processes. Encouraging a sense of ownership at every step of the composition process then fosters a heightened level of consciousness among students in regard to the choices they are making.

When we model access in our classrooms, we then also *teach* access, facilitating an environment where students can learn about ways of being and ways of communicating they may not have been aware of. In turn, this awareness fosters new modes of communication in the world beyond the classroom, along with instilling empathy into communication. When we think about how someone's intelligence or humanity is often measured by their ability to "speak well," the intersections of access and communication can be revolutionary starting points for students to engage with, and revolutionary concepts for teachers to introduce.

Notes

1. Williamson, Bess. "Access." *Keywords for Disability Studies.* NYU Press, 2015, p. 16.
2. Scott, J. Blake. "The Literacy Narrative as Production Pedagogy in the Composition Classroom." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1997, pp. 108-17.
3. Ladau, Emily. *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to be an Ally*. Ten Speed Press, 2021.
4. Alexander, Kara Poe. "Successes, Victims, and Prodigies: 'Master' and 'Little' Cultural Narratives in the Literacy Narrative Genre." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2011, pp. 608-63.