

Reassessing Intersectionality: Affirming Difference in Higher Education



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Abstract: This essay offers a review of Jay Dolmage's *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* and Asao Inoue's *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* with the intent of reminding composition instructors of the importance of intersectionality and accessibility. Each text encourages us to challenge traditional perceptions of success and failure thereby also interrogating imbalanced power dynamics between instructors and students particularly in regards to writing assessment and other pedagogical priorities. Finding ways to acknowledge difference, and affirm it, is vital to our collective success especially in the writing classroom.

Dolmage, Jay T. *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. U of Michigan P, 2017.

Inoue, Asao B. *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*. WAC Clearinghouse, 2015.

Many composition instructors grapple with how to best serve students who are historically and currently underserved, silenced, marginalized, and misunderstood; instructors are even further challenged when marginalized identities intersect. In mainstream conversations, the theory of intersectionality is often perceived as the mere intersection of any two identities; however, this popular misconception does not align with Kimberlé Crenshaw's original iteration, which addressed *overlapping oppressions* that are made even more vulnerable within institutional contexts.

To illustrate this theory, Crenshaw, as a lawyer, observed the law's inability to protect individuals who experienced institutional dual oppression; she surveyed Black women who struggled to find work because there was not an existing framework to recognize their oppressed position as Black people and also as women. There were frameworks for Black men and for white women yet there was not a viable lens to recognize the specific oppression experienced by Black women. This demonstrates that the intersection of oppressed identities is different than the intersection of a privileged identity and an oppressed identity, which is often lost in mainstream conversations.

Considering most scholarship addresses only one identity due to constraints of space and time, Jay Dolmage, in *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* focuses on disability while Asao Inoue, in *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*, prioritizes race, yet both authors reference intersectionality to remind us that individuals can hold two or more oppressed identities. This is especially important since any attempt to prioritize one oppressed identity over another merely reinforces oppression. In this review essay I use an intersectional lens to highlight key concepts from both texts, which raise further questions about intersectional approaches in higher education, most specifically in the composition classroom.

Challenging Traditional Notions of Success and Failure

To adopt an intersectional approach within oppressive institutions means re-examining our models of success and failure as they are shaped by mainstream measures; in other words, if success is exclusively modeled after thin, able-bodied, white, straight, Christian, cisgender male ability, all others will be discounted. To use one standard for all students inaccurately categorizes student potential and ability by holding them to misshapen standards (Inoue 9). Just as architectural designs indicate who is welcomed physically, intellectual models reveal which persons are

anticipated to excel. Dolmage and Inoue are concerned with issues of equitable access and each text challenges us to examine our relationship to conventional notions of success and failure.

Academic Ableism is organized around three spatial metaphors that align with three eras of disability studies: steep steps, the retrofit, and universal design, which “nicely articulate the ways space excludes, the ways space can be redesigned, and the ways space can be more inclusively conceived” (41). The introduction begins with reference to “The Approach” from Ellen Cushman’s “The Rhetorician as an Agent of Social Change”; the image portrays a steep, massive stairway that leads to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, which visibly separates the university from the surrounding downtown area. In revisiting Cushman’s work, Dolmage reminds us of the barricades between universities and their surrounding communities, which mirrors the physical and intellectual barriers marginalized students experience within their own universities. Dolmage relies on the metaphor of inaccessible steps to claim that uniform architecture is often prioritized and protected on campuses. This example begins to uncover other historical and current barriers that are communicated through the architectural and aesthetic preferences within our academic institutions. If one’s ability to walk a set of stairs is a measure of success, we know that excludes folks who are unable to do so; therefore, instead of holding to that measure, alternative paths are created via elevators, for example, to ensure more success for more people. Dolmage argues that just as uniform design is preferred, uniform ideology and pedagogy are privileged in the classroom for the sake of convenience, beauty, and familiarity, which inherently reveals a resistance to progress and change (122). We must resist comfort and seek to expand what’s familiar for the sake of better understanding the various physical and intellectual barriers placed in front of our students; we can develop many new models of success that can work to unravel oppression, which is at the root of said barriers.

Dolmage and Inoue both emphasize structural oppression as inherent to the foundation of higher education. Dolmage recounts higher education’s participation in eugenics and colonial science, which inevitably contributes to our ideas about valuable bodies. This horrid history was fueled and funded by universities, so its ableist and racist legacy is not easily disassociated from our academic identity (4-5). This reminds us that disability is not recognized as a source of knowledge production but rather a “problem in need of a solution” (Titchkosky qtd. in Dolmage 4). Therefore, we are encouraged to reject that perspective in order to view disability as an asset that can further expand how we know what we know. Inoue adopts a similar perspective in his discussion of students of color, although all students can benefit from antiracist assessment.

Seeking to expose traditional perceptions of success and failure, Inoue advocates for antiracist writing assessment ecologies, which can reinvent our assessment strategies and help combat racism in the writing classroom. Inoue’s conception of a “white racial *habitus*” implies no wrongdoing in and of itself but the dominant implementation of hegemonic standards *is* counterproductive to equitable access as it warps accurate indicators of ability in the writing classroom, especially for students of color (107). Most approaches to writing assessment reveal how easily institutional practices and values trickle into the writing classroom and remain unchallenged—thereby welcoming racist standards – “racism seen and understood as structural, instead, reveals the ways that systems, like the ecology of the classroom, already work to create failure in particular places and associate it with particular bodies” (Inoue 4). Accepting our role within racist and ableist institutions means accepting that our pedagogies and therefore assessment practices are steeped in racist and ableist markers of success and failure.

Instructors must first be aware of their own position within their institution before they can help their students do the same. By exposing our students to the system that created said notions of failure, it can take the onus of failure off of individual students, especially marginalized students; otherwise, they will “believe that their failures in school [are] purely due to their own lacking in ability, desire, or work ethic” (Inoue 4). Instructors typically avoid transparency and that inhibits a student’s opportunity to accurately identify their abilities within their academic institution. If certain failures are attributed exclusively to marginalized bodies, it turns the attention away from institutions to individuals, which creates an inaccurate portrait of the institution. Assessment communicates perceptions of success and failure. When we don’t consider assessment while creating our goals, assignments, and activities, we allow racist frameworks to inform our project outcomes. Inoue asserts that writing assessment should determine writing pedagogy and course goals, instead of the other way around. Antiracist writing assessment ecologies are also designed to help students “liberate themselves” (109), which inherently alters academic power dynamics.

Interrogating Power and Fairness

Imbalanced power dynamics naturally politicize our classrooms. Inoue develops the first element of antiracist writing assessment ecologies by using Foucault’s definition of power, “a productive force that moves through society” (Foucault 215, qtd. in Inoue 121); this particular definition articulates the relationship between power and discipline. Consider the layout and furniture in your classroom: what bodies are welcomed due to the size and shape of the

desks/tables? How does the desk arrangement communicate who has power and authority? Similar to Dolmage's argument about architecture and uniformity, Inoue argues that traditional classroom structures discipline students into "passive listeners" by placing teachers exclusively as "knowledge givers." This model is replicated through traditional writing assessment by positioning instructors as more powerful since "students 'submit' themselves and their writing only to a teacher for judgment, which has its most power(ful) employment in feedback and grading practices" (Inoue 122). Altering this power dynamic may be initially uncomfortable for the student but also for the instructor who prefers a position of power; each instructor must reflect on their preference of proximity to power and what they believe is to be gained from that power.

Implementing a different approach, some instructors pursue fairness in an attempt to create some form of equality in the classroom; however, fairness often means flattening student ability by forcing all students to perform and be evaluated in one particular way, which relies on the instructor's definition of fairness. As an instructor, I have to honestly reckon with how subjective writing assessment is. Even if I don't intend to, I naturally consider external factors while grading; I'm influenced by their previous work, how actively they participated in class, how often/if they visited during office hours. All of these elements impact my perception of their work, which inhibits objective assessment (although objectivity quickly aligns with fairness). In his previous work (2007), Inoue suggests that fairness is constructed ecologically within itself because "judging everyone by the same standard is not an inherently fair practice in a writing classroom...when you don't have enough agreement (not consensus), participation, and an acknowledgement of fairness as a dynamic and shifting construct of the ecology, it is difficult to have a fair writing assessment" (Inoue 56). Considering this, Inoue asks instructors to consider not being unfair. Inoue's implementation of antiracist writing assessment ecologies makes "power arrangement[s] in grading" more transparent particularly for the sake of reckoning with "racialized and hegemonic" discourses (Inoue 122). Identifying the racialized aspect of dominant academic discourse, Inoue shows the relationship between the body and language and how that relationship impacts writing assessment because "as teachers when we read and evaluate our students' writing, we do so through and with our bodies, and we have in our minds a vision of our students as bodies, as much as we have their language in front of us" (Inoue 30). Fairness impulsively erases the body and does not account for difference. Rejecting fairness, in place of being not unfair, allows us to consider the individual and their distinctive characteristics.

As instructors we must interrogate and understand our biases against particular bodies since those ideas (sub)consciously impact the outcomes of our assessment, arguably even more so for students with disabilities, students of color, and students of color who have disabilities. Inoue reminds us that when we think of composition we must actively engage the body of the composer; to consider the body is to consider the language produced through that body. We must acknowledge our perceptions when difference shows up; as previously stated we cannot simply think of difference as "a problem in need of a solution" but rather should seek ways to affirm bodies as good as-is. Dolmage adds to this idea by connecting the body and power back to rhetoric: "if we understand rhetoric as the circulation of power and discourse through the body, then we'd want to view this through a wide range of possible bodies, or even the widest range of possible bodies" (113-114). Just as we have to consider the ways oppressed identities overlap, we must consider the overlapping of social, physical, and intellectual inaccessibility. Often only one is prioritized when in fact all three could be at play. Similar to oppression, ignoring one merely reinforces the others against each other.

Pedagogical Implications

As I wrestle with the impending pedagogical imperative, I am overwhelmed with how many pedagogical choices we are privileged to make and how many are optional. In adopting an intersectional lens, we must commit ourselves to understanding the functions of privilege and oppression in order to understand how it impacts the ordinary operation of our composition courses. In addition to intersectionality, both texts also reference *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, in which Stephanie Kerschbaum reminds us, "there is much that teachers don't know or don't understand about their students" (2), and "teachers need to consider their students not in terms of single identifiers but as the embodiment of a complex set of identifications that must be considered together, rather than independently from one another" (10). This aligns with the theory of intersectionality as it brings together the existence of multiple identities at once and becomes even more crucial when oppression is overlapped. As we consider the imbalance of white instructors to students of color, and able-bodied instructors to disabled students, we must recognize our own gaps in knowledge and commit to closing them through means of negotiation where students are given more power to share their lived experiences as valid forms of knowledge (and at the same time not demanding the oppressed teach the privileged). Marginalized students are most consistently excluded as valued voices within the academy, despite the distinct epistemological standpoints they offer. We all suffer when we exclude disability, for example, because that exclusion constricts what we can know about minds and bodies (Dolmage 20). Neither Dolmage nor Inoue is interested only in individual interactions or "some arbitrary list of bad words" (Brown qtd. in Dolmage 7), but rather

they emphasize the institutional nature of systemic oppression, specifically ableism and racism.

It is difficult to negotiate power in our established pedagogical arrangements, and I often consider how we can authentically change an inflexible system from the inside, especially when there are varying levels of responsibility and power, but we must commit to making small changes even when we are overwhelmed with all of our options. Inoue's pedagogical contribution is outlined very thoroughly in the book as each chapter explains another component of the ecology. As you think through practical ways of implementing a new assessment strategy, you can simultaneously consider making changes with something more familiar such as your syllabus. I am remembering a workshop I attended with Brenda Brueggemann, a scholar in Disability Studies, who encouraged instructors to revise their version of an "accessibility" statement in an effort to shift some of the responsibility from the student to the instructor. Most accessibility clauses instruct students to discuss any accommodations in private or quietly after class, which creates a sense of shame around asking for accommodations. Prior to this workshop, I had never considered altering the statement since it's a required, but through the workshop, we were encouraged to use to statement to show enthusiasm and support because when students know their teachers are genuinely invested in their success, they are more likely to perform to the best of their ability. We each have to reflect on what we're able and willing to do to accommodate student needs.

At the end of his book, Dolmage offers links to practical resources and tips for teachers, faculty members, administrators, hiring committees, conference organizers and presenters, and folks who publish—and also provides details about different approaches to instruction. He makes clear that university accommodations are often offered to "temporarily even the playing field" for typically one assignment, activity, or class section; these examples of retrofitting reveal that higher education is not invested in nor created to help disabled folks "live and thrive" with their disability (70). Although some changes are temporary, it is important to still consider implementing them since they can improve student experience even briefly. Universal Design (UD) is one approach of adaptable instruction that outlines different elements of student engagement. Dolmage explains:

Although UD was first an architectural movement, the design of physical spaces through UD then also became a means of transforming ideological space. Universal Design for Learning has since developed as a philosophy of teaching adapted from these architectural roots—advocating the use of multiple and flexible strategies to address the needs of all students. The three major 'moves' of UDL mandate that there be multiple means of student engagement (why students learn), multiple means of delivering content (what students learn) and multiple ways for students to express themselves and act (how students learn). (124)

UD resists the notion of retrofitting that presumes one model, which everyone else has to make fit. Dolmage spends as much time critiquing UD as he spends advocating for it, and although there are many potential flaws within UD, beginning with the title (as "universality" is presumably connected to "normativity"), still, UD offers a new way of thinking by suggesting that it's possible to design a classroom that is open and inclusive. Dolmage understands that UD isn't the perfect fix but acknowledges that it can provide more options—although with more options comes the potential of further isolating some students while better including others. Still, these challenges are always a part of teaching (Dolmage 151). Ideally, if we look for ways to "design a classroom activity for a broad range of minds, then all students will have a genuine opportunity to learn and to create new knowledge" (Dolmage 124).

As we seek to understand what adaptable instruction looks like, even if we struggle to imagine an authentically accessible classroom, we cannot let our egos or ignorance hinder the success of our students. In providing different avenues to knowledge production, we must remain willing to accommodate each student individually; it can be tempting to rely on the experience of a former student to inform our path with a new student. Even if two students share the same disability, for example, they will have different needs. So, when we remember that rhetoric "is the circulation of discourse through the body" and therefore, "spaces and institutions cannot be disconnected from the bodies within them" (Dolmage 43), we can better honor our students' individuality. And in this way we may accommodate and affirm intersectional bodies when they enter our classrooms, as they are vital to our success.

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