From Difference to Différance: Developing a Disability-Centered Writing Program

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Abstract: This program profile of the Critical Writing Program at the University of Pennsylvania focuses on how disability came to be a valued term, a structuring philosophy, and a pedagogical touchstone for the program's philosophy, curriculum, and practices. After exploring various challenges involved in addressing the needs of students with disabilities, we provide an overview of our program's efforts to address the needs of students with disabilities. In so doing, we explain how we came to adopt an orientation towards disability that depends for its philosophical force on a return to Derrida's advocacy of the deconstructive notion of *différance*. *Différance* seeks to overturn binary thinking, challenge uninterrogated binaries such as abled/disabled and the normate templates that enact and enforce these, replacing them with a relational, fluid, contextual approach.

> "[We] must traverse a phase of overturning. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-a-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand.
> --Jacques Derrida, "Interview with Julia Kristeva"

Introduction

This profile will briefly trace the formation and development of the Critical Writing Program in its effort, almost from its founding in 2003, to embrace *différance*, a concept introduced by Derrida to deconstruct binary thinking that unreflectively and inaccurately imagines that we can divide whatever is before us into two terms, one valued and idealized, the other devalued and denigrated. Our profile will explore how disability has become a valued term, a structuring philosophy and a pedagogical touchstone of our writing program. We will begin this profile by giving an overview of the University of Pennsylvania and the development of the Critical Writing Program, including its curriculum. Thereafter we will explore the institutional and program-specific challenges in our effort to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and finally conclude with some of the practices and strategies that our program employs in our continuing effort to identify and replace a diagnostic, identity-based approach, often referred to as "the accommodation model," with a more fluid, relational approach that better addresses the complexities and contexts that facilitate effective writing instruction and aligns more closely with the social model of disability.

Background: University of Pennsylvania

Founded in 1740, the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) is the fourth oldest university in the nation and arguably the first to introduce a writing program in the vernacular. Located in Philadelphia, this Ivy League institution has twelve graduate and four undergraduate schools (College of Arts & Sciences; Wharton; Engineering, Nursing). In 2007, Penn became the largest school in the country to offer an all-grant, no-loan financial aid program to its 10,000 undergraduates. This aid substantially altered student demographics by providing access to students from a range of social and economic backgrounds. This year, 47% of students will receive an average of $43,800 in grants and work-study programs, and those whose parents earn less than $75,000 will receive full funding, including tuition, books, room and board. 48% of the Class of 2021 self-identify as students of color; 16% identify as international; 12% identify as first-generation, and 53% as female. They are drawn from 72 countries and every state in the U.S. Most

are well-prepared in terms of conventional measures. 97% are from the top 10% of their high school class. The middle 50% of test scores were SAT Critical Reading 710-790, SAT Math 740-800, ACT Composite 32-35. Penn Admissions stopped requiring the Writing SAT this year; last year's middle group scores in this category were 700-790.

The Critical Writing Program

The Critical Writing Program, which includes first-year writing seminars, writing in the disciplines, and the Marks Family Writing Center, was founded in 2003 as an independent writing program with its own administrative and instructional staff and budget as part of the Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing (CPCW). CPCW is an umbrella organization resulting from a university-wide decision by Penn administration and faculty to consolidate all writing resources and programs into a single center, including the Critical Writing Program; the Creative Writing Program; PennSound (audio archive project creating and collecting audio files of writers' readings); and Kelly Writers House, a hub for student, community, faculty, and writers-in-residence. CPCW also hosts many other writing-related programs, internships, contests, resources, reading and writing groups, and outreach efforts. Nearly all programs are hosted by the School of Arts and Sciences, including the two academic programs, Critical and Creative Writing.

The Critical Writing Program is charged with developing writing in the disciplines, including first-year discipline-based writing seminars required of all undergraduates. Penn's commitment to writing in the disciplines is indebted to the work of writing-across-the-university pioneers at Penn in the 1980s and early 90s, including Elaine Maimon and Peshe Kuriloff, who created Penn's Writing Across the University (WATU) Program. Since our founding in 2003, our writing seminars have typically represented between 20 and 30 disciplines, from anthropology to physics, including seminars on disability taught by scholars with credentials in that field drawn from a range of disciplines.

It's important to note that multidisciplinarity was our first and formative encounter with difference—in this instance, those that surfaced due to differences in disciplinary approaches to teaching and writing, which soon led us to recognize that that there was no such thing as "good writing" or "good academic writing," no single measure of what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson would call a "normate" construct, an uninterrogated ideal that we use to set our expectations and shape our assessments of students, that we might use as a basis for our program's teaching philosophy and desired outcomes. Multidisciplinarity was thus our first encounter with, and deconstruction of, normate thinking. At first—and just as we would a bit later in response to challenges from neurodiverse faculty and students—we acted like any inheritor of the enlightenment project: We tried to identify, describe, and taxonomize the differences we were encountering, not only from one discipline and genre to the next, but from one faculty member to the next within a given discipline. Over time, we came to recognize the impossibility of this grand identity project, this attempt to catalogue and respond to the multitude of differences we were encountering. The increasing futility of this effort alerted us to the limitations of approaches based on diagnostic identities, e.g., "the ADD student" or "the autistic student," and led us to foster a philosophy and set of practices informed by what Derrida alludes to in our epigraph, an approach that challenges the violent hierarchy of abled/disabled and replaces it with one that emphasizes the importance of relationships and contexts rather than identity categories (see also Kerschbaum, *Toward*). This is not to dismiss the importance of identities in certain kinds of political and institutional initiatives, but to suggest that we need a double movement, one that seeks to empower those on the devalued side of the binary, and another that seeks to do away with the binary altogether, the process of overturning to which Derrida alludes. While the purpose of this profile is to provide a practical overview of our program's approach to disability, rather than engage in an exegesis of the rather dense theory informing it, theory and practice are of a piece in our program, a praxis, and we will do our best to touch upon some theoretical considerations while focusing mostly on the nuts and bolts of our approach. In the next section, we will discuss the major, program-wide challenges to addressing the needs of students with disabilities, and thereafter provide an overview of our program's responses to these challenges in our ongoing effort to develop more effective policies and practices.

Program-Wide Challenges for Addressing the Needs of Disabled Students

Lack of information about students with disabilities

The lack of information available to institutions, programs, and individual instructors about students with disabilities poses a significant barrier to the kinds of identity-based approaches customarily deployed for assisting at-risk or otherwise marginalized students. Programs and support systems are often organized around such identity markers as race, gender, English language proficiency, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class (e.g., first-generation), or based upon such measures as high school transcripts and scores on admissions and placement tests. Despite that

most students with disabilities enter college as an at-risk population, no identification of disability can be collected at the point of admission. It is left up to the individual student to self-identify and register if they are to receive any disability accommodations.

According to a major disability advocacy group, "Policymakers, program administrators, service providers, researchers, advocates for people with disabilities, and people with disabilities and their families need accessible, valid data/statistics to support their decisions related to policy improvements, program administration, service delivery, protection of civil rights, and major life activities" if we are to advance the interests of those with disabilities (Institute on Disability). However, the American Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits universities from seeking information about disability at the point of admission and for good reason: They wish to protect students with disabilities from being discriminated against or stigmatized. Yet while this measure prevents discrimination it also renders opaque how many students with disabilities attend a given institution, and thus becomes an obstacle to identifying and supporting them. If writing programs understood that perhaps one quarter or more of their students have disabilities —and often multiple disabilities—surely this would have an immediate and profound impact on all aspects of the program. The current approach to disability may lead WPAs and teachers to imagine that only a small handful of students have disabilities—at most the 11% who self-identify and register (National Center for Education Statistics, Table 311.10), or those few who both register and seek accommodations for their writing courses.

As a consequence, writing programs may only deal with a subset of a subset of the overall population of students with disabilities. As is well-known among scholars who research at the intersections of writing studies and disability studies, many students are reluctant to identify as such or to register for disability services at their institutions for the same reasons as universities are prevented from asking students at the point of admission if they have a disability (Hitt; Walters; Wood). Research in the field of disability demographics routinely remarks on the substantial under-reporting of disability due to students' fears of stigmatization, aversion to the bureaucratic demands of the registration process, and belief that the kinds of accommodations dispensed will be of little or no use in terms of their particular disability.

Of those students who do identify and register, the National Center for Education Statistics reports the following distribution for the 2008-09 academic year, in institutions with 10,000-plus undergraduates: 29 percent had learning disabilities; 18% had ADD/ADHD; 2% had ASD; 3% had cognitive difficulties; 16% had mental illness (including depression, anxiety, and PTSD). Other reported disabilities included health impairment (10%), including chronic illnesses; physical mobility (8%); hearing (4%); traumatic brain injury (3%); seeing (3%), and speaking or language impairments (1%) (Raue, Lewis and Coopersmith, Table 4). According to this data, then, more than two-thirds of reported disabilities are in categories often referred to as "invisible" or "hidden," including learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD, cognitive difficulties, depression, anxiety, and PTSD.

Like many—probably most—other institutions, Penn treats as confidential the number of students who register with the Student Disabilities Services office. We therefore can only extrapolate based on national statistics, which suggest that about 11% of our students—or 1100 undergraduates—have registered with our Student Disabilities Services office, including about 300 incoming freshmen among the 2600 annually populating our first-year writing seminar. We approach that 11% figure as highly conservative, knowing that about two-thirds of postsecondary students with disabilities are likely to receive no accommodations from their colleges. For example, a recent survey of postsecondary students with disability said that they did not consider themselves to have a disability; another 7 percent acknowledged having a disability but had not told their colleges about it (Lederman; Wagner et al). In short, from a program administration perspective, instructional staff annually face a large population of students with disabilities that may affect their ability to benefit from a writing course, and more than two-thirds of these students are likely to be "invisible" to those instructors and to the program as a whole.

Accommodating invisible disabilities

For the 2008-09 academic year, the NCES survey of all institutions that enrolled students with disabilities reported the following distribution of accommodations: additional exam time (93%); classroom note-takers (77%); faculty-provided written course notes or assignments (72%); help with learning strategies or study skills (72%); alternative exam formats (71%), and adaptive equipment and technology (70%) (cf. Raue, Lewis and Coopersmith, Table 6). These are the accommodations approved by the federal government. However, in our experience, few of these accommodations are much help in writing seminars when working with students who report, formally or informally, that they have been diagnosed with a range of different disabilities. For example, students with dyslexia, processing, and reading comprehension issues may find themselves at a disadvantage when assigned substantial weekly readings and source-based papers. While these are not "timed" assignments, they certainly do take a significant amount of time, which is finite for neurotypical as well as neurodiverse students. Thus a student with reading comprehension issues who requires perhaps triple or quadruple the time to read an article or book for each of their

classes is given no extra time to do so. Within our program, a growing recognition of the tyranny of what Jay Dolmage calls "normative time" (179) has influenced the amount of and approach to reading we assign, but we have much work to do on this. Similarly, scaffolded assignments, while a greatly lauded approach to writing instruction, can be a barrier for students whose disabilities affect memory, time management, organization, or involve OCD or perfectionism (for more on accommodating mental disability, see Price). Add to this that there are no formal accommodations for these sorts of challenges even if the student registers with disabilities services, and that invisible disabilities tend to remain hidden in one's classroom and program, and it is easy to see how deeply flawed are identity-based models of accommodation.

Multiple, fluid, and contradictory identities

While we know that students with disabilities are less likely to attend college, there is scarce information on which kinds of disabilities most dissuade students from higher education, other than that students with vision or hearing impairments are likelier to attend college than those with other disabilities (Henderson 10). We do know that students with learning disabilities are more prone to drop out than the average population (Scanlon and Mellard). This challenge has to do with the fact that students are likely to have a complex or what, in learning theory, is called a "jagged," profile: Most learners are better at some things than at other things. Students represent constellations of skills and challenges, dispositions and confidence levels, that affect them in one class or one assignment more than in another, or one day more than another. A reliance on medical diagnoses is, for these and other reasons, counter to the social model of disability at the center of disability studies. However, even if we were provided with a thorough medical diagnosis of a given student, we would be hard-pressed to know how best to accommodate that particular student's abilities and disposition in a writing course (see, for example, Kerschbaum "Anecdotal"; Lewiecki-Wilson, Dolmage, Heilker and Jurecic; Yergeau).

One group of students with disabilities that has received very little attention involves those who are sometimes categorized as "twice exceptional," or "gifted with disabilities." According to Benjamin J. Lovett and Lawrence J. Lewandowski, a person in this category is defined as one "whose measured general ability is significantly above average (i.e., in an absolute sense, relative to the population at large) but whose achievement in some academic subject area is squarely in the below-average range" (515). For example, a student may be in the 90th to 99th percentile in all categories in the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement often given to diagnose learning disabilities but be in the 10th percentile for reading comprehension. Depending on levels of support and attention, as well as whatever biases shape assessors' dispositions, a "twice exceptional" student might as readily be placed in the special education track as in the gifted student track.

As this suggests, "twice-exceptional" students can pose unique challenges to writing program administrators. The question of how to cultivate such students' skills while also recognizing and addressing disability has been the subject of some scholarly attention (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, and Moon; Pfeiffer "Identifying"; Santamaria) but has been neglected by those in higher education as well as by those at the intersections of disability studies and composition studies. Often, these students' disabilities may go unrecognized or are misdiagnosed because of the limitations of identity-based thinking, in which one is either able or disabled, where, to recall our epigraph, one term governs and has the upper hand over the other. At the theoretical level, the "twice exceptional" disrupts this easy binary, and at the level of practice, it interferes with an assessor's or instructor's ability to grasp that a student might be both cognitively gifted and have a cognitive disability. This is a problem that may be exacerbated at an elite institution such as Penn, where students are admitted based upon a demonstrated record of achievement typical of "gifted" students. It is difficult, if not mind-boggling, for some instructors to recognize that a student may be regularly attending classes, engaging satisfactorily, even brilliantly, in class discussions and activities, but then turn in little or no work, or work that is poorly executed. Such students are often themselves bewildered by their poor performance, although others will confide that they have heard a lifetime of lectures about not living up to their potential, of being berated as lazy, careless, undisciplined, disrespectful, and so on. On the flip side, once an instructor recognizes that a student has a learning disability, they may find it difficult to grasp that the student might also be cognitively gifted in other areas (Pfeiffer *Handbook*; Webb; Robertson, Pfeiffer and Taylor).

In this way, students with disabilities have been teaching us the futility of diagnosis-based identities for developing effective instructional practices. In so doing, they contribute to our understanding of universal design in the writing classroom, where we are tasked to approach each student as having a jagged profile itself subject to the vicissitudes of time, space, assignment, mood, sleep, and the vast ecology of student life within and beyond our classroom's confines.

Talking about disability

Along with the lack of basic information, the one-size-fits-all accommodations, the complexity and multiplicity of types of disability and how to accommodate such multiplicity, yet another nearly insurmountable challenge is the legal and sometimes simply imagined constraints on speech about disability. We wish to be clear in this section that teachers and administrators are free and encouraged to discuss disability in general with their students and instructors, including through syllabus statements that address accommodations for disability; class discussions about disability and its impact on the work or topic at hand; course topics that focus on disability, and professional development sessions on disability, all of which we do in our program. However, most institutions and disability offices in higher education recommend or sometimes insist that instructors refrain from engaging in discussions with individual students about disability beyond what is scripted by the institution's letter outlining disability accommodations. Before any conversation can occur, students must register with the institution's disability services office, and once this process is completed, the contours of the discussion are limited and framed by the slender information provided in the letter sent to the instructor. Unfortunately, the current "accommodations" delineated are often all but meaningless in terms of addressing the needs of those with invisible disabilities in a writing class, and thus in our particular context, is something of a dead end with no allowance for a discussion about what might be more helpful than, for example, extended time for taking exams in a writing course, where exams are rarely given.

While the ADA explicitly prohibits asking students at the point of admission whether they have a disability, we could find no similar regulation prohibiting post-secondary instructors from inquiring about disability or recommending that students seek an assessment. Yet there are, as with the ADA prohibitions on point-of-entry queries, good reasons for institutional wariness about having such conversations with students. First, being confined to what is explicitly provided in the letter sent by the disabilities services office prevents instructors from making independent judgments about what kinds of accommodations the student should be given. It also protects the student's privacy; and ensures against discriminatory behavior or accommodations that would be disadvantageous or unfairly advantageous to the student with a disability. All are excellent reasons for avoiding such discussions with students.

But these constraints also render nearly useless an identity-based approach to disability, since instructors are not at liberty to have discussions about individual students' disabilities beyond what is outlined in their letters. The letters are highly formulaic and do not provide the kind of complex information about students' particular and varied needs that might enable an instructor to initiate a discussion with the student about how to best support them in the writing seminar (for more on disclosure discussions, syllabus policies, and accommodation letters, see Kerschbaum "Anecdotal"; Samuels; Vidali; Wood and Madden).

We will now turn to how these and other considerations have influenced the development of our curriculum and our growing recognition of the importance of recognizing differences, particularly in the area of neurodiversity.

The Critical Writing Curriculum

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, our founding in 2003 was in many respects a series of encounters with many types of difference, the sheer number of which arguably compelled us to take difference as such into account (for more on this, see Ross "Managing Change"). Encounters with differences in learners have most obviously been central to our mission as a writing program, but as we worked to develop a shared philosophy, we encountered equally formidable differences in terms of working with an instructional staff that was—like many writing programs— quite diverse in rank, with instructors ranging from long-standing tenured to tenure-track faculty, graduate students in their eighth or ninth year of study, graduate students in their second or third year of study, adjuncts who had terminal degrees, PhDs, or were ABD, some of whom were in ongoing job searches, to those who had patched together part-time adjunct positions, and still others who worked part-time because they enjoyed it or sought the extra income. Our instructional staff was reasonably diverse in many other respects, including gender, race, class, age, experience, status, sexual orientation, disability and academic credentials. But we also confronted a type of diversity unusual in writing programs: our instructional staff was, and is, drawn from across disciplines, institutions, and nations, with very different outlooks and relationships to our program and to writing instruction. How were we to address the needs of diverse learners, when we couldn't agree on what constituted good writing, how writing should be taught, what a writing program should look like, hire, do, or expect of its instructional staff and students?

Meeting with students turned up similarly broad differences but also considerably more common ground. For example, students appreciated the variety of topics our seminars offered, but did not feel that the courses were fair or equivalent. There were few constraints on the seminars, other than that students had to produce at least 20 pages of writing, some of it revised and polished. This translated into reading and writing assignments that diverged profoundly from one course to the next, as did the approach to teaching these, the goals and learning outcomes (if such were expressed), and the criteria for grading. How, students justifiably asked, could such vastly different courses, instructors, approaches, assignments, and assessment of student work consistently and fairly fulfill the

same requirement? And how were we ensuring that what was being taught represented the best practices in writing pedagogy? We did not receive any feedback at this time from students with disabilities, though we would in the years ahead. In 2010, we began discussions of how universal design might inform our curriculum, a focus that prompted us to introduce multimodal methods of classroom instruction.

As our inaugural year came to an end, we agreed that we needed to have a shared approach to teaching and assessing writing that would meet students' demands for fairness and consistency across the seminars, would address faculty demands for ensuring that students were prepared to write at a college level, and would ensure that students were being exposed to best practices in writing studies. After extensive research into approaches to writing instruction, we chose to retain the discipline-based, topic-based course structure and to adopt Kenneth Bruffee's *Short Course in Writing* as our shared method. It appeared to most in the program that Bruffee's student-centered, active learning, peer-oriented, collaborative pedagogy and scaffolded assignments were a good fit for writing in each of our disciplines. The following year, 2004, we piloted a curriculum that used his text and method for the first half of the semester and left the second half open for instructors to design at will while taking the lessons of the first half into account and practice. We also agreed to use the language employed by Bruffee (e.g., proposition, reasons, evidence, counterargument, concession) consistently across the program so that when we met we would have a common vocabulary for talking about student writing.

By the second year of this pilot, we had learned that it was an excellent approach for teaching writing, and particularly for students who experienced particular challenges with writing, whether in terms of preparation, disability, dispositions, language proficiency, or self-confidence. While some students (and instructors) grumbled about how structured it was, depriving them of opportunities to develop their "individual style," most grudgingly admitted that for the first time academic writing made sense to them. Students reported that the approach gave them a much better grasp of how to be, as well as how to identify, a successful academic writer. Scaffolding slowed the process, broke it into small manageable concrete parts that instructors as well as students could explain to each other. It lent itself to visual rhetoric, charts and images to demonstrate structure or coherence. It led to student-centered learning and problem-solving. In short, it engaged with and taught all students strategies that are often recommended for those students with disabilities as well as for those who are underprepared, lack self-confidence, or are non-native speakers.

Along with being a better method for teaching students for whom writing was particularly challenging, having a shared method transformed the program in a way that has been of particular benefit to students with writing-related disabilities. Individual stories of teacher/student triumph or failure became evidence of shared phenomena, data that revealed our shared approach's teaching successes and failures. We discovered that most of us had one or two students each semester who exhibited relatively similar types of failures. For example, we identified a pattern of students who faded out by the second or third week of the source-based synthesis assignment, no matter whether we opened or closed the semester with that assignment. This led to our identifying students with reading challenges that were proving a barrier to their success in the seminars, from under preparation to reading speed or comprehension. With each such instance of shared experience, we pay close attention to the issue identified, gather information, and explore and test new approaches. By 2006, we were collecting various data, including inter-rater reliability scores for our portfolio assessment process, which has proven key to identifying and accommodating students who struggle for various reasons with the writing curriculum (see Ross and LeGrand).

Vis-a-Vis and The Curriculum

Derrida describes *différance* as distinction, difference, discernibility but also the interposition of a delay, the interval of a spacing and temporalizing that puts off until later that which is presently denied. For something to differ, there must also be a sameness at the root: the sameness which is not one. This is as true of writing a history or assemblage of a program as it is of working with identity categories such as disability. In the prior section, we offered a blazingly successful story of our curriculum. Now we beg to differ: It is true that each semester brought more and more instances of *différance*. For example, we learned that the argument/reason model was not a one-size-fits-all, that it worked better for some disciplines and genres than for others. While some students loved the open-endedness of the seminars' second half, others complained once again about inconsistency of workload, expectations, grading, purpose, outcomes. Some faculty across the disciplines reported that students were approaching all writing assignments in lockstep with the Bruffee method, such that no matter what the genre assigned, students would plop their proposition at the end of the first paragraph and open each subsequent paragraph with a reason followed by supporting evidence. At a broader level, we started to notice how easily students took to putting an argument through its paces but yet the arguments themselves, while logically sturdy, didn't amount to much. We wondered if that was because our courses were theme-based, which encouraged a kind of grazing rather than immersing themselves in a focused scholarly inquiry. We continued to experiment, innovate, and refine based on what we were learning across

the seminars from faculty and students. In 2007, we commenced our exploration of transferability.

As for disability, there was good news and bad. The bad news was that for all our talk and self-congratulations about how the universal design components of our seminars were helping many students, especially those with "disabilities," we couldn't help but notice that what was good for some was actually a real—and new—barrier to others who came to Penn already having mastered certain ways of self-accommodating. What was most worrisome about our shared curriculum was its march to produce the normate student writer, the regulatory ideal that a structured curriculum strives to materialize, no matter how benign the intentions are behind the design. Our structured curriculum was flushing out those students for whom some piece of it was not working, students who, for example, couldn't keep up with the reading or could not follow assignment instructions. Was that a good thing, or a bad thing? Initially it felt like the most undesired consequence imaginable, the very thing one fears about structured curricula. But over the long haul, it has proven to be something of a gift.

Thanks to a shared curriculum, we were able to pinpoint with increasingly more precision the different trouble spots for various students. For example, students who were often brilliant in classroom discussions, superb at generating ideas and seeing connections, would stop turning in assignments and eventually get so behind they would drop out of the seminar. These students (with a range of different mental disabilities) were being tripped up by things like scaffolding their writing process. For many students, breaking projects into short simple steps makes writing more manageable. But for others, producing or keeping track of so many short assignments was the opposite of helpful, putting stress on short-term memory, time management, and quick condensation of ideas, and also catching up students struggling with perfectionism, OCD, or anxiety disorders. For these students, turning in a "shitty first draft" (Lamott) poses enormous barriers, much less producing several "shitty drafts" in a row. Outlining and summarizing scholarly readings, which leads to more substantive, well-developed source-based writing, may challenge students who are excellent but very slow readers. Peer review, collaborative work, and certain kinds of rhetorical analysis can advance the writing and thinking of many students, while undermining students who might otherwise be strong writers in an environment that didn't thrust them into continual intimate social engagement with each other.

As we continue to experiment with authentic genres, we are seeing still more *différance*: students who flourish at writing academic literature reviews seldom are the same as those who flourish at writing the breezy, "voicy" public editorial. Students who write beautiful cover letters, demonstrating their synthesizing and narrative skills, stumble in other genres. Thus we begin to see the social and intellectual lives of genres as such, for each brings to the fore a version of that "twice exceptional" model: a student who is above average in one and below average in another, teaching us as much about the constraints and affordances—the *différance* of genres—as it does about our students' abilities, and making assessing them fairly ever more difficult.

Other Program Policies and Features

Over the years, in response to a wide range of encounters with difference, including students and faculty with disabilities, our program continues to interrogate, and often enough, overturn the assumptions and conventions of the writing courses with which we began. Our attendance policy, our accommodation statement, our add/drop policy have all been reviewed and recalibrated. We replaced a "participation" grade with a "quality of contributions to the class" grade that does not penalize quiet or less socially skilled students nor reward the verbose. Multimodality and multiple forms of feedback, as well as formative assessment, are central to our work. Laptop-lending ensures that students without laptops are never put at a disadvantage, and all of our course materials are online so that students can tailor these to their specific needs, including, in the case of students with memory/organization issues, having a place where they can be certain all materials from class can be found.

Perhaps the most notable changes we've implemented are the installation of Directed Self-Placement (DSP) and the retooling of our two-semester course for "underprepared students" into a one-semester course for any student who feels the need for more individualized attention than will be given in the other seminars. Entitled "Craft of Prose," its DSP lists standard criteria for directed self-placement such as SAT scores, but also lists challenges we have found representative of students who have self-identified with disabilities. When we rostered this course and implemented DSP, we expected that we might go from one section to two. Instead, we experienced great demand and within a few semesters were rostering 14 to 16 sections. We could easily add another five, perhaps more.

Another innovation was our "one course with a safety net" model. Initially we had a two-semester sequence for underprepared students and international students. We also had "regular" seminars and "advanced" seminars. We decided instead to condense all of the key knowledge domains and practices into one rigorous seminar that, upon successful completion, fulfilled the writing requirement. We replaced a cumbersome and ineffective placement process that included a diagnostic essay with self-directed placement and a single seminar. If a student puts in

reasonable effort and does not pass the seminar, they receive elective credit and a grade-neutral S, but do not fulfill the writing requirement. They are able to retake the seminar, earning elective credit, until they receive a passing grade. If they are from underprepared backgrounds, for example, the retake advances their knowledge and practice of writing, and each seminar has a new line of inquiry to expose them to different subjects and disciplines. For all students—including those with disabilities—this "safety net" model helps them to relax and explore different approaches to college-level work and self-accommodation that they may not have needed in high school because of the intensive support network they typically had at home and school.

Looking Forward

With an average of 1,300 students enrolled each semester in our seminars, our first impulse was to attempt to create a storehouse of knowledge that identified patterns of difference and sorted these by disability and effective accommodation. However, in recent years we have come to learn that such a 19th-century enlightenment project is futile: we will never identify all the disabilities and combinations of disabilities and situations; there will never be an instructional manual that we can turn to for guidance on this or that particular disability. There is only *différance*: There is seeing the individual in context, in a given moment, struggling or triumphant, and doing what we can to help that individual succeed. We need to remain open to ways that our classrooms are not places of genuine inclusion, changing the classroom model and context itself rather than attempting to customize individual lessons for the "non-normate" student. In part this is making a virtue of necessity, since we know that many of our students with disabilities may be "invisible" to us, thanks to institutional and other constraints. But in great part it is also a recognition that there is no "normate" student, there are only normate ideals that we impose on ourselves and others. We will thus continue collaboratively to retool and refine our processes and systems. Our philosophy is that every student wants to do well and if they do not, it's our responsibility to discover as best we can what is interfering with their success. Thus each moment with a struggling student has become, for us, an experiment, a detour, that involves the student, the instructor, our administrative faculty, perhaps a tutor, perhaps others from other campus support services. Over time, we have learned to do what Susan McLeod and Kathy Jane Garretson suggested 37 years ago; ask the student: What works best for you? We take it from there, but we do not intend to leave it there: each such encounter becomes a question and concern about what, in our curriculum, our process, our attitude, has proven an obstacle and how to go about overcoming it.

Scholars working in the field of disability studies argue that students should receive instruction where "pace, level, and content can be geared to ability, interest, and learning style" (Brody and Mills 292) and assert that students should be able "to work at an appropriate level in each subject area, even if this results in grade level asynchronies within the student's educational program" (McCoach and Siegle 409). As Lovett and Lewandowski point out, "Optimally, all students would receive truly individualized instruction, moving at their own pace through classes" augmented by whatever resources are needed to make that happen (523). That is where we'd like to be within the program and the university in the next ten years.

For now, we know that we need to have a much better understanding of how students learn and what prevents them from learning. On the one hand—let us contradict ourselves here—we hope to design targeted interventions that can be subjected to validation research (Lovett and Lewandowksi 523). On the other hand, given what we know of *différance*; and given all the barriers to self- and institutional identification; given the complexities of students' needs; and given that a disability is only a disability in a particular moment, place, and time, well, validation research can be, as *différance* teaches us, a noble dream deferred.

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