

Entitled *Disabling Composition: Toward a 21st-Century, Synaesthetic Theory of Writing*, my dissertation examines the ways in which composition pedagogies have, both in theory and in practice, systematically worked to exclude individuals with disabilities. As Patricia Dunn and Brenda Brueggemann have both noted, persisting in composition studies is the ideological belief that traditional writing and intelligence are somehow inherently linked, that traditional literacy is central to defining one's intellectual worth. My dissertation suggests that studies in digital media and disability give us reason to think otherwise. It suggests that we disable composition studies—what we think we know about composers, composing, and composition(s). This privileging of composing as print-based, I contend, masks the notion that writing is simply one among many systems of making and conveying meaning, that among our readers are those who cannot always access the messages delivered within print-based texts.

Disability studies allows us to perceive the ways in which traditional writing—and composition studies' investment in traditional writing—normalizes and has been normalized by our understanding of “the” rhetorical triangle. But disability studies also allows us to regard the ways in which **multimodal** composing normalizes and has been normalized by our understanding of “the” rhetorical triangle. Expanding on work by Jay Dolmage, the New London Group, Patricia Dunn, Margaret Price, and Robert McRuer, I maintain that this critical work—considering what it means to compose, and what it means to compose multimodally—has scarcely been considered within a disability studies framework.

My first chapter establishes the significance of disabling as a rhetorical move. I maintain that disabling is a way of coming to reshape and reclaim what it means to compose, of what it means to compose multimodally, and what it means to be composed. In examining the work of the New London Group, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, and Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, I suggest that dominant theories regarding multimodality are ableist and exclusionary. In considering Jay Dolmage's claim that multimodality has come to mean, in practice, multi-multi-modality, this chapter analyzes key digital media theory and composition texts and suggests that these texts privilege individuals without sensory impairments. Of note in this chapter and the chapter that follows is the positioning of synaesthesia within multimodal composition scholarship. This scholarship, I assert, distances synaesthesia from its pathological origin as a sensory impairment and instead reformulates it as an able-bodied, cross-modal heuristic. I maintain that this disability-distancing move positions multimodal composition as a terrain meant primarily for the able-bodied.

I begin **chapter 2** by examining neuroscientific literature on synaesthesia, which largely emphasizes pathology, involuntary cross-modal experiences, and brain abnormalities. From there I segue into Gunther Kress's claim that heuristic synaesthesia is not to be conflated with disability-related synaesthesia, which represents a “severe pathology” to be avoided. I also maintain that Kress's understanding of synaesthesia seems analogous to multimodality. In particular, I posit that these disability-distancing representations of synaesthetic composing—and the privileging of making cross-sensory meaning in normative ways—unfortunately renders disability as a project outside the scope of multimodal composition. I argue that this re-presentation of synaesthesia, though a well-meaning move toward transformative access, invokes what I call the rhetoric of shininess—a concept that sounds wonderfully robust and inclusive in theory, but is often empty and exclusionary in practice. In order to avoid shiny, happy rhetoric, and in order to center disability, I posit that we (re)disable synaesthesia and reclaim its pathological meanings.

Synaesthesia as heuristic (and pathology) drives my two middle chapters, both of which are case studies. **Chapter 3** examines the ways in which usability and accessibility are often forwarded as separate (but not equal) concepts in digital composition and technical communication scholarship. This, I argue, is largely the result of an ableist conception of audience. My examination includes analyses of usability-

related articles from *Computers and Composition* and *Technical Communication Quarterly* from the past 10 years. Using both rhetorical analysis and critical discourse analysis, I investigate the ways in which these scholarly conceptions of usability assume an able-bodied audience. Furthermore, this chapter explores the rhetorical nuances of accommodation and assistive technology in these *TCQ* and *C&C* articles, as opposed to accessibility and universal design. More often than not, I maintain, digital media technologies such as screen-readers or social networking web sites are described functionally as accommodating or assistive, which implies that disabled users are best served by an add-on or a quick fix. Conversely, accessible and universal design involves centering disability from a design's very inception.

My fourth chapter explores the ways in which autistic individuals have used online spaces to build a thriving autistic culture. These communities, I argue, have much to teach compositionists about learning, writing, difference, and ways of coming to know the world. Using the disabled (or synaesthetic) theory of composition laid out in chapters 1 and 2, as well as the disabled reclamation of audience from chapter 3, I analyze four literacy narratives of autistic writers, all of whom share experiences about composing, advocating, and learning. In emphasizing disabling as a rhetorical move, I purposefully subvert scholarly discourse surrounding autism and composing, which largely represents autistic people as unempathetic, audience unaware, and pathologically arhetorical. Instead, I suggest that our conceptions of audience are normalized to such an extent that autistic people are rarely considered to be audience members themselves. Sections of my fourth chapter have been published in *Disability Studies Quarterly* and in *Computers and Composition Online*, and this work on autism and rhetoric, I feel, is but one example of how we might re/envision composition studies.

In my **final chapter**, I consider the concept of “best practices,” and how such a concept applies (or doesn't) when we disable composition and when we disable multimodal composition. Here I emphasize the importance of accessibility to composition studies, of the ways in which our choices—at conferences, in our syllabi, in our scholarly work—reflect who it is we value as audience members. Additionally, I also provide concrete suggestions that work toward universal design, suggestions that compositionists might consider in both their work as teachers and as scholars.

Finally, my dissertation is a **multimodal, born digital project**. It includes video and audio elements, and it experiments with universal design and accessibility in its very form. I recognize that my audience likely contains individuals who work best with print-based texts, as well as individuals who work best with other modes of expression. Individuals who in other contexts might be considered able-bodied may, at many points, feel disabled as they encounter this dissertation, something that I explore, trouble, and play with throughout.

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