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Perceptions of Expertise in Disability: Intersectional Considerations for Disclosure

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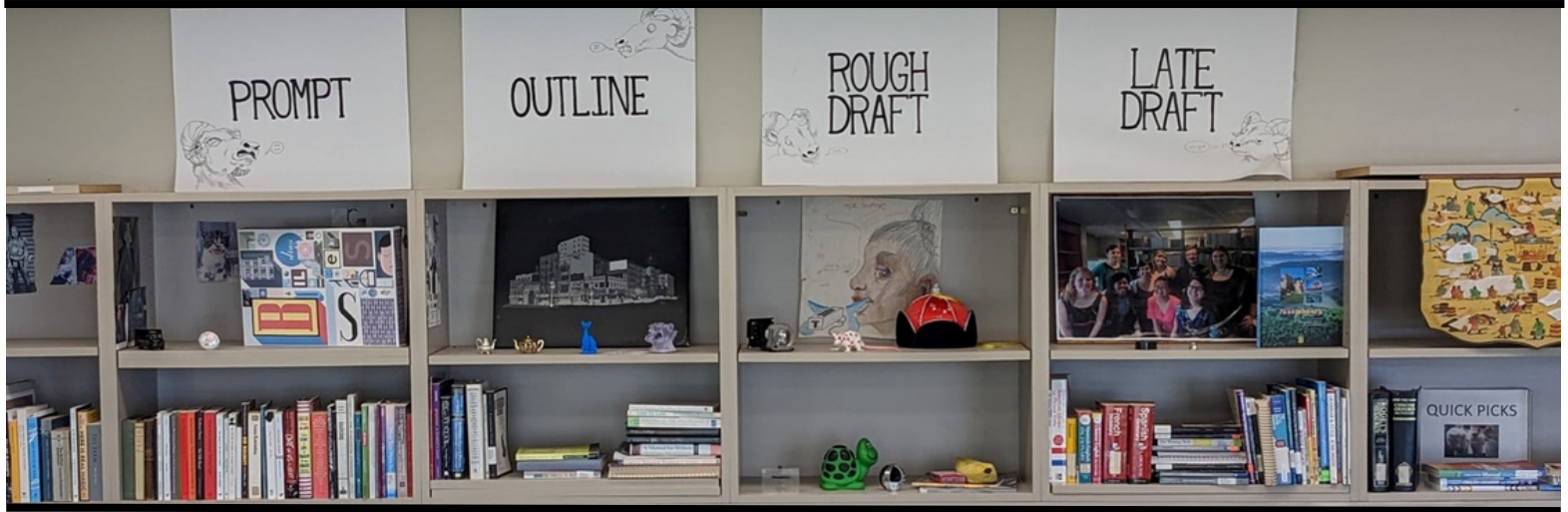


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Welcome and Spring Board Update

Hello, folks! As we come to the end of the academic year and the end of my term as MWCA Chair, I'm quite excited for you all to read this issue of the MWCA newsletter! While you may not have a lot of time left to discuss these columns in your centers, it is my hope that they'll provide some refreshing discussion. Included in this issue are three columns from undergraduate tutors. These three tutors were invited to write up their 2023 MWCA Conference presentations to further share their insights with us. They offer a variety of considerations on neurodiversity in the writing center. Following those articles is a lovely reflection from one of our outgoing board member on her job search process this year.

Along with this welcome, I wanted to offer an update on what the board is planning now that our 2023 conference is over.

Conference wrap-up: We are wrapping up our debrief of the conference; many thanks to those of you who were able to take the conference survey to provide feedback.

We appreciate all of the feedback and are actively working with it to try to ensure the best conference experience for everyone. We will also have photos up on the website soon for those interested in seeing them!

Summer retreat: We will be heading into our summer retreat soon to discuss planning and programming for next year - an off-conference year! Please watch your email, the newsletter, and the website for upcoming events for this next year.

New website: As a reminder, our website committee has been hard at work on a new streamlined website. If you notice any errors, please contact us, and we'll be sure to correct them. The Wordpress site will be down shortly, and our new Wild Apricot site will be the place to go. If you haven't yet seen it, please check it out here.



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Tutor Columns: Neurodiversity in the Writing Center

Strategies for the Autistic Student

by Haley (Roman) Belsher, Grinnell College

Out of the institutions already in many colleges, the writing center is by design one of the most useful places for Autistic students to improve their communication. Writing center tutors need to be intentional about helping neurodiverse students in order for the space to be an effective tool for them. However, it can be difficult to know where to begin when working with Autistic students.

I posit that the best way to empower Autistic students to communicate more effectively is to teach them the dominant forms of discourse, help them get into well-deserved positions of power, and then encourage them to use their positions of power to make neurodiverse types of communication more accepted. That's a lot of pressure to put on students who are already working through the struggles of being a not only a college student, but a neurodiverse college student. But, I believe that Autistic people are the strongest advocates for our community, making this is our brightest path forward. The teaching strategies I provide are targeted toward empowering Autistic students to enter dominant neurotypical discourse.

Teaching Strategies: What Individuals Need

Make your space accessible: Take what steps you can to make sure the types of spaces available for students are flexible.

Working within the student's workspace preferences will leave more of their minds open for learning because that brain power isn't spent on coping with their environment (Gerstle & Walsh, 2011). Sound and lighting are commonly overwhelming for Autistic students. Checking in with the student to make sure the space is one in which they are comfortable working is an important step, especially if there is something obviously distracting the student.



Photo is of a small room containing two lit lamps, a small round table, and 3 chairs. The room is intended to be a quiet working space within a larger writing center.

Another source of creativity is that neurodiverse students are typically less in-tune with the rules of the institutions they inhabit. They sometimes say things that many people would be afraid to say. In many situations, this leads to bold and substantial claims, but this can also lead students to say harmful things. When this happens, try to make sure the claim is well-supported and, in appropriate cases, tactful so that it holds weight in the classroom.

Work on audience, context, and organization: Audience and context are difficult for those with autism because Autistic people have difficulty considering other people's perspectives. It takes more conscious effort for an Autistic person to put themselves in someone else's shoes than it does for a neurotypical person to (Gerstle and Walsh, 2011).

Organization is difficult for a lot of Autistic students because, on the whole, Autistic students have difficulty with executive function. Executive function involves processes such as planning, organizing, and managing time. (Demitriou, DeMayo, Guastella, 2019). Lots of students have difficulties with organization, but neurodiverse students are very likely to have them, so be on the lookout.

Use fixations and interests: Many neurodiverse students have strong fixations. For those with Autism, in my experience, a fixation is often used to mean an interest in something that is pervasive in the person's life. It is a common pedagogy approach to connect a concept to something the student cares about. From what I've seen, the effect is even stronger for those with fixations.

Put writing strategies into rule sets: It is accepted that Autistic people tend to have a trait called hyper-systematization. This term means that through attention to detail, the student comes up with rules, conscious or subconscious, that they either follow or believe the world follows. This means that, when given rules about how something works, an Autistic person is much more likely to be able to apply a new concept (Baron-Cohen, Ashwin, E., Ashwin, C., Tavassoli, & Chakrabarti, 2009). So, bring out your templates!

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Directive Tutoring: Directive tutoring can be helpful for many Autistic students. It is well accepted that video modelling is helpful for Autistic children, and Cihak and Schrader showed that video modelling for adult activities was also likely to be helpful (2008). Directive tutoring, as defined by Shamoan and Burns (1995), is much like video modelling in its benefits while remaining flexible. Directive tutoring should only be done with consent and in an academically honest way. While it can be a useful tool, forcing it on a student can be belittling, especially to a neurodiverse student.

Multi-sensory teaching: This is a more flexible tool you can use with both your neurodiverse and neurotypical students. As Shoshana Konstant described it, multi-sensory teaching is the practice of using a combination of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic methods of teaching a concept (1992). She explains that you should ask your student what works for them and work with that as well as you can. Then, when something works, stick with it.

"Many of us have taken on a "whatever works" attitude, and I encourage you to adopt it with us. Using methods that work, but are imperfect, is an important step to working with neurodiverse people."

Many of us have taken on a "whatever works" attitude, and I encourage you to adopt it with us. Using methods that work, but are imperfect, is an important step to working with neurodiverse people. I imagine neurotypical people are similar in that regard, but in the neurodiverse community, this way of thinking is really culturally powerful and in the forefront of our discourse. Therefore, it will resonate well with these students to try and take on this "whatever works" attitude.



Image shows two people standing in front of a white board. One person is holding a marker while the other one is looking at the white board.

With the help of these tools and mindsets, I hope you will be able to more effectively approach your appointments with Autistic students.

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Perceptions of Expertise in Disability: Intersectional Considerations for Disclosure

By Rachel Jocson

One prevalent association with writing center tutors is "expert knowledge" that serves as a gateway. However, my "expert" position as a tutor contrasts my positionality as an Asian woman with ADHD, having not been treated as the expert on my own learning while seeking diagnosis and accommodations. I am interested in how ableism in the writing center might disproportionately impact opportunities for tutees with marginalized identities to disclose their disabilities. Overall, how might perceptions of expertise impact how we value the self-knowledge of tutees with disabilities?

Drawing from writing center literature, Degner et al. argue that disclosure helps tutors with mental health diagnoses find support. Potential risks of disclosure include loss of authority and other social ramifications. The authors believe tutors with disabilities or mental health diagnoses are placed in a "default position of non-disclosure" (Degner et al. 28-29). Their survey results indicated that disclosure was largely uncommon as well as an encompassing lack of mental health awareness in writing centers (31-32). Despite important distinctions between mental health and disability, the influence of stigma on disclosure arguably informs both experiences.

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In my opinion, these standard views likely affect tutees as well. As both a tutor and a college student, my experiences reflect that disclosure is atypical.

Examining Degner et al. further, they advocate disclosure as a means for de-stigmatization and emphasize continuous conversations about mental health. However, they specify that these efforts are not disclosure-oriented and the importance of personal choice and intentionality (Degner et al. 33). I see this as an indication that emphasizing autonomy and identity for tutees that disclose also becomes pertinent.

In contrast, Rinaldi focuses on the disparities among writing center theories of disability and practice. Although peer tutors are encouraged to work against ableism, they often still otherize tutees with disabilities and their practices become inflexible (Rinaldi 11). Rinaldi argues this reinforces assumptions that disability takes precedence and disclosure is necessary. She contends that disclosure is not inherent to accessibility and advocates for understanding the tutee as the expert on their disability (12). In other words, the disabled tutees' authority and learning approaches are more relevant than the disability itself and this approach is not entirely different from "standard" tutoring.

Furthermore, ADHD demonstrates the relationship between stigma and disclosure in both general and particular ways. Disclosure of ADHD is uncommon in tutoring because its very existence has been de-legitimized (Stark and Wilson 10). ADHD has been depicted as laziness, deviant behavior, or a willful refusal to change personal deficiencies (6-7).

One consistent theme in these texts generally was the gap between writing center theory of accessibility and practice. The lack of intersectionality further revealed this.

As expressed by Stark and Wilson, this stigma creates the idea within writing centers that students with ADHD are not ideal tutees. These misconceptions may lead to already marginalized disabled tutees feeling increasingly unwelcome. I believe that if you cannot trust that your need for help will be considered legitimate, it is difficult to view tutoring as beneficial to your learning.

Applying intersectionality to Rinaldi, "Her approach works for writers previously equipped with the skills and language necessary to communicate their specific needs, but what about writers without such backgrounds who may already feel disadvantaged?" (Stark and Wilson 6). Rinaldi's suggestions would have overwhelmed me a year ago and I can see how others would have similar experiences. Generally, I am not an especially assertive person and am still growing accustomed to situations where I have to self-advocate. It is difficult for BIPOC to be vulnerable in predominantly white spaces such as college campuses or writing centers, even more so regarding sensitive topics like disability. If disclosure is already largely uncommon, it is imaginable these barriers are enhanced for disabled BIPOC tutees.

"If disclosure is already largely uncommon, it is imaginable these barriers are enhanced for disabled BIPOC tutees."

Using myself as an example, diagnosis brought struggles that would have stayed invisible to light because the masculinity and whiteness typically associated with ADHD do not represent me. In my situation, the disability itself was relevant because I was initially not perceived as in need of help. I agree that only viewing someone through the lens of a diagnosis is harmful, but there is also damage in having challenges or parts of your identity you want recognized going unacknowledged. Being neurodivergent is by no means all of who I am, but I acknowledge that it is nonetheless an important part of my identity.

From my individual experience, my writing center has presented me with irreplaceable opportunities to explore my ADHD and how I learn best. For example, during the final portmanteau essay or a letter to my high school English teacher about my reading life. During that letter, I discussed how my reading life changed as a college student.

Understanding myself as a reader and writer helped me understand what effective reading and writing look like. The portmanteau essay had us use writing center literature we read for class to reflect on the writing center tutor that we wanted to be. My experiences as a neurodivergent student also informed my decision to apply as a tutor. I see value in comparable opportunities and experiences, whether or not they involve disclosure, being present for tutees. Even though there are important distinctions between how tutors and tutees relate to the writing center, the overlap can further our knowledge of accessibility. I have disclosed to my writing center faculty and find being open about my ADHD to be beneficial, but I acknowledge this is not universal.

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Overall, I believe an intersectional framework for disclosure is needed in the writing center in addition to the research that has already been done. To be specific, considerations for disclosure that include the identities of tutees that are seen as non-concurrent with disability. Intersectional considerations are important for disclosure because they help fully address the nuances of disability and prevent exclusion in the writing center. This topic addresses complex questions with inherently personal answers, but I appreciate being understood as the expert on how my ADHD affects my learning and what accommodations are effective.

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Negotiating a More Inclusive Table: Reconciling Neurodiversity and Online Tutoring

by Paige Meyer, Augustana College

As I sit down to fill out an asynchronous feedback form, my writing center's method of tutoring online, an all-too-familiar shake begins in my hands and my stomach starts to turn. Logically, I'm completely aware that online tutoring means that no one is watching me, that I'm less scrutinized than during in-person sessions. Nevertheless, I still have never felt more vulnerable.

"Nevertheless, I still have never felt more vulnerable."

This head-spinning, nauseating feeling associated with online tutoring is not something that happens to every tutor.

In fact, I have noticed that some actually prefer it to in-person tutoring; being online takes away some stress over responding immediately. I, on the other hand, have had a very different experience. As a neurodivergent tutor, I personally struggle with both conveying and understanding meaning in conversation, which is often made more difficult in an online setting. In order to dive into this imbalance in neurodivergent tutoring that I have found myself facing, both online and in-person, I have explored the significant lack of research in this area, as well as why this very specific section of tutoring is important and how we can make changes to compensate for such a lack of resources.

Gaps in Literature

In recent years, there has been more acknowledgement and support of neurodivergent students in writing centers; mostly focused on the perspectives of tutees, from an academic standpoint.

This means that there is a noticeable lack of such support for neurodivergent and disabled tutors, a gap that is visible in research that tends not to focus on tutor-specific perspectives. One prominent exception to this, however, is the work of Hilary Degner and her colleagues at Saginaw Valley State University, which highlights mental health stigma in writing centers from their individual perspectives as tutors (Degner et al. 29-30). Despite this exception, these gaps are especially noticeable because being a peer tutor is one of the most accessible ways into academic life. There is a lot of potential in neurodivergent and disabled tutors in terms of what strategies they bring to the table and the people they can reach. Despite this, given the innately "peer" nature of peer tutoring, there can easily be a suppression of neurodivergent and disabled tutors and our place in academia.

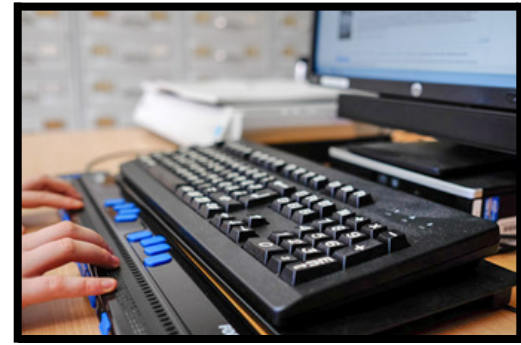


Photo shows a braille keyboard and the lower part of a computer screen.

Additionally, online tutoring has increased in recent years, especially given the Covid-19 pandemic and the overall implementation of online learning. As a result, there has not been a proportional amount of research or discussion surrounding how this shift affects neurodivergent tutors. I do want to acknowledge that online tutoring has been around for some time, and has been studied, but the area that we are lacking in specifically is the overlap of online tutoring and neurodivergent and disabled tutors.

These perspectives are not only missing from literature, but also from our conversations in writing centers. Personally, I have been able to form connections with other neurodivergent tutors that have been invaluable to me, but I have also found that the idea of being neurodivergent or disabled stops firmly at the doors of our writing center, whether they be virtual or in-person.

Next Steps

It is important to note that there will be no singular way of supporting neurodivergent and disabled tutors that fits every writing center or every tutor. It ultimately comes down to reflecting on each individual center, and asking all – specifically neurodivergent and disabled–tutors what they would like to see actively changed.

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There cannot simply be diversity for diversity's sake; there have to be actions taken to make sure that tutoring is accessible for those of all ability levels. Each writing center can do their part to promote representation and help their tutors to the best of their ability. Alice Batt, a strong advocate for disability in writing centers, argues that we should create an environment where tutors feel they can disclose (Batt). I, however, think we can take a step further than that, and bring writing centers to a point where tutors feel they can disclose, but not that they have to in order to be successful.

If the baseline of our tutoring is at the intersection of accommodation and traditional management practice, accessibility may be able to come naturally to our writing centers. Our default position can become one of acceptance and compassion.

As for specific strategies to support neurodivergent and disabled tutors, drastic changes are likely unnecessary. For example, writing centers can promote self-advocacy, and encourage all tutors to speak up for themselves on a smaller scale. Normalizing tutors sharing what works well (or not so well) for them can go a long way for helping neurodivergent tutors feel more comfortable in asking for what they need to succeed. The physical space of a writing center is also worth acknowledging. It can be easy, especially with technology, for a tutoring session to be reduced to a table and two computers. This excludes both students who don't learn best this way, and students who don't tutor best this way. It's important to have resources available to tutors who might prefer a hands-on approach to tutoring, or who may need to take a physical or mental break.

"Our default position can become one of acceptance and compassion."

Overall, however, there is a difference between having a seat at the table, and having your voice heard. Not only is it helpful for other tutors and tutees to see neurodivergent tutors and hear their perspectives, but this can actively combat ableist stereotypes and standards that are buried deep within academia. Neurodivergent and disabled tutors are not going away and we will be continuing to have these conversations. The only question is whether they will be happening silently, or out loud.

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Considerations: The Joys of Job Seeking in Writing Center Work

by Joni Hayward Marcum

As a PhD candidate in the final year of my program, I, like many of my peers, found myself at a crossroads in the fall. When it came to jobs, the possibilities seemed simultaneously endless and limited. Between tenure-track jobs, VAPs, short-term contracts, administration, and the murky world beyond the university, positions are as varied as graduates, as are our experiences in our programs and as jobseekers.

My time in a PhD program has not been straightforward. Aside from being interrupted by the pandemic at the end of my fourth year, I have taught classes mostly outside of my discipline in film studies and have mentored, coordinated, and led graduate and undergraduate students in various roles in addition to honing my disciplinary approach to my area of study.

The vital component of my life while earning a PhD, however, has been writing. Whether writing my dissertation, publishing my scholarly work, copywriting, teaching composition, or tutoring writing, the act and study of writing has permeated these years. As the graduate assistant coordinator of a writing center in my final two years as a PhD candidate, I was thrilled to discover that writing center jobs were being posted regularly. Based on the advice of a trusted mentor, I began to apply widely to positions of all kinds.

I briefly trace the shape of my experiences applying to and interviewing for a range of jobs in the writing center field and what I have learned along the way as way to both take stock of my journey but also to reveal a brief snapshot of the field from a job-seeker's perspective.

I came to tutoring somewhat late and have worked in one writing center. During the second year of my PhD program, I started tutoring and have done so ever since. I have worked with talented undergraduate and graduate students and have been proud to call those far beyond my own tutoring experience colleagues.

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It may sound obvious, but one of the things I've learned during the application process among writing centers is how distinct various centers are. I knew this was true, but discussing the daily operations, goals, and challenges facing different writing center professionals I interviewed with taught me to see our work in a new light.

Of course, writing is context-specific, audience-oriented, and context-sensitive. So too are our writing centers. The center at a small liberal arts college is, for good reason, different from the center at a large, flagship state university. As I learned more, I admittedly became greedy for new experiences. What would it be like to work alongside scholars with that approach? Or this approach? In this context, or that? How can I continue to grow as a scholar and a professional? How can a change of context positively impact both me and those I work with? From director positions to full-time tutor positions, jobs were continually posted on the wcenter listserv, and being connected to that artery of information proved to be enlightening about the shape of the field.

"This fact makes me proud to have an opportunity to continue in this discipline."

Interviewing with writing center scholars is an experience that I would frankly recommend. While interviewing for jobs is doubtless a stressful experience, I approached these opportunities as chances to learn.

And learn I did. I learned that writing centers are by and large as welcoming and accommodating as I have come to see them. As we know, to be a writer is to be vulnerable with others.

To be an applicant is equally, if not more so, a vulnerable position. As an applicant, I felt the ethos of working with writers extended to me. I believe this extension occurred because of the best practices in the field. In my work to apply widely, I applied for other university positions, tenure-track positions, corporate roles, and more.

Writing center interviews were overall with the kindest and most welcoming people I spoke with. This fact makes me proud to have an opportunity to continue in this discipline.

"To have an interdisciplinary approach to this work is, in my view, a distinctly positive position to be in."

As a film and media scholar, I have a distinct perspective on issues in the writing center field. To have an interdisciplinary approach to this work is, in my view, a distinctly positive position to be in. And while it feels strange to be at the start of a formal career after being a student for so long, the openness and possibility in front of me is exhilarating.

To graduate with a PhD in the current job market is a challenge. However, the writing center field remains a vibrant and welcoming professional discipline, the beauty of which is enhanced by the variety of backgrounds and ideas that scholars of all stripes bring to the field.

Interested in contributing to the newsletter?

The MWCA Newsletter Committee is seeking contributions of 500-1,000 words. We welcome articles on a variety of topics. Possibilities include articles from tutor perspectives, training strategies, news from your writing studio, article reviews, and more. Photos and comics from your spaces are also welcome.

If you have an idea that you're interested in writing about, send us an email! Please email chair@midwestwritingcenters.org.

Do you have a job announcement, conference, or other writing center event that you'd like to advertise?

Please send it to the newsletter committee for inclusion in the newsletter. Announcements can be sent to chair@midwestwritingcenters.org.

Announcement will also be forwarded to the website committee for inclusion on the new website.