

Anecdotal Relations: On Orienting to Disability in the Composition Classroom



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Abstract: Attention to stories compositionists tell about teaching and learning reveals some of the ways that teachers orient to disability in the classroom. This article argues that these “anecdotal relations”—relations that are created and disseminated through narratives people share about disability—can frustrate productive negotiations with disability in the classroom. Two anecdotal relations receive particular attention in this article: disability as personal and disability as threatening. Critically recasting these anecdotal relations may offer potential for creating writing classroom spaces that welcome disability.

By returning to how we commonly speak of disability, we find the invitational possibility of developing new relations to it.

--Tanya Titchkosky (*A Question of Access* 56)

Stories about disability have a way of emerging, sometimes in surprising places, across composition and rhetoric scholarship. This essay explores the work that such stories do for teachers vis-à-vis disability, even when those stories sometimes may not—on the surface—seem to be about disability. These stories constitute what I am calling “anecdotal relations”—relations to disability that are created and disseminated through the narratives people share about disability. More specifically, I suggest that embedded in these stories are two problematic orientations to disability that can frustrate rather than open up possibilities for new relations with disability.

In what follows, I first outline my approach to identifying and analyzing anecdotes of disability in composition research. I then use three narrative examples to illustrate the anecdotal relations of disability as personal and of disability as threatening. These anecdotal relations are problematic because, rather than inviting disability into the classroom, they enact barriers that prevent teachers and students from openly engaging with one another. In urging teachers to build relationships with disability, I further suggest that such relationships are needed in order to address problems that arise when disability is largely an imagined or hypothetical presence, and I conclude by outlining how orienting to uncertainty may open up some moves that welcome disability in the composition classroom.

Identifying and Analyzing Anecdotal Relations

Over the last ten years, as I've attended disability-related presentations at the Conference on College Composition and Communication and read and engaged with a wide range of disability rhetoric scholarship, I've come to notice some of the ways that—as Tanya Titchkosky puts it, “we commonly speak of disability” (56). These stories construct disability and relationships to disability in particular ways that I have heard echoed again and again as I've delivered workshops on disability and teaching, talked with local and national colleagues about disability and composition, and worked to cultivate general disability awareness on my own campus. I use the term “anecdotal relations” to refer to the ways that stories create, portray, and foster relationships between the narrator of the story (who is often also a character in the story) and those who are represented in the story. Some of the stories I identified seemed to prevent such relationship-building between teachers and students. I unpack two anecdotal relations that resist relationship-building with disability in the hopes of inviting readers to join me in “developing new relations to” disability (Titchkosky 56). I focus on these two anecdotal relations—of disability as

personal and disability as threatening—because they also underscore a key challenge that teachers face as they design and implement composition pedagogy: that of building connections with students in their classrooms in order to foster learning.

The examples selected here emerged through a process of reading broadly (although not systematically) across composition-rhetoric scholarship. I also solicited examples on listservs and on Facebook. I orient to writing and performing close readings as a means of working through and figuring out ideas, so my selection process was in some respects idiosyncratic: I was drawn to examples that spurred mixed feelings that I wanted to understand better. The three examples that I highlight and analyze below involve a teacher who reflects on an assignment and dwells on interactions she had with a student writing about his experience of chronic illness; another who, in making a claim about teachers' resistance to change, revisits an experience she had negotiating accommodations as a graduate student; and a third who writes a vignette about a student's persistence in re-taking a writing course four times. My identification of these three examples is not a claim about their representativeness across all composition and rhetoric scholarship, but instead, about their significance. They are significant for the way that they offer a glimpse of the sorts of relationships that teachers imagine for themselves with disability in composition classrooms. Each story selected is different from the others in its rhetorical purpose and function, but when read collectively, these examples illustrate how disability is understood not as something to welcome and celebrate, but as something potentially dangerous. Re-narrating these stories has particularly productive potential for welcoming disability in composition classrooms.

Anecdotal Relations with Disability

Numerous scholars have attended to the role of "lore" in shaping composition as a field (e.g., Helmers; Lynch; North) and to the role of personal experience in academic scholarship (e.g., Spigelman). In her analyses of such narratives and representations of students, Marguerite Helmers finds that they often portray students in a negative light⁽¹⁾ and suggests that revising such representations can offer a means for productively orienting to students and the work of teaching writing. Like Helmers, I understand critical attention to these stories to be an important means of building knowledge about how our field, our roles, and our responsibilities to others are composed. These representations of students and teachers have important consequences for the work we do in our classrooms and as members of our profession, because they run the risk of eliding, erasing, or dismissing disability as a generative presence integral to our teaching.

One example of disability's emergence in teaching anecdotes that reveals the anecdotal relations of disability as personal and disability as threat, can be found in Melanie Kill's important article addressing some limits to pedagogical creativity and experimentation. She opens the article with a discussion of several students' responses to an introductory assignment in her composition class. The assignment was a new one for Kill, and an unfamiliar genre for her students. Its prompt read in part, "Please tell me a little about your background. I am interested in who you are in general but also, more specifically, in what kinds of writing you do and have done." One student's assignment discussed his long-term illness, as he wrote:

To understand who I am, in general, it is necessary to know of my earlier years because they have shaped my life more drastically than the others. Since I was born I have had an extensive medical background. I basically lived in a hospital for the first eight years of my life. (qtd in Kill 227)

Kill notes that in this case, she was reluctant to rely upon her usual strategies for responding because they seemed inappropriate, adding that because she didn't have her typical repertoire to fall back on, she felt as if her teacherly identity was being threatened.

Why did this student's account of long-term illness throw Kill off-kilter? She explains,

I didn't want to fail to acknowledge his mention of his childhood illness because I was concerned that to do so would seem rude or invalidating. At the same time, I recognized that to take up a teacherly performance—asking questions and offering suggestions—would be intrusive and inappropriate in response to this particular utterance. (228)

Notwithstanding Kill's discomfort in directly addressing the student's long-term illness, it is worth noting that it is the student who has made this aspect of his experience available for discussion, as a response to Kill's essay prompt. This move suggests that he might not interpret questions or discussion about his childhood illness and its relevance to his current student-identity as inappropriate at all. Indeed, in interviews with thirty-five disabled students about their experiences with classrooms and accommodation, Tara Wood found that many disabled students wanted more—not fewer—opportunities to openly discuss their disabilities with college teachers

(Disability).

In acknowledging her impulse to tiptoe around, even avoid, the topic of chronic illness, Kill's response also echoes that of another widely-cited composition study: Linda Brodkey's discussion in *On the Subjects of Class and Gender* in 'The Literacy Letters.' In analyzing letters that graduate students who were learning to teach basic writing exchanged with students enrolled in an "Adult Basic Education" class, Brodkey shows how the graduate students failed to acknowledge the subject positions that their correspondents put forth in their letters. Several parallels between Brodkey's analysis and Kill's discussion are worth noting: in the negotiation of new or unfamiliar genres that require back-and-forth interaction, Brodkey's students and Kill fell back on familiar-to-them teacherly performances that elided the relationships offered up by their correspondents. Kill recognizes her own defensiveness as a teacher when she writes, "Without a ready strategy for moving these interactions into productive territory . . . I found these responses to my assignment threatening to the legibility of my performance of teacherliness" (228). Kill effectively fears that she will not be recognized as a teacher—or at least, not the sort of teacher she wants to be—if she takes up her typical modes of response with this student, in much the same way that Brodkey's students feared losing some of their own authority and ethos.

In Kill's anecdote, disability is cast in the role of threatening her ability to perform the role of "teacher" in desirable ways that she hopes will be recognized by her students. But disability is not just threatening—it is threatening because it is "too personal." As Kill describes her uncertainty about how to respond to her student's disclosure of chronic illness, she suggests that disability should not be probed in the same way that we are often urged not to make comments about others' appearance or to compel people to share information about themselves that they don't want to share. While it is possible that students might disclose a disability without being fully aware of some of the consequences of such moves, work done on students' disability disclosures by Amy Vidali (*Performing; Rhetorical*) and Tara Wood (*Disability; Overcoming*) show that students often do think carefully about what information they want to share about themselves with their teachers and why. For example, writing teachers may find it valuable to know that a student has developed particular study habits or learning strategies, or that a student has struggled or done well with particular modes of instruction. Pedagogical rationales are not the only reasons that disability might be mentioned, though. A long history of scholarship on personal writing in composition studies underscores the many ways that dimensions of teachers' and students' personal lives emerge in academic writing (see, e.g., Freedman and Holmes; Payne; Spigelman). If we take seriously this student's willingness to write about his chronic illness and its relationship to his educational experiences, then it might be warranted for Kill to see that as an invitation to respond. I am not here suggesting that Kill probe the nature of her student's illness nor that she solicit prurient details about his experience. What I am suggesting is that there are many potential avenues for engaging this student's disclosure of a chronic illness that are all but ignored in Kill's anecdote.

A useful question to ask in examining the stories we tell about teaching might be this: What possibilities for relationship-building are opened up or foreclosed by positioning disability as a threat? When disability is framed as something to be avoided or not addressed because it is "too personal," teachers risk excluding particular kinds of people from classroom interactions and they shut down opportunities for creating certain kinds of relationships.^[2] For teachers to create accessible classrooms that enable a wide range of learners to learn, develop, and grow also necessitates relationship-building as both students and teachers learn new ways of moving and communicating.^[3] Put another way, if disability is going to be welcomed into a classroom, it needs to be open as a topic of discussion, especially (but not exclusively) when it shapes students' learning and involvement. Such welcoming can involve what I have elsewhere called "learning with" disability: "When teachers learn with their students, they situate what they know from personal experience and professional training alongside interpersonal interactions that enrich, complicate, and challenge those forms of knowing" (*Toward* 57). This work requires openly acknowledging relationships to disability, such as by recognizing a student's disclosure^[4] or querying after the best ways of working with them in the classroom. When disability is treated as a private topic, it can easily be excluded, and excluding disability shuts down opportunities for learning—on the part of both teachers and students.

Narratives that address disability—in our scholarly essays but also in hallway conversations and pedagogical lore—often reinforce the sense that disability is threatening or dangerous. Kill notes that her teacherly identity is threatened when she did not know how to respond to her student. This sentiment is echoed by teachers who sometimes do not know what to do when they receive particular accommodation requests. Consider a second example, offered from a student perspective by Melanie Yergeau as she describes how her request for a different way of managing classroom interaction in a graduate seminar was met with resistance:

Because of my difficulties with nonverbals and auditory processing, one of my accommodation requests was a more orderly f2f system for class discussions, one in which I might raise my hand or type something on my laptop and show it to another person. But this particular request was not

always well received. For example, in one class I took, a professor refused to call on raised hands because he felt it interrupted the “natural flow of conversation.” (Yergeau et al., n. pag.)

Another way to put this is that the teacher experienced Yergeau’s accommodation request as a threat to the classroom environment and teacherly identity he was building. In emphasizing “the natural flow of conversation”—forgetting, of course, that communication is always socially constructed and organized (see, e.g., Gee; Jefferson)—this teacher saw disability as a threat to his imagined (ideal) classroom.^{5} Reinforcing a “natural flow of conversation” that is in fact anything but “natural” highlights the often-violent normativity of education more generally (see, e.g., Erevelles; Smith) and fails to consider the many multimodal possibilities for classroom dialogue and engagement that can be opened up in classrooms.

Because disability is framed in such situations as something to fear rather than as something generative or constructive, it is then avoided, instead of welcomed. Approached in this way, a student’s accommodation request becomes a problem, and in some cases, can even pit the disabled student against putatively non-disabled peers.^{6} This stance emerges in Yergeau’s anecdote as the professor suggests that Yergeau’s needs would “inhibit” a natural-flowing discussion for other students. Disability in these cases also tends to be a problem that students have to solve themselves, or treated as the responsibility of a disability office, rather than a cooperative effort between teachers and students as they build a productive classroom environment together.

A third anecdote from a vignette published in *College Composition and Communication* in 2013 further highlights the sense of threat that can surround disability in writing classrooms. In *In the Margins*, Margaret Finnegan muses about one of her students in the following way:

A more casual observer might read her as coolly detached or uneasily impressed, but I have lived in this world. I know a medicated daze when I see one.

I don’t know Amy’s particular prescription cocktail, and I don’t know what it seeks to remedy. She has mentioned depression. She is registered with our Office for Students with Disabilities, but, again, I don’t know why. It could be the depression, but it could be learning disabilities. I see her struggle with memory retrieval and executive functioning. Then again, those could be side effects of the meds. It’s hard to say. All I know for sure is that she can have double time on her final and that, per our OSD office, *I am not allowed to inquire further.* (19, emphasis added)

Through her work with Amy, Finnegan draws on her personal experiences to understand if and how Amy’s situation might be similar to or different from other situations she has experienced.^{7} The reference point that Finnegan ultimately offers in this vignette is that of medication and disability. How she arrives at this reference point is unclear—it may be because she received a letter from the disability services office, perhaps because she has friends or family members who take psychiatric medications, or even because she herself has experience with such medications. Other teachers might evoke different reference points—some might orient to Amy as overworked, or as having no interest in their class, or they might cue into other aspects of Amy’s self-presentation that lead them to very different representations of her—there are many possibilities. The point is that we as teachers are always making use of our lived experiences in the world to make sense of the interactions we have in classrooms. However, where disability is concerned, those personal experiences are too often put to use to diagnose or point to disability “over there,” in that student, rather than to identify with or claim disability, as Finnegan does with her casual “I know a medicated daze when I see one.”^{8}

In critiquing Finnegan’s use of personal experience to diagnose disability in her student, I do not want to deny or downplay the importance of personal experience for teachers in their work. As Heidi Estrem and Shelley Reid highlight in their analysis of data from an interview-based study with new writing teachers, personal experience was perhaps the most significant resource these teachers drew upon as they made decisions about how to design their courses, respond to students, and behave as teachers. I do want, however, to invite these personal experiences and biases out into the open, to make them available for examination and critical reflection. Through such inquiry we can resist the problematic anecdotal relations—of disability as personal and disability as threatening—that so often emerge in these narratives and purposefully build new, more productive relationships by telling different kinds of stories. Because disability is always something we are experiencing along with our students, it is vital for us to invite and create productive relationships with disability. Finnegan elides possibilities for this sort of relationship building because she locates her only possibilities for action within the terms offered by the accommodations letter.

To invite relationships with disability involves challenging the orientations to disability as personal or as threatening that have been expressed in the three anecdotes analyzed thus far. Indeed, Finnegan explicitly suggests that the threat of disability is something she can observe from a distance but cannot engage, as when she writes that

according to her office for disability services, she is “not allowed to inquire further” about Amy’s disability. Other than pointing to the accommodation letter, Finnegan doesn’t explain why she cannot engage Amy around the topic of disability, but—based on my own experience with such letters, as well as Amy Vidali’s important analysis of the accommodation letter as a genre (*Writing*)—my sense is that Finnegan is picking up on the way such letters often try to protect students’ privacy by focusing only on the accommodations that students need and not naming their disabilities. Disabled students, like anyone else, should be able to make their own determinations about how much and what kind of information about their disability they want to communicate to others. Students regularly make these assessments as they negotiate beginning-of-semester interactions with teachers. Such communication is precisely what teachers and students need to do as they figure out what—if any—new arrangements or moves may be necessary as part of their work together. However, accommodation letters sometimes also make some rhetorical moves that can lead teachers like Finnegan to orient to them not as a means for opening communication, but for closing it down. For example, when letters remind faculty of the laws that mandate reasonable accommodations in educational settings, some teachers might then imagine a dangerous bureaucratic environment around disability and the institution in which any mis-step could put them on the wrong side of the law. [\[9\]](#)

When teachers receive a letter like this one, indicating specific accommodations that they must implement in their classrooms, they can sense that some avenues for relationship-building around disability are unavailable to them. As with Kill and Finnegan, teachers may be uncertain about what communication about disability might be welcome and what might be intrusive, acknowledging once again the tension between disability as an available topic for discussion and disability as a private matter or a threat. Of course, it is important for students not to feel compelled to disclose or to explain personal information that they do not want to share. For this reason, many disability scholars have outlined ways to move with disability in the classroom that don’t require that students disclose and that don’t single out individuals for exceptional scrutiny or focus. To point to just one example, Allison Hitt has implemented a collaborative note-taking exercise in her classes in which all students in the class share in various responsibilities around note-taking, and all students benefit from the collective record of class discussions (Hitt, Collaborative). I offer this example to point out that just because *some* kinds of questions about disability are intrusive does not mean that *any* discussion of disability is unwelcome: teachers can and should invite communication about how best to work with students in their classrooms, and disability as a general topic is valuable to keep at the forefront of our pedagogical awareness because we are better teachers when we learn with our students.

Building Relationships with Disability

In the preceding sections, I have argued that in the stories we tell, composition teachers orient to disability as a personal topic that shouldn’t be queried after or as a threat to preferred ways of moving in the classroom. The ensuing lack of communication around disability can contribute to shame, embarrassment, and/or unwillingness to disclose disability or negotiate accommodations on the part of both disabled teachers and students. In pushing back on what literary theorist David Bolt has called “the critical avoidance of disability” in the academy, numerous disability and composition scholars have offered ways of reimagining physical and virtual spaces (Brewer, Selfe, and Yergeau; Dolmage Mapping; Disability; Yergeau et al.); ways of reimagining rhetorical presentations of disability (Jung, Textual Mainstreaming; Kerschbaum On Rhetorical; Martin; Price, *Mad*; Vidali Embodying/Disabling; Performing; Rhetorical; Wood and Madden); ways of reimagining the work of the composition course (Dunn; Dunn and Dunn DeMers; Price Accessing) and ways of reimagining procedures for access (Adams; Barber-Fendley and Hamel; Hitt Who; Wood, Disability). Taken together, this work does a great deal to suggest how students and teachers can move within what Tara Wood, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson describe as “the times and spaces of disability” (147). Incorporating such change and welcoming disability into our teaching practices and classrooms is not always easy.

In this section, I move from my critique of the anecdotal relations of disability as personal and disability as threatening to urge teachers to build productive relationships to disability. With the phrase “building relationships to disability,” I specifically invoke the emerging, relational, and always-in-flux identities of disabled teachers and students, as well as the recognition that disability is in all of our classrooms, every day, whether it announces itself or not. Disability is not a static identity that is determined *a priori* when students enter a classroom (notwithstanding how overdetermined representations of disability are in literature, film, and television—see e.g., Dolmage, *Disability*; Davis); it is an identity that is co-constructed simultaneously by teachers and students and these identities take shape over the course of a semester or an academic year (Wortham).

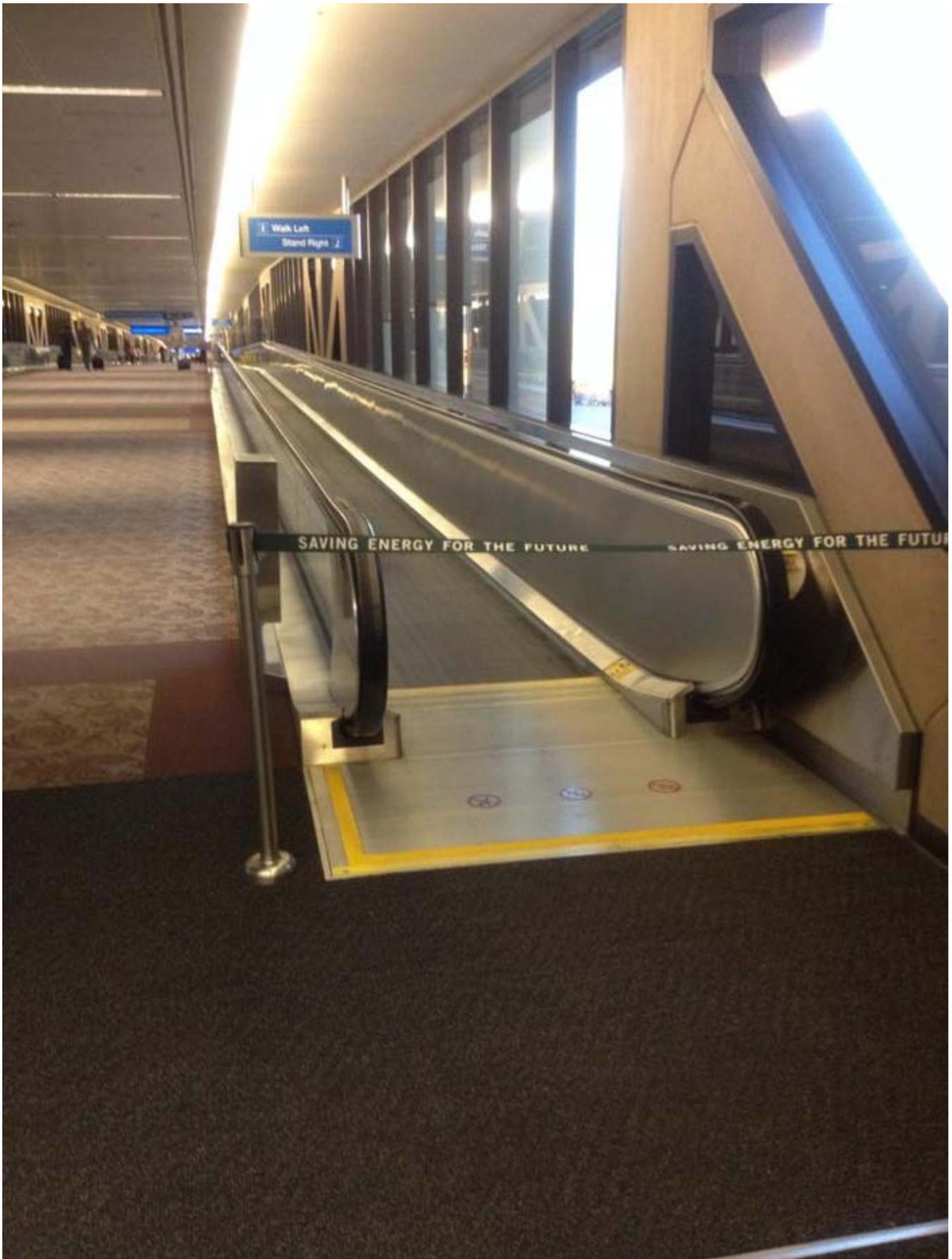
Paying close attention to how we narrate interactions around disability is especially necessary not only because many forms of access within classrooms and the broader university are deeply social (see, e.g., Minikel-Lacocque;

Steele; Sue et al.), but also because it is through these interactions that relationships with disability are formed. These relationships provide the resources necessary for disrupting the anecdotal relations that currently swirl around disability in composition classrooms. Making moves towards social inclusion and welcoming can be difficult to enact, even for the most well-intentioned teachers, and they involve more than following minimum standards or implementing specific accommodations communicated through the disability services office. Making such moves requires understanding teachers and students as complex individuals who are seeking to define themselves in particular ways, and it requires learning to negotiate complicated and often unfamiliar rhetorical situations and interactional genres. Imagining disability in these ways is important because even when disability doesn't announce itself, it emerges in all kinds of ways in all kinds of settings.

In Kill's example, disability emerges through a student's experiences of chronic illness, experiences that have shaped how he approaches classrooms and classroom settings. In many ways, Kill's discomfort is understandable. As long as there have been personal writing assignments, there have been debates over what is "too personal" as well as questions about the nature of the ethical responsibilities that teachers have when students construct them as particular kinds of audiences. These are not easy issues to resolve, and they are in some ways becoming even more fraught in an era of increased surveillance around mental disability and institutional responses to sexual harassment. So it makes sense that teachers who encounter student disclosures and find themselves in uncharted waters may feel uncomfortable. This discomfort is evident in Yergeau's narrative, too: when teachers' typical or preferred ways of doing things come into conflict with students' needs or preferences, it can feel scary to wonder how and in what ways this change might tip or disrupt what can be a delicate pedagogical equilibrium in the classroom. Also, as Finnegan's narrative illuminates, for many faculty, the questions about interacting around disability adjoin questions about what is "legal" or "allowed" in classrooms vis-à-vis disability, often with few clear avenues for getting answers or avoiding mistakes. I turn in the next section to one other form of narrating disability that emerges in pedagogical anecdotes—hypothetical or imagined scenarios. These forms of imagining disability can dangerously erase or elide consideration of disability, and when considered alongside anecdotes of encounters with disability, can have damaging consequences. I then conclude by suggesting how we might build new anecdotal relations with disability that push back against the erasures, silences, and dismissals of disability addressed here.

"But I Don't Have Any Disabled Students in My Class"

I have argued throughout this essay that attention to teachers' anecdotal relationships with disability are important because such relations can lead to problematic forms of exclusion in composition classrooms. I have also suggested that in order for teachers to productively orient to disability, they need to actively welcome and build relationships with disability. However, given the number of times I have experienced others telling me that they haven't had students with disabilities in their classes, I want also to touch on the importance of imagining disability—of understanding disability as always present in any given classroom even if the specific ways that disability takes shape may not be immediately evident. To illustrate this point, let me share a photograph of an airport's moving walkway. While this image is not taken from a classroom context, it points to the ways that waiting for disability to explicitly announce itself can be exclusionary. The photograph depicts a long carpeted airport hallway with a moving walkway that takes up the right half of the image. The walkway seems to still be in operation, but it is blocked with a barricade labeled "Saving Energy for the Future."



(Photo credit: Aimi Hamraie)

The barricade is purportedly aimed at encouraging people to walk down the carpeted hallway rather than use the moving walkway. But in being so placed, it also seems to presume that nobody approaching the walkway will have a “good reason” for using it. In that way, this photo evidences a failure of imagination, in which disability is simply

not imagined as part of any given social environment (see also Titchkosky). By calling on purportedly able-bodied people to participate in Saving Energy for the Future, the barricade also presumes that no disabled people now or in the future will need to use the walkway.

The barricade's subtle erasure of disability, its assumption that disability is not in this place, points to the importance of imagining the possibilities of disability's presence. Kill's, Yergeau's, and Finnegan's anecdotes each show disability as a barrier to interaction/engagement and they reveal the subtle movements of ableism within writing classrooms. In these scenarios, the approachable student is the able-bodied/able-minded student.^{10} Despite the actual prevalence of disability in writing classrooms (about 11 percent of all college students according to the National Center for Education Statistics), the fact remains that disability is not often at the forefront of classroom planning or pedagogical practice.

The failures of imagination evidenced in these anecdotes can have serious real-life consequences. When Kill does not explicitly take up her student's disclosure, he may interpret her silence around it as a clue that he should not have raised it with her, and hesitate to raise potential needs in other contexts. When Finnegan inappropriately zeroes in on Amy's "prescription cocktail," she risks missing points of connection that might provide a stronger basis for pedagogical connection. When Yergeau's professor dismisses raising hands in his class, he conveys that he does not care about or value her contributions to class conversation. All of these denials of disability are likely to have consequences beyond their individual occurrence, as students draw on these experiences to make predictions about how other teachers might act or respond to their disabilities and accommodation requests.^{11} Even when teachers do not explicitly deny students accommodations, Wood's interviews with students repeatedly show ways that lack of engagement and communication around disability and access can have the same effect as denying the accommodation when students stop asking or perceive that an environment may be hostile to their ways of moving. What are needed here are forms of authentic and genuine engagement between teachers and students.

In environments that present disability as either irrelevant (too-personal), dangerous (too-threatening), or erase it altogether, it is not surprising that students and teachers may choose not to engage one another around disability or accommodation issues. According to Wood, the students she interviewed sometimes questioned the relevance of their disability to the classroom and would often wait to assess a particular classroom environment before raising the topic of disability (Wood Disability). In many higher education contexts—classrooms, meetings, workshops, conferences—people avoid calling attention to their disability, so it is not all that surprising or even necessarily problematic that students do not generally openly mention disability in class. But even when disability is not easily perceptible, it takes shape in the classroom in myriad and surprising ways: through classroom behaviors and various kinds of presence, through accommodation requests and learning styles, and through students' interactions with and around writing. While I have analyzed narratives published in composition scholarship to identify the anecdotal relations I critique here, the representations of disability they offer emerge in our classrooms as well. Teachers invoke many kinds of stories and illustrative examples that can reflect conscious and unconscious biases. The stories and vignettes that are published are forms of what is "sayable" about disability (Titchkosky). In order to change our classroom discourses, we can begin by being mindful towards the representations we offer of students among one another.

Colleagues sometimes tell me that they haven't had many students with disabilities in their classes. In these cases, I think what they really mean is that they haven't had many students that they immediately perceived as having a disability in their classes, which is, of course, not the same thing as not having students with disabilities in their classrooms. When my colleagues (and I—for I have been guilty of this, too) design our classes as if there will not be any disabled students in them (or when we plan accommodation moves only after a disabled student announces their presence), we set up barriers much like the Saving Energy for the Future barricade blocking the airport's moving walkway. We erase considerations of disability from our planning and our pedagogical practices, and we fail to move with/in the spaces and times of disability. Such erasures occur when teachers assign multimodal projects such as remixes or podcasts without imagining how deaf students might complete them (for some ideas, see Ceraso; Zdenek). They occur when teachers don't notice that there's no room for a wheelchair to maneuver in the classroom until students who use wheelchairs roll in (Titchkosky). Questions such as "What if my students can't see the images I am displaying on my power point?" or "what if in-class reading is really slow and laborious for some of my students?" are part and parcel of what it means to develop relationships with disability in the classroom, and they are not questions that are easily answered when disabled teachers and/or students announce themselves on the first day (or third week, or just before finals). As numerous disability scholars have argued, accommodating disability cannot be an afterthought, a retrofit (Dolmage, Mapping; Titchkosky; Yergeau et al.). This means making disability an everyday part of classroom practice, whether individuals with disabilities have already been identified as present. It means shifting away from what Titchkosky calls the "not-yet" time of disability^{12} towards the here and now of disability.

On Creating New Anecdotal Relations

Let me now offer some suggestions about how we might work our way to new anecdotal relations with disability in the composition classroom. First, I want to encourage a turn towards uncertainty that stands in explicit contrast to the sorts of “certainty” that often underlie conversations about disability. One form of this certainty manifests in the persistent questions about “what to do” with a student with a particular disability that almost always occur at the end of workshops about disability and teaching (Lewiecki-Wilson, Dolmage, Heilker and Jurecic; Wood et al.). Rachel Adams has noted that some institutions have responded to these questions by offering detailed “tip sheets” tailored to different disabilities. Recent writing studies scholarship, however, has begun to assert precisely the opposite: that what is needed is a turn to *uncertainty* rather than certainty (see Lynch; Rousculp). Indeed, as Tiffany Rousculp emphasizes, the recognition of uncertainty is a necessary element of a “rhetoric of respect” that takes seriously what other actors and participants in a situation may bring to an interaction. In creating what is by all accounts an overwhelming list of possible ways of moving to accommodate disability in classrooms, Jay Dolmage explicitly challenges the articulation of certainty that might be suggested by a briefer and more manageable list: a shorter list might imply that particular accommodations are more important than others or that there is an easy checklist to follow to ensure accessibility (*Universal*). The fact is that access will always require the hard work of negotiating among all members of a classroom community, and teachers cannot know, predict, or assume who those members will be nor what moves will be needed.

Second, orienting to uncertainty also means allowing students (*and* teachers) a sense of agency, the ability to claim themselves and to change or develop as interactions proceed. People have varying degrees of comfort in talking about their own and others’ disabilities. I’ve developed this comfort over time, as I’ve realized how important it is for me to have others make adjustments to the way they move in social spaces (e.g., by making sure I can see their faces while they are speaking, speaking more slowly, or being willing to repeat things), but others may prefer not to raise their disability or want to wait and check an environment’s hospitability before mentioning anything. Creating an environment where access is a topic of discussion and where members of that environment help shape the dimensions of access can feel risky, but it can also have immense payoffs. As Margaret Fink noted, writing about her experience at a conference that created a space where participants collaboratively shaped access, “As a small-d deaf woman, I often experience strong hesitation about stopping a group activity to ask for access changes,” but went on to say that the efforts to collaboratively create access at this conference led to her feeling “an atmosphere of permission to be present” (221). Like conferences, classrooms tend to be environments largely (but not wholly) shaped by organizers’ and teachers’ design moves, and while some participants may speak up and request changes, in many other cases, they may just quietly disappear.

Openly inviting conversations about access can be hard. It still sometimes makes me anxious when students ask me to allow or excuse a large number of absences. These requests come from a broad range of students, from athletes who have practices and competitions to students who have family responsibilities (and vacations) to students who have health issues or personal crises. It is never simple for me to figure out how to fully reconcile my belief that it is valuable for students to engage with me and their classmates during class meetings with the fact that some students are not always able to be physically present for those sessions^{13}. But I have learned that I do much better when I meet students with a spirit of generosity and openness that invites discussion of what works and doesn’t work, both for me and for them. This doesn’t mean allowing any request from students, and it doesn’t mean that there is always an option that satisfies everyone, either, but it does mean engaging together around the goals and purpose(s) of class meetings, assignments, and activities.

Third, disability is implicated in all aspects of our pedagogy, from the syllabi and assignments we draft, to how those materials are shared with students, to the classroom activities we implement.^{14} We need to think carefully about the portrayals of disability we create in the examples we offer and in the ways we position ourselves and our students in the classroom. How do we pay attention to these positions? There are many ways, and throughout this article I’ve suggested one way—by exploring anecdotes of disability in composition scholarship. In critically reading the stories we tell about our classrooms, we can ask: who populates these stories? How are the characters identified and named/described? What are the characters doing in the stories? How are these positions replicated in real-life behaviors in and around our composition teaching?

Finally, in recognizing the affective dimensions of interaction with others we might openly recognize the discomfort and fear of change that may accompany accommodation requests and challenging questions about how to implement pedagogical change. Such recognition might mean, as Matthew Heard has suggested, attending to various forms of classroom contact (including peer review and student-teacher conferencing) as potentially difficult spaces that may not lend themselves to narratives of success and triumph. What I want to suggest here is that such storytelling is an important move toward practices that are inclusive, rather than exclusive, of disability. In order

to invite disability to be fully present, we need to imagine the emergence of disability in classroom contexts, in ways that are not unlike the storytelling practices that Kill, Finnegan, Yergeau, and others participate in. Working together, we can ask how to re-cast these stories to challenge or address barriers to our relationship-building with disability and invite disability to be “fully present” in our classrooms. We need to imagine what happens when disabled students are in our classrooms, and this imagining needs to happen before someone actually discloses a disability. Whether disclosures happen or not, disability will always be part of classroom life everywhere. Moreover, our imagining should be informed *not only* by our personal experiences (which are necessarily limited in many ways) but also by our ongoing engagement with various resources, including scholarly literatures and disabled people themselves. These imaginings are not ways for us to exhaustively predict and anticipate every possible person who might come into our classrooms, but instead, ways for us to imagine some productive ways of moving within the times and spaces of disability.

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Notes

1. On narrative representations of students see also Dryer; Yergeau, Circle Wars. ([Return to text.](#))
2. It’s important to note another problem with the personalizing of disability, one that has been a trenchant critique within disability studies: that when accommodation and access are figured as individual acts provided for single people, then little structural change happens. Titchkosky notes that when disability and neoliberal notions of personal worth are put together, “disability is represented as an essentially private matter requiring the worth of the autonomous individual” (101). Vidali has traced this influence in composition and rhetoric scholarship as well, as she notes, first, that “the dominant rhetorical tropes of disability require a focus on personal issues, rather than social and political influences and implications” (Performing 618) adding that in rhetoric and composition this move emerges in the way that scholarship explicitly engaging disability has tended to involve personal narratives while theorizing about embodiment has all but ignored disability (Performing 618-20). ([Return to text.](#))
3. I should note here that relationship-building is a two-way process, in that students and teachers both need to participate in the process. Teachers cannot, simply by being open to relationships, effectively create relationships where students are not receptive or interested. However, a big part of my argument here is that the conditions for such relationship-building need to be fostered within pedagogical planning and design, and this is where I see teachers’ work being particularly vital. ([Return to text.](#))
4. Cultivating welcoming relationships to and with disability can be difficult and challenging. Even within disability studies, which has a long history of seeing the personal as political and which features numerous means for publicly disclosing disability, there remains unease around asking for or requiring disclosure. In 2013, a pair of articles featured in *Disability Studies Quarterly* (Rinaldi; O’Toole) highlighted some of the tensions between public and private that characterize many acts of disclosure. As Corbett O’Toole put it, “a person’s relationship to disability is often disclosed only within their social network. Professor Z might give a paper at [the Society for Disability Studies] without stating any relationship to disability other than their job title yet a few minutes later they are sitting in the hall sharing stories of their disabled partner. But if during the question period, I asked Professor Z “What is your relationship to disability?” it would widely be considered rude” (n. pag.). O’Toole here calls attention to the ways that disability—even among those whose primary academic interest is disability and/or who are regularly surrounded by other disabled people—is often considered a personal identification that is not appropriate to be publicly queried or explored except by close friends or family members. However, O’Toole’s main point is also about the fact that disability is about relationships. Whether someone identifies as disabled or not, they still have relationships of various kinds with disabled people. For some, those relationships may be in terms of “not-me” or “over there” or “not yet” spaces/times of disability (see Titchkosky; Wood et al.). But for many others, relationships to disability and to disabled people are varied and richly complex, although these relationships may not always be openly acknowledged in the stories about disability that emerge in composition scholarship. ([Return to text.](#))
5. Two other examples reinforce the prevalence of this narrative. In one, Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jay Dolmage tell an account of supporting writing instructors in which “Working with the disability resources office, Cindy placed a blind student into the class of a seasoned instructor, thinking that this instructor’s

experience and easygoing style would be a good fit for a student needing accommodations. However, this placement turned out to be a disaster because the instructor felt strongly that the usual way that she did things was being disrupted. Despite several conferences with Cindy, the instructor kept saying, 'He doesn't seem "normal." He makes me nervous.' Even given the institutional pressures to accommodate his different learning needs, the instructor felt emboldened to be frank, saying—finally—'I want him out of my class'" (25). And in another, Tara Wood relates one student's experience with requesting a change in his teacher's Power Point slides: "Tom had specific preferences for the slide show color palette, pointing out that darker color palettes were easier for him to see. When I asked Tom about whether or not he ever expressed this preference to a professor, his response was quite revelatory: 'Actually, last semester I told one of my professors and he changed that week's slides. But you could tell that was part of his flair for making his lectures interesting was changing up his color schemes and doing that so for me to ask him to change that and make it more generic or tone it down or whatever, I think he felt like that was taking away from the other students and from his lectures.' While the teacher accommodated Tom's request for one week, he elected to ignore it in subsequent class meetings. When I asked Tom about whether or not he followed up with the professor again, Tom stated that he 'didn't bring it up again because it wasn't worth the argument'" (Disability 91). ([Return to text.](#))

6. Thanks to Tara Wood for this insight. ([Return to text.](#))
7. This is a process Paul Lynch describes as casuistry. Interestingly, several of the examples Lynch invokes to illustrate casuistry involve disability (see, e.g., 112, 118-119), highlighting the ways that disability often changes an orientation to a classroom or pedagogy or activity, as well as how disability influences various ways of being and doing in the classroom. For many people, the lived experience of daily life is a series of encounters with disability in all kinds of forms, a point Jay Dolmage develops by pointing to disabled bodies as the locus of meaning-making in *Disability Rhetoric*. ([Return to text.](#))
8. Extended attention to significant issues that arise when teachers use their personal experiences to diagnose disability rather than identify with it can be found in Lewiecki-Wilson, Dolmage, Heilker and Jurecic; Kerschbaum, *Toward*; Price, *Mad*; Vidali, *Rhetorical*; Walters. ([Return to text.](#))
9. Pointing to the law is a rhetorical move also made by the American Association of University Professors in talking about faculty accommodations—reminding universities and administrators of their legal obligations to disabled faculty. However, as Vidali points out in an analysis of the AAUP report, "legal requirements set standards for accessibility and accommodation (standards that are often not met), [but] they also foreclose other conversations crucial to including disabled faculty members" (Kerschbaum et al., n. pag.). ([Return to text.](#))
10. Another way to think of the "approachable" student is to note that many people feel more comfortable asking questions of a student who seems to have been injured than of a student who seems to have a chronic condition, even if the manifestation in the classroom (a sling, a cast, a wheelchair) is the same—a point that Tobin Siebers develops in discussing the disability masquerade (*Disability Theory*). ([Return to text.](#))
11. Two other examples are worth mentioning here. One is the notorious example of Jon Westling, a Boston University provost who, in a series of speeches in the mid-1990s, told stories about a student he called "Somnolent Samantha" in order to deny accommodations to students. He later confessed that "Somnolent Samantha" was fictional (see e.g., Estrin; White; Yergeau, *Disable*). Westling's case illustrates how the circulation of narratives about disability, even when the people described are not real, can have destructive consequences. A more contemporary example in this vein is in the AAUP's *Accommodating Faculty Members Who Have Disabilities*, as the document hypothetically imagines faculty who might potentially request "unreasonable" accommodations, images of faculty that might then influence administrators who have to respond to faculty members' need for workplace accommodation. ([Return to text.](#))
12. As Titchkosky writes, "It is not that somebody cannot attend classes because there is no accessible washroom; it is instead that disability, unlike window cleaning, is not yet imagined as an essential aspect of all of our lives. Disability is managed as a potentially excludable phenomenon since it is present as a not-yet" (109). ([Return to text.](#))
13. See Price, *Mad* for ideas on reimagining physical presence in classrooms. ([Return to text.](#))
14. Disability rhetoric scholars have carefully examined the emergence of disability in many of these rhetorical venues, including plagiarism policies (Vidali, *Embodying/Disabling*) and syllabus access statements (Wood

and Madden). ([Return to text.](#))

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Return to [Composition Forum 32 table of contents](#).