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Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability

The five authors call for increased awareness of disability in composition studies and argue that such an awareness can productively disrupt notions of “writing” and “composing” at the same time it challenges “normal”/“not normal” binaries in the field. In six sections: Brueggemann introduces and examines the paradox of disability’s “invisibility”; White considers the social construction of learning disabilities; Dunn analyzes the rhetoric of backlash against learning disabilities; Heifferon illustrates how a disability text challenged her students; Cheu describes how a disability-centered writing class made disability visible; all five conclude with challenges and directions for composition studies in intersecting with disability studies.

We have been puzzled by how hard it has been to get to this “visible” moment. This struggle to get over, around, and through the multiple intellectual and physical barriers we felt were still strongly in place around our profession became the subject of passionate discussion at the 1999 “Teaching about/with Disability SIG” held during the Atlanta CCCC Convention, the theme of which was “Visible Students, Visible Teachers.” Late on a Thursday evening, some forty people—double and then quadruple the numbers that had attended the 1997 and 1998 SIGs respectively—filled the room.¹ All were deeply concerned about the “visibility” of disability at CCCC.

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Disability studies activists and scholars talk and write a lot about “visibility.” It concerns them because even at the dawn of this brave new millennium disabled people still aren’t very visible in our culture. There are, according to one recent estimate, 56 million Americans with a disability, a stunning one-half of whom are underemployed or unemployed (and this in a currently thriving employment environment).² But as one student in my freshman composition class last spring finally asked me, point-blank—“You’ve said that several times now—that there are about 56 million Americans with disabilities. Then why don’t we ever *see* any of them?” If you want to cast a quick glance around any meeting room at a CCCC Convention—or just your own classrooms at your own institutions—you’ll quickly understand why he would ask this question; you’ll *see* what is meant by the *invisibility of disability*.

But then again, you won’t. This is the paradox of visibility, another of disability culture’s great concerns: *now you see us; now you don’t*. Many of us “pass” for able-bodied—we appear before you unclearly marked, fuzzily apparent, our disabilities *not* hanging out all over the place. We are sitting next to you. No, we *are* you. As the saying goes in disability circles these days: “If we all live long enough, we’ll all be disabled. We are all TABs—temporarily able-bodied.” We are as invisible as we are visible. And it is only in often having to claim the rights that are due to us, to gain the access we are equal to, to enter the public space we are guaranteed, that we uncloak ourselves, turn “passing” into “outing,” turn discreditability into discredit (in Erving Goffman’s terms for the assignation of *stigma*); it is in no less than a civil rights frame that we become fully visible.

Another concern lies in the metaphor of visibility to begin with—in the very ways that the language we and our students use is laden with metaphors of ability. Not that we would want to police the propriety of sight equaling insight; the political power gained with “visibility” in our culture; the importance of “hearing others’ voices”; the meaning of “throwing our own voices,” “turning deaf ears,” or coming up with “lame ideas.” To do so would pretty much have emptied out the 1999 CCCC’s program book, which was overlaid with these very metaphors. But disability studies does invite us all to at least consider the able-bodied agenda lurking in the way we make meaning through so many crippling metaphors, in the way we compose and communicate that disables even as it might be attempting to “enable.”

In such an honest enabling move, CCCC has recently and significantly begun to attend to the elements of access and accommodations for disabled students and teachers who want to fully, equally, meaningfully participate in its annual convention. It is only rather recently that CCCC teachers and scholars

have begun to imagine richly the ways that an awareness of and attendance to disability furthers much about and in our field and our own classrooms. It is only recently that CCCC members have gathered to seriously consider the presence (and absence) of disabled students and teachers in our midst. Past CCCC Chair Cindy Selfe's response to a 1997 Sense of the House motion at the CCCC Business Meeting that asked the organization to begin including disability within its other "diversity" considerations was to put in place the Disability Issues Task Force (DITF). In addition, the 1999 Program Chair, Keith Gilyard, and his assistant, Debi Saldo, did so much to work toward an accessible convention, and they also had the insight to imagine the promise of inviting Simi Linton to take a featured place in the program. Linton's presence—her visibility, as it were—was one major mark of CCCC's recent attendance to and imagination in the realm of disability. After the publication of her book, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, Linton resigned her academic position as associate professor at Hunter College (in counseling and sociology) to take up full-time the work that she was increasingly being called to do anyway: that of "disability ambassador"—an activist and educator at large. Educationally, she seeks no less than a transformation of curriculum, particularly at postsecondary institutions, that would include a "disability studies perspective." This perspective, she tells us in *Claiming Disability*,

adds a critical dimension to thinking about issues such as autonomy, competence, wholeness, independence/dependence, health, physical appearance, aesthetics, community, and notions of progress and perfection—issues that pervade every aspect of the civic and pedagogic culture. They appear as themes in literature, as variables in social and biological science, as dimensions of historical analysis, and as criteria for social policy and practice. (118)

These same issues and their appearances also, we believe, occupy a central place in our writing classrooms, in our entire college curriculums, and cer-

Issues of disability matter in composition studies and classrooms, first, because we have a long, proud history of making the invisible visible and of examining how language both reflects and supports notions of Other.

tainly, as we've known it in at least the last decade, in the interests of each CCCC Convention. As Simi Linton suggested during the "Teaching about/with Disability SIG" during the 1999 CCCC Convention, we are "becoming visible" by organizing here some of our presentations from the 1999 CCCC program. Our goal in this article is to move toward "enabling composition," both in our collective field and in our individual classrooms. In the four sec-

tions that follow, we argue that not only will the enabling of our pedagogy and curriculum for the college writing classroom make disabilities and people with disabilities (both students and teachers) visible, but that it will also make visible the continuum that links “abled” (or TABs, those who are “temporarily able-bodied”) with “disabled” (or PWDs, “persons with disabilities”).³ With such a continuum, the us/them dichotomy that is often in place for designating and dividing disability and disabled persons disappears.

Why should these things—the attention to disability and the disappearance of such entirely unclear distinctions in the first place—matter? Issues of disability matter in composition studies and classrooms, first, because we have a long, proud history of making the invisible visible and of examining how language both reflects and supports notions of Other. We should be receptive to disability studies’ powerful exposure of the dehumanizing societal constructions of disability and difference. Second, we also

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rightly pride ourselves on our attention to practice—and on our refusal to separate it from the theoretical assumptions that explicitly or implicitly inform it. Disability and the presence of disabled students in our writing classrooms return us squarely to issues of practice that both interrogate and enrich our theories about literacy and empowerment. Third, connected to the first two reasons, because we already challenge the binaries of theory/practice, writing/thinking, and self/other, we should be well equipped—even eager—to embrace the critique of the (false) abled/disabled binary that is articulated by disability scholars such as Simi Linton, Lennard Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, David Mitchell, and Sharon Snyder.

We can disrupt these binaries in the ways articulated by the sections that follow this opening section. As Linda White suggests, we can disrupt the “handicapped” (and handicapping) construction of “learning disability.” We can also disrupt the “special privilege” myths of the learning disability backlash, as Patricia Dunn argues, at the same time we supplement writing-as-a-mode-of-learning with challenging, multi-model representations. Tapping into these multiple intellectual pathways and using what I have called “alternative formats” for teaching, learning, thinking, writing, and being in literacy, we can reach beyond the letter of the “accommodation” laws and invigorate praxis for all of us, PWDs and TABs alike, leading us all to “disability as insight.” The enactment of “disability as insight,” as Barbara Heifferon illustrates, using texts

like Nancy Mairs's *Carnal Acts*, can disrupt societal taboos about what is or is not an acceptable coping strategy and can also resist conventional binaries regarding perfect/imperfect bodies. Exposing these constructions of "disability," by extension, disrupts other disabling myths about gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and age that limit us all. And as Johnson Cheu demonstrates, teaching a class in disability studies (within the frame of a second-level writing course) can bring us "from silence to visibility to consciousness" in ways that surprise us as well as our students. In sum, these five pieces added together make visible how reconceptualizing "disability" uncovers harmful constructions of "normal/normalcy" and has everything to do with issues of confidence, power, and identity—issues we already know affect how we write, or are written by, the world.⁴

Constructing learning disability

Before I had read much about learning disabilities or worked with many LD students, I would have argued for excluding them from the legal protection guaranteed students by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

I thought that LD was different from other disabilities. It was easy to see that not being able to walk could, but need not, prevent anyone from doing the work of a college student, as long as reasonable accommodations were provided.

Reasonable accommodation for LD means questioning our definitions of intelligence and questioning how integral certain teaching and testing methods truly are to higher education.

But I couldn't see what might constitute reasonable accommodation for a student with LD, since learning is the work that college students do. From my current perspective, this argument depends on a too-narrow definition of learning and intelligence, one that Patricia Dunn critiques in the next section.

It is always easy to forget that tests are made, and that they are often made (constructed, manipulated, revised) to produce the "normal" distribution of the bell-shaped curve. Reasonable accommodation for LD means questioning our definitions of intelligence and questioning how integral certain teaching and testing methods truly are to higher education.

Becoming aware of the work being done in disability studies has also changed my perspective on LD. Our culture sees disability as handicap—something wrong with an individual. Disability studies makes a distinction between *impairment* and *disability*. Impairment is a physical difference—a difference in hearing, vision, mobility, brain function. Disability is more than impairment; disability is what society makes of that impairment in constructing

“disability” as the opposite of something thereby recognized as “normality,” part of a structure that privileges some and oppresses others (Linton 138–41).

An important insight of disability studies is that members of the helping professions have a stake in maintaining disability. As Harlan Lane comments, “the troubled-person professions serve not only their clientele but also themselves, and are actively involved in perpetuating and expanding their activities” (156). As objects of study in medical discourse, people with disabilities have been disempowered; their interests are not the same as those of the (usually nondisabled) professionals who participate in disciplinary discourse. The field of learning disability provides particularly salient examples of how attempts to “help” seem to reproduce rather than disrupt the political structures that place the disabled in subordinate positions. Since its popularization in the mid-1960s, the field of learning disability has flourished. The individuals it studies have not, despite more than thirty years of research and federal laws designed to protect them from discrimination (Gerber and Reiff 3–13).⁵

A commitment to social justice demands that we examine the way learning disability is constructed. No disability is determined by its physical components. As Linton explains, disability is a category of oppression, a political status, not a condition for an individual to overcome. She argues not for passing or overcoming, but for *claiming* disability, a move that will necessarily “disrupt the social order,” as disabled people come out (from “the institutions that have confined us, the attics and basements that sheltered our family’s shame, the ‘special’ schools and classrooms designed to solve the problems we are thought to represent”) to demand an inclusive society: “We are, as Crosby, Stills, and Nash told their Woodstock audience, letting our ‘freak flag fly.’ And we are not only the high-toned wheelchair athletes seen in recent television ads but the gangly, pudgy, lumpy, and bumpy of us, declaring that shame will no longer structure our wardrobe or our discourse” (3–4).

Being shamed is a prominent feature in the autobiographical essays written by people with LD, whose stories provide vivid accounts of the way impairments become disabilities. Children suffer when they find out in school that they belong at the bottom of the scale, a discovery cogently described by Thomas West in *LD Online*:

It is hard to remember any details of my earliest years—except a pervasive sense of confusion and personal failure. . . . I seemed to be at the bottom of the class or

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near the bottom of the class in nearly everything. In reading, writing and arithmetic I seemed to have no ability at all. I could not spell, write clearly or remember my multiplication tables. . . . I could not learn to read at all until the fourth year of primary school. . . . I always wanted to catch up with the others.⁶

When people with LD describe their experiences in school, they describe abuse and humiliation. Someone who learns to read in the fourth grade is a slow learner, not someone who learned to read in the fourth grade. Someone who cannot spell is stupid, because spelling is a basic skill, universally acquired in elementary school—even though it quite evidently is not. Children are routinely told that they will “never amount to anybody,” that they are limited, stupid, hopeless—in a word, “retarded” (Westall).

The LD movement argues against this construction by establishing an identity different from mental retardation. The learning disabled have specific dysfunctions, not the pervasive cognitive impairment thought to be characteristic of mental retardation.⁷ “[S]ignificant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities,” according to the National Joint Committee for Learning Disabilities definition, might “occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance)” but are not the same (qtd. in Torgesen 4). LD autobiographies testify to the positive impact of this identity. Being diagnosed with LD is described as epiphany, the turning point of the story. Diagnosis initiates a transformation because when someone finds out that he has LD, he realizes that he is not stupid, limited, or lazy and thus is capable of learning, as Dirk Funk describes in this passage from the *LD Resources* web site:

As the reality of what Dr. Williams had told me [that tests revealed dyslexia] set in it was like one of those aha experiences. The lights went back on. . . . Finally, I had an answer and a life-line I could hold on to. It was a new direction for me. I became hyper-dedicated to succeeding at school. . . . By the time the Fall semester of the following year was over, my grade point average jumped to 3.2. I wasn't failing anymore.

To some extent, the LD movement has helped students who learn differently. By emphasizing that dysfunctions are specific, “LD” reveals abilities obscured by more pejorative constructions. Paul Orfalea, the entrepreneur who founded Kinko's, tells the story of a college professor who at first fails Orfalea for making so many spelling errors on a test. Finding out that Orfalea has LD has a dramatic effect on his assessment of Orfalea's ability: “When [the profes-

sor] found out I had LD, he announced to the class that I was ‘on the brink of brilliancy’ because he looked at my ideas instead of the spelling” (Orfaea).

And yet, because of the political status of disability, because the LD identity does not disrupt the basic premise that some fixed, unitary quality called “intelligence” is distributed unequally at birth, people with LD remain vulnerable. They are vulnerable to those who want to help, as long as help is provided by professionals unaware that they participate in “ableist” culture. One adult with LD remembers an experience in remedial education so abusive that it might have been invented to parody the way professions create dependency. As a junior high student, he was instructed to practice crawling as part of attempts to improve his “hand-eye coordination.” He comments that he didn’t mind doing the crawling exercises in the doctor’s office, but that he disliked being forced to do them at home, since his brothers and their friends would see him: “They would bring their girl friends and all of them would see me doing that. . . . It was like I had to go back, I guess I felt like I was failed back to childhood” (Gerber and Reiff 191).

Learning-disabled students will remain vulnerable as long as schools are organized less to educate than to sort, a function that requires the convenient fictions of standardized testing in order to make some children Others. If schools were more inclusive, less hierarchical places, we might see reading and writing as abilities acquired at different rates and in different ways. Instead, schools pathologize difference; differences in performance are ranked, and identities assigned, so that some of us become “retarded” and “learning disabled.” The boundary between “normal” and “retarded” is of great cultural importance and constantly policed. Thus, the existence of LD remains controversial and “learning disabled” is still an identity less “real” than “retarded.” Even those who would dispute his views are as much aware as Massachusetts Board of Education Chair John Silber that “some of the things that pass for learning disabilities used to be called stupidity” (qtd. in Shapiro 31). As a composition teacher reading from the perspective of disability studies, I argue against such scorn for learning-disabled students, and I read their work with the ability to see myself constructing a stupid person, from marks that could have other meanings and different weight.

Analyzing the rhetoric of the learning disability backlash

The story of Somnolent Samantha is familiar to anyone who has followed the public discussion regarding disability legislation. In 1995, when Jon Westling was provost of Boston University, he gave a speech bemoaning what he saw as

outrageous accommodations given to learning disabled college students: a quiet room in which to take tests; a seat in the front row; lecture notes; and—for one student who might fall asleep in class because of her disability—more time from a professor to update her on what she missed during her classroom naps. According to the *New York Times*, Westling repeated this story of a sleepy LD student he called “Somnolent Samantha” in other speeches and referred to her in a 1996 interview with that newspaper. However, in papers filed during a 1997 lawsuit brought by students against Boston University, Westling admitted that the dozing young woman he called “Somnolent Samantha” did not exist. He had made up this extreme example to make a point about college LD accommodations.

The rhetorical strategy of finding, or, if necessary, inventing, an extreme example of LD students’ “demands” has become routine practice in a growing learning disability backlash. Since the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the testing and accommodating of students with learning and other disabilities have been governed by federal law. However, it was the 1990 ADA that put physical and learning disabilities in the foreground for some Americans who never had to think about them before, including compositionists.

Of the many learning disabilities now being debated (mathematical, spatial, attention-deficit, etc.), I am focusing here on language-related ones because they cause the most anguish for students in word-loving humanities divisions, English departments, and especially composition classes. For example, college students I interviewed with language-related learning disabilities

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have told me that they are often made to feel stupid, lazy, or even morally degenerate because of the kinds of errors they make in their writing. However, few people in composition studies (or even disability studies, for that matter)

pay much attention to learning disabilities. Or if we do pay attention, it is mostly to dismiss the whole idea or field of learning disabilities.

One reason for the near invisibility, or dismissal, of LD in composition is the highly controversial nature of LD-related research, testing, and treatment. The entire LD field has been critiqued by Gerald Coles, Barry Franklin, James Carrier, and Kenneth Kavale and Steven Forness, who argue cogently that LD research is flawed and testing for LD is inconsistent. They also critique the LD label, saying it locates “dysfunction” in a person, which blames the victim and allows the present ineffectual education system to continue.⁸ Saying physical

cause is unproven, and research exploring it is flawed, however, does nothing to address problems some people seem to have with writing—difficulties not fully explained by social, historical, or economic factors, or by controversial research on intelligence.⁹

A second reason for the hostility toward or dismissal of LD, and the one I examine here, is a rhetoric of difference that has shaped public attitudes toward LD students and toward nontraditional approaches used to accommodate them. Questionable rhetorical strategies, of course, can be found on both sides of the debate, but the widespread, negative reaction to disability legislation successfully employs metaphors and false dichotomies that are particularly divisive.

In their essay on environmental rhetoric, Michael Bruner and Max Oelschlaeger maintain that if an argument is to actually change people's minds or move them to act, it must "evoke sentiment" (215). In other words, the audience must feel something. Citing Richard McKeon, Bruner and Oelschlaeger also argue that if public policy is to be altered, there must be a strong, controlling metaphor or image that defines the debate. McKeon calls this transformative rhetoric "architectonic," an art so powerful it can change the structure and shape of public discussion (2).

In Jon Westling's made-up anecdote, Somnolent Samantha functioned as a powerful architectonic rhetorical device. The image of one student dozing through a lecture, only to be given a private catch-up session with the professor when she finally awoke, was designed to infuriate other students, themselves struggling to stay awake through long lectures, let alone have office-hour access to the professor. Somnolent Samantha also shifted the public's focus from controversial policies at Boston University onto one (invented) student's outrageous (albeit fictional) request. This story, with its construction of "special treatment," played to notions of "fairness" and delivered a rhetorical double punch. Setting up a false dichotomy, it positioned students against each other rather than against banking-model teaching. It also absolved professors who rely exclusively on word-based pedagogies from having to rethink their epistemological assumptions, philosophical goals, or classroom practices.

This rhetorical double punch is also seen in Mark Kelman and Gillian Lester's book, *Jumping the Queue: An Inquiry into the Legal Treatment of Students with Learning Disabilities*. They ultimately promote a teaching environment that includes all students, a recommendation with which I agree. However, their book's controlling metaphor—"jumping the queue"—is an image that depicts the LD student as somehow stealing public money for "special treatment" while so-called normal students are ignored. This metaphor also

constructs "special treatment" in a way that works with cultural commonplaces that one should wait one's turn and take only one's fair share. The metaphor functions as an effective architectonic rhetorical strategy and dis-

"Special treatment" is being successfully posited in this controversy as "unfair" advantage for one group of people: those labeled LD.

turbingly false dichotomy. It implies that LD students are jumping the queue, cutting the line, pushing patient, suffering, "average kids" out of the way and into the shadows while they, waving their LD label,

rush to the front to grab an oversized piece of a shrinking pie. "Special treatment" is being successfully posited in this controversy as "unfair" advantage for one group of people: those labeled LD. In a review of the Kelman and Lester book in the March 1998 *Lingua Franca*, S. D. Metcalf accepts without question the "special treatment" construction in the "jumping the queue" metaphor. He sympathizes with "beleaguered public school administrators" who reportedly complain of "children willfully malingering to land special perks" (64).¹⁰

In the 6 August 1999 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wendy M. Williams and Stephen J. Ceci argue that accommodations for learning-disabled students are "unfair advantages" that "shortchange other students" (B4-5). This opinion piece triggered 75 responses in the *Chronicle's* online Colloquy, one of which said, "This talk of learning disability is all smoke and mirrors" (Wolf). Responding to the same article were seven lengthy letters to the editor in the September 24 issue of the *Chronicle*. Emotions ran high on both sides, with one letter writer using the phrase "special privileges" as a synonym for accommodations, calling them "a scam, a breach of academic integrity, and a fraud" (Katz B5).

Variations on this theme can also be found in popular magazines. In a September 1998 *Time* magazine feature article entitled "Lost in the Middle," so-called average students are depicted as "pay[ing] the price" for special education programs. One mother is quoted as saying, "If I could give him a label, I know there would be all sorts of extra help for him" (Ratnesar 60). Not mentioned in this parent's lament nor anywhere else in the four-page *Time* article is an alternative view of what "special assistance" and "extra help" often mean in a system where difference is not celebrated but condemned, and where not-so-coveted labels accompany the LD label. Even in this *Time* article, for example, the terms "slow learners" and "misbehaving problem children" were routinely used as synonyms for learning-disabled students.¹¹

Why does all this matter to compositionists? Those who criticize the LD field are right that the problems LD students experience are partly the result of

how society constructs “disability” and “difference.” And the LD label may be implicated in causing that which it problematically names.

However, “disability” is also a result of the way in which most intellectual tasks in composition classes are pursued. Different academic fields, of course, construct intelligence in different ways, valuing whatever talents are most useful in their particular disciplines. Science and technology schools may privilege mathematical or logical ways of knowing, and the arts may stress a visual or kinesthetic ability. But in English departments and composition classes, what counts is a facility for reading and writing texts.

Granted, a writing class must be about writing. But composition professionals may, unwittingly, be privileging a way of knowing with which we ourselves are most comfortable, perhaps not realizing that our students have other talents we might use even as we teach writing. We may, unwittingly, play a part in disabling some of our best thinkers by overusing one pathway—writing—in the many intellectual tasks leading up to a finished piece: written journals, written peer responses, freewriting, written proposals or outlines, written e-mail discussions, and so on.

Very few of us compositionists are language “learning disabled.” We chose this field for its intrinsic, if not financial, reward of what we probably do very well. But many of our students would gladly avoid composition classes because they fear any difficulties they have with writing will (once again) be interpreted as intellectual or moral flaws. If people who do not write in technically correct prose were not so thoroughly humiliated in so many implicit and explicit ways in the first place, there would be less need for LD-related legislation that, though problematic, was intended to address some of these issues.

Now, however, composition professionals are in a unique position to take advantage of multiple talents and ways of knowing. For decades we have spoken about “writing” as learning. We know that writing is about complex intellectual processes. We know that writing is intimately connected with issues of authority, identity, power, and confidence, and that if students are to become more sophisticated thinkers and writers, they should be both challenged and taken seriously. The rhetoric of the learning disability backlash interferes with this critical dynamic between writer and reader, between student and teacher, by introducing stereotype into the equation.

Michael Bérubé, in describing how people sometimes cannot conceive of a Down syndrome child as an individual, uses Wittgenstein’s concept of “seeing *as*” as opposed to “seeing.” “‘Seeing-as’ is not a part of perception. And for this reason it is *like* seeing, and then again *not like*” (xii). In *Life As We Know It*, Bérubé

uses this concept in describing how people do not see the individual child who has Down syndrome; they see only the child as a Down syndrome child, as a stereotype. They do not *see*. They *see as*.

Similarly, the prevailing metaphors about LD students work by preventing us from seeing individuals. These false analogies force us to see these students

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only as lazy learners, line jumpers, and pie gobblers. The emotions evoked here are righteousness, anger, and fear—rhetorical enzymes strong enough to force people to act. In this case, this architectonic rhetoric functions as an attempt

to change public policy back to thinking LD students are, after all, just lazy and stupid. This is ironic, of course, since the general public never really stopped thinking of them in any ways other than negative.

My purpose here is not to defend the LD label, or tests for LD, or LD research—though all three have implications for composition studies that too many of us are rejecting out of hand because the methodological or epistemological assumptions supporting them conflict with our own. As Linda White explained in the previous section, every issue in the LD controversy is a complex one, fraught with constructed assumptions of difference. Yes, tests for LD are not clear-cut, and anecdotal abuses of this legislation are not difficult to find (or invent). And yes, there are substantial educational resources at stake in schools and universities.

But dehumanizing metaphors and false analogies eventually harm everyone by supporting a business-as-usual pedagogy that legitimates only one way of knowing in writing classes—that makes learning too frustrating for some and too easy for others. We need to supplement writing-centered instruction, even in our writing classes, not only because people do make knowledge in different ways, but also because everyone can benefit from occasionally using nonwriting strategies to alter perspectives and create the intellectual distance needed for sophisticated revising. The system needs to change not because some people are labeled LD but in spite of it. Those called “normal” also learn along a continuum of difference and would be better challenged if classrooms became more interactive, student-centered, multi-modal, and collaborative.

“Learning disability” matters in composition because of the critical questions it raises about *our* preferred mode of learning—writing—as an effective intellectual pathway for everyone. “Learning disability” also matters in com-

position because of the questions it raises about constructions of difference in society, and constructions of difference in our composition theories. I propose a shift in theoretical assumptions about “writing” and an exploration of classroom practices that challenge received (but usually unspoken) assumptions in composition regarding intelligence and writing ability. Expectations, assignments, and assessments will re-emerge after teacher-researchers reflect seriously on that theoretical shift.

Here are just a few examples. If a course requires reading logs or dialogue journals, every student might be asked to produce both oral and written ones—perhaps alternating the format throughout the semester. Good writers who might have difficulty organizing their thoughts orally, without first writing them down, would be challenged to do so. Those dynamic students who contribute much to the quality of class discussions—but who sometimes are not the best writers—would be recognized for their verbal contributions. If written proposals, outlines, or early drafts are required for inquiry-based papers, students might also experiment with drawing, sculpting, or dramatizing the plan. Being asked to conceptualize a project from a different perspective can trigger new insights for all writers, helping us generate connections we might not have made in word-locked prose.

When we ask all students to tap into multiple pathways to generate and rethink their ideas, we disrupt constructions of “normal,” we broaden notions of “writing,” and we bracket off some of the petty, hateful aspects of the disability debate—both sides of it. When we expect all students—and ourselves—to think in oral, visual, and kinesthetic arenas, in addition to the ones that privilege written words, we learn from those who were previously excluded. What is more, when we disrupt our own comfort with writing as a way of knowing, we problematize our assumptions, tilt our perspectives, and recast our metaphors. This discomfiture will invigorate the teaching, learning, and writing in our classrooms and in our lives.

In a field that rightly prides itself on its self-reflective praxis, we in composition should become especially aware of cultural biases supporting limited definitions of “writing” in composition. With our analytic skills in language, we should problematize limited constructions of “special treatment,” “disability,” and other key phrases in the LD controversy. Analyzing the rhetoric of language and learning used in public debates (or perhaps in our own syllabus) can help

When we expect all students—and ourselves—to think in oral, visual, and kinesthetic arenas, in addition to the ones that privilege written words, we learn from those who were previously excluded.

us to learn about—and challenge—harmful metaphors, false dichotomies, and stifling cultural assumptions about writers and writing.

Making disability visible to students

As composition professionals we are in a unique position to challenge pervasive and misguided assumptions about disability. I argue here that introducing disability texts into the classroom not only makes disability visible but also empowers students to see that “writing is intimately connected with issues of authority, identity, power, and confidence,” as Patricia Dunn indicates in the previous section. She goes on to state that “if students are to become more sophisticated thinkers and writers, they should be both challenged and taken seriously.” In this section I show how introducing a text written by a differently abled writer challenged students in exactly the way Dunn advocates. Although the text centers on physical disability rather than learning disabilities, what students experienced writing in response to the text clearly demonstrates this intimate connection writing has “with issues of authority, identity, power, and confidence.”

One way to move past the disabling and disenfranchising labels examined above as well as the invisibility of differently abled persons is to debunk concepts of “normalcy” and “ideal bodies” in the classroom. Traditional students are most prone to such constructions of people and bodies, given their developmental stage of late adolescence. In this section I examine a particular case of introducing a disability text into the composition classroom. The description constitutes a reflection on what happened in a particular classroom, relying both on memory and the final essay exams written in the class. However, preliminary observation could suggest future questions for researchers, such as the following: (1) Does introducing disability texts into the classroom raise awareness and increase visibility of differently abled people? (2) Do disability texts in particular challenge students’ conceptions of “authority, identity, power, and confidence”? and (3) Are there gender differences in reactions to disability texts?

Again to situate this classroom description, we can point to the increasing acceptance of teacher research within our discipline. Teacher research “is not designed to investigate cause and effect; instead it aims to describe, as fully as possible, what happened in one teaching situation” (MacNealy 243). This definition also frames what I do here, giving a limited description of the teaching situation within our page limitations. To summarize the situation, in the fall semester of 1996 the University of Arizona composition program gave a common

final for all 130 sections of its first-semester, first-year composition classes. All of us teaching sections of 101 were to give our students a copy of Nancy Mairs's essay "Carnal Acts" to read and discuss before the final.

In "Carnal Acts," Tucson writer Nancy Mairs responds to a request from a student at a small liberal arts college at which she has a speaking engagement to discuss "how you cope with your MS disability, and also how you discovered your voice as a writer" (81). Mairs reviews the intimate details of how multiple sclerosis has affected her body and her sense of self, and she concludes that she cannot remain politely silent on such details if she is to write as a woman who has experienced birth, love, and disease. The intimate writing that she shares with her readers is what she ironically calls a "carnal act." Drawing on her own experiences, Mairs raises basic questions about living and writing; she uses research and her knowledge of feminist writers to develop her perceptions. As a woman who is physically challenged, Mairs confronts issues such as disability labels, stereotyping, and cultural biases toward the differently abled body.

In the essay, Mairs goes into explicit detail, especially after her failed suicide attempt from which her husband, George, rescues her. Her descriptions of her body and her honesty about being unable at times to cope with her disease are about as graphic as any text you can read. She doesn't make it pretty (and this is one of the milder passages) as she talks about a body "which trips you even when you're watching where you're going, knocks glassware out of your hand, squeezes the urine out of your bladder before you reach the bathroom, and weighs your whole body with a weariness no amount of rest can relieve" (83).

When the director of composition announced this text as a final, I wondered if this work would demand too much maturity from our students, most of whom were eighteen years old, from Southern California, and often attracted to University of Arizona's reputation as an affordable party school with beautiful coeds. (This description is not the official one in *Peterson's*, but it can be found in some of the more student-centered guides.)

But I trusted our director's judgment and looked forward to the days of discussion just prior to the final. I had expected emotional responses to Mairs's work, but was surprised at certain phenomena I observed. In the often heated and vehement student-led discussion about this work, I saw clear gender splits. The young women in the class were clearly moved by Mairs's words and were sympathetic and empathetic, and young male students were outraged, not just "grossed out" by descriptions of body functions and other things that go awry in MS, but angry, furious, livid in the classroom. One young male exclaimed in his final essay, "[This is] everything you don't want to hear." Other young men

said that they were “uncomfortable” reading the text and wondered if she wrote it in order to “shock the reader.”

Our composition curriculum calls for a hands-off approach to this classroom discussion prior to the final, so that we are not in effect “teaching the final.” But in this case, I felt some direction might be necessary. I followed my instincts to intervene when the voices in the classroom became overwhelming to the degree that students could no longer hear each other because everyone was talking at once. I suggested to my students that we rhetorically analyze the phenomenon we saw happening before us and make use of this teachable moment. What was it about disability issues in general, whether LD or physical disability, and Mairs’s MS in particular that caused young women to react with such empathy and young men (for the most part) to react with such anger? Well, that question certainly shut down discussion for a few minutes. I then backed up and said I was not blaming men for reacting this way—I just wanted to understand why. I suggested that they take their anger into the finals, citing passages that repulsed them and arguing in a rhetorical analysis or writing personally in a reader response why Mairs did not reach her audience. Anger, any emotion in fact, is an excellent catalyst for writing well because students are engaged and motivated. As Dunn points out, Bruner and Oelschlaeger suggest that cogent arguments must also “evoke sentiment” in order to change minds (215). On the final exams, male students wrote about their initial reactions to Mairs’s text with such terms and comments as: “lurid,” “not easy to read,” “offensive,” “anger,” “mad,” and “reading those words infuriated me.”

I tried to put myself into the shoes/often sandals in Arizona of the young men in my class. One of the issues I discovered by looking at their verbal and written reactions was that they were outraged at the schism between the idealized body image of women they see projected in the culture and the body image Mairs wrote about. Their reactions then generated another question for future research: Do male reactions hinge on the idealization of women’s bodies? They were equally outraged by her admission of self-doubt, weakness, and disability. These young men are barely out of puberty at eighteen, still in it in many cases, just achieving sexual maturity or striving to. One male student writes: “At [this] point in my life, I [am] entering the transition state of moving from boyhood to manhood.” Another male student writes, “This [separation between the mind and body] is largely due to social views of

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what the ideal person should be: able in both mind and body. . . . [P]eople in our society are expected to be both mentally and physically desirable." Their fantasies are based on women projected by our popular media, a media that offers no alternatives to the Barbie doll ideal, a totalizing gesture that wipes difference from our cultural map, rendering it invisible. As Susan Bordo documents in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, "the vulnerability of men and boys to popular imagery, the contribution of their desires and anxieties, the pressures thus brought to bear on girls and women" are the fallout from the constructs our culture has created around youth and ideal bodies (46).

Mairs articulates the pressures on her as a female in this culture: "I was never a beautiful woman, and for that reason I've spent most of my life (together with probably at least 95 percent of the female population of the United States) suffering from the shame of falling short of an unattainable standard" (87). When Mairs makes the invisible visible, she creates an emotional as well as intellectual dissonance for these young men. They see women as idealized sexual objects, while Mairs presents a real woman, one who bleeds, one who drops things and struggles to cope on a day-to-day basis. Many young male students form identities based on their own strong, healthy bodies, and because they are young and abled, their initial response to a disabled woman's body is an angry one.

The author challenged us to *see* ourselves beyond the packaged images that our culture sells us. As Bordo also articulates, "in our present culture of mystification—a culture which continually pulls us away from systemic understanding and inclines us toward constructions that emphasize individual freedom, choice, power, ability—simply becoming *more conscious* is a tremendous achievement" (30; emphasis in original). Mairs's essay succeeded in making such constructions more conscious and in increasing awareness.

In the finals, I thought I would get the same angry male responses as in class discussion. I told students in advance that I would not penalize them for writing against the grain as well as reading against the grain. Instead, their responses surprised me. I realized the young men had processed their dismay and gotten underneath and beyond it after the initial shock. The class discussion seemed to help them process the initial anger and move them from outrage to more awareness of and acceptance of difference. Not only did Mairs succeed in coming to voice herself in her essay, but she also succeeded in enabling young men who are

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still discouraged from expressing feelings to do so in response. Those feelings shifted dramatically, and that change was reflected in the final essays.

To illustrate the most articulate change in a male student's perception, here is part of one young man's final essay in which he wrote about his father's death: "When Mairs spoke of coping with her illness in the beginning of the essay, she said, 'In these terms, I have to confess, I don't feel like much of a copier' (82). Reading those words infuriated me!" This student initially responds angrily to Mairs's text and must challenge his assumptions of an idealized picture of strength and the ability to cope. Later in his essay, this same student identified with Mairs when she admitted she did in fact cope and did so "by speaking about it" (91). Mairs helped this student find his own voice by speaking the unspeakable.

For me speaking about my father's passing would be too traumatic right now. Until this semester I'd never even written about it, but now I'm glad that I finally did. I found solace in writing about my dad, and when I was through writing about his death, I felt as though a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders.

This student, like Mairs, found that bringing the unspeakable to the foreground helped him to understand that he did not need to embrace the idealized model

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of masculinity (strong, silent type) along with the idealized model of femininity. Instead, the disability text opened up an opportunity for him to express his own grief and loss. The introduction of her honest text and the chance to write in response to that honesty reinforce our notions that writing is closely linked to

how we form our identities. Having to confront the toughest issues through writing empowers students and increases their confidence, because they find that they can meet the emotional challenges that will confront them as they move from a teen's perspective to an adult's perspective.

Texts on disability, honest, real, open texts such as Mairs's essay, have a valuable place in the writing classroom, particularly in a culture that continually blasts the able-bodied, idealized, and commodified body into our eyes and ears, and in a culture that often denies men the right to express their innermost feelings. I doubt a tamer text or a text that did not confront such stereotypes could have moved students so far from the previously unquestioned assumptions they carried with them, invisible and silent assumptions that render those with dis-

abilities invisible and silent. Thus we moved from dismay to discussion past dissonance to the discovery of a place where disability texts in the classroom help students confront issues of authority and power. Students' ability to grapple with such texts that challenge the views they take for granted increases their confidence and enables identification with persons different from themselves.

Building bridges between students and disability

Brenda Jo Brueggemann, Linda White, Patricia Dunn, and Barbara Heifferon have all commented on the idea of invisibility as related to disabilities such as LD and on students' assumptions about disability—previously unquestioned assumptions that, as Heifferon notes in the preceding section, were “invisible and silent assumptions that render those with disabilities invisible and silent.” My students, like Heifferon's, had “assumptions” about disability; but for me, as a wheelchair user, as someone whose disability is visibly marked, *disability*—and the assumptions therein—was never really invisible to me. Disability, to me, had been, and often still is, present, couched in stares, whispers, pointing fingers, in the function, often dysfunction, of my own body. Thus, upon teaching my first class in disability, I admit, the “silence and invisibility” of disability—mine and others'—surprised me, indeed surprised all of us, my students and myself. In this section, I examine the teaching of a class in what some humanities scholars are calling “the new disability studies”—one approaching disability from a cultural rather than medical paradigm. Like Heifferon's section, this does not constitute a case study but is instead a reflexive recounting. Still, there are issues here that call for further research: (1) What are students' preconceptions about disability, and how should their literacies regarding disability influence pedagogy and curriculum? (2) How does a teacher validate students' “uneasy” feelings and experiences surrounding disability yet assist them in finding their own way of engaging with the subject matter?¹²

During the quarter that a national colloquium on disability, “Enabling the Humanities: Disability Studies in Higher Education,” was being hosted by The Ohio State University, I decided to design my class around issues of disability and to entitle the class “Cultures and Literatures of Disability.” I'd been teaching English 367—an intermediate-level writing class and a “diversity” class in one—for almost three weeks when one day I encountered a silence that was a bit unnerving, but not surprising. We'd seen *Storm Reading*, a video of vignettes by disabled performance artist Neil Marcus. We had traversed through Lennard Davis's chapter “Constructing Normalcy,” where most students at least grasped the idea that “normalcy” is something society defines; and we had waded

through most of Kenny Fries's autobiography *Body, Remember* about being disabled, gay, Jewish, and human. Students had also written their first critical response paper, so I knew they all had thought about *something* related to disability. Because this is a required course, and it's also required that we talk about race, class, gender/sexuality (that "diversity triad"), students are often silent. Afraid to say the wrong thing, they persist in saying nothing, especially when they're there "just to fulfill the requirement." That day there we were, in a silent room, attempting to discuss some aspect of Fries's *Body, Remember*, when a student ventured to break the silence by saying that he, and by extension *they*, staring straight at me, were silent because "I don't know *anyone* with a disability." I had never felt so invisible.

Only four students out of twenty snickered. To the rest, my disability status seemed invisible. As I discovered, this was one of the three main reasons they found themselves silent: not being disabled or not knowing anyone disabled, never having been asked to consider disability, and disability being a "personal issue" no one talked about. As Jack writes:

I have had some experience with disabled people because I have a mentally handicapped older cousin and I guess growing up that my other cousins and I alienated him from our activities. Whether the activity was watching TV or playing a game of basketball, he was never a part of the group. Was it right to not do any activities with him? Probably not, but we were little and didn't know any better at the time.

As Michael Oliver notes, "reduc[ing] the problems that disabled people face to their own personal inadequacies or functional limitations . . . [organizations] do not see disability as arising from social causes" (6–7). Such categorizing of disability as a "personal problem" is one of the major barriers to understanding disability as a societal construction.

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Students also revealed that they were never asked to consider disability in other contexts, not even, as a women's studies major pointed out upon reading Hubbard's "Abortion and Disability," in four years as a women's studies major. And, because they

were not themselves "disabled," they felt they had no authority to speak, write, or say anything about disability. It was the classic us/them binary at work. Tom writes:

I was brought up on the east side of Cincinnati into a school system that had always segregated the disabled. In junior high they had special classes that they took nearly all day long so I never had any contact with disabled people unless it was the ones which were able to perform in the band. In high school the disabled people were sent off to an entirely different school which over there they were even segregated from the undiseased. Needless to say that I haven't been around disabled people long. In the last year of high school they were trying to make it more accessible for disabled people but yet there was only about a handful that came back to my school.

I was never engaged in any activities with disabled people and that is a reason that I would never know if they need help when you see them having problems doing something. I never talked about anyone's disability to them before, this doesn't mean that I am not interested in it, it just means that I don't have the know how to carry on an intelligent conversation with them. I was always taught not to stare and that meant for me that I couldn't look without staring so I felt that it might be rude to ask if they needed help. It is never because I don't want to help them but because I wouldn't know how a disabled person would feel. Sure I'll help them if they ask me to but I had never had anyone ask for my help. I just never gained the knowledge about disabled people to see how they feel. Do they want my help or don't they?

Tom's experience was typical of many. Here, however, the effects of isolation, of invisibility, are felt not only by the disabled, the bearers of "negative stigma" (as Erving Goffman names it), but also by the nondiseased student as well. Most of the questions students had at the beginning were about access. "Do we or do we not hold the door open?" Having answered that question personally since before I can even remember, I hadn't even considered that to be a part of this class. I wanted to talk about literature, about theory, about hot-button issues such as Dr. Kevoorkian. But clearly, I had to begin someplace else. I had assumed, wrongly, that everyone who had had some experience in hospitals could relate to Fries. They could, but I had to start where they were, and that meant talking about opening doors. And although this perhaps, unwittingly, set me up as some "paragon of disability," it also, I think, created a common vocabulary and validated their experiences and discomfort. It created for us a place to speak.

Then, they could write about the literature. Cindy, who "came out" as disabled by clinical depression, wrote passionately about how she could "relate to Anne Finger's experiences in her memoir *Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy, and Birth* on the basis of common experiences of womanhood." Similarly, after reading Donovan's poem, "For a Paralyzed Woman Raped and

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Murdered While Alone in Her Own Apartment,” students talked about powerlessness and control. They were beginning to make connections between disability and larger cultural issues. They were talking now. And by far, one of the better experiences of the class was, again, letting their experiences guide me.

They loved movies, and we spent a whole class talking about *Star Wars* and whether Darth Vader is disabled. Or would we consider Luke Skywalker disabled after he acquires a mechanical hand? We discussed Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg” theory then. We spent a good hour talking about Disney films, Quasimodo’s *Hunchback*, the Beast’s transformation, the Little Mermaid as a “freak,” and on and on. In the beginning of the class, the students were silent because “they were not themselves disabled.” By beginning to view disability in larger cultural contexts, however, they were gaining some authority, some comfort. Cole said to me, “you never notice it [disability] in the movies, but once you’re trained to look for it, it’s everywhere.”

Having students run the class, in many ways, often meant that I had to concede my own political and personal goals for the class. Beginning where students were meant that I had to allow them to go where they needed to with the subject matter. When nearly half of them wrote their final research papers on medical discourse, I had to relinquish my desire to have them all become social and cultural critics, displacing the medical paradigm. After all, it would be perfectly natural for Monica to want to do research on cystic fibrosis because “my niece has it” and she had never been allowed to think or talk about it before. It had been a “personal family problem.” So she did her medical research paper, but we also had a nice talk about family dynamics, parental expectations, and other such cultural issues.

Today, I am still mulling over what, in actuality, I taught them about disability as a cultural issue, or how to combat more effectively the pigeonholing of myself as the sole disabled member of the classroom, or about the best ways

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to go about breaking down the “us/them” binary. Those are big questions, and even loftier pedagogical goals. But we were an active and interactive classroom. Some time after the class was over, one of the students stopped me as I was rolling on campus. He was one of the students interested

in Darth Vader’s “disability status,” and he wanted to discuss the Website for *Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*, something I hadn’t yet downloaded. He’ll be looking for disability, he informed me. I laughed, thinking somehow we got

from silence to visibility to consciousness, even if it wasn't always the consciousness I wanted. But, in retrospect, building that bridge was as much about *my* changing my notions and expectations about disability as it was about students' coming to their own voices and views. Disability, invisible and unspeakable, became not only visible but also speakable (and writeable)—indeed, knowable in the context of the classroom and in our culture, changing, as Michael Bérubé notes, “life as we know it.”

Enabling conclusions

In this essay, we five composition teachers have joined our voices in a chorus—a chorus to break the silence. We have attempted, in various ways, to make the invisible visible to those who, like us, also want to learn to “see” and “speak” differently. Seeing and speaking are often not taken for granted among the people we attempt to represent here.

Even such an attempted representation is in itself problematic, we know. Like Michael Bérubé ending his account of “a father, a family, and an exceptional child” in *Life As We Know It*, we hope for a future that offers better options for such representations. “My job, for now, is to represent my son, to

set his place at our collective table,” Bérubé writes in conclusion as he inconclusively muses on the difficulties of representing people with disabilities, his son included: “But I know I am merely trying my best to prepare for the day he sets his own place. For I have no sweeter dream than to imagine—aesthetically and ethically and parentally—that Jamie will someday be his own advocate, his own author, his own best representative” (264).

Aesthetically and ethically and pedagogically, we aim here for the kind of “enabling conclusion” that will make it more possible in the future for students with disabilities in our writing classrooms (and for us, too, as teachers with disabilities in those classrooms) to be their own best advocates, their own authors, and their own best representatives. Disability advocates often say, “Nothing about us without us” (Charlton). Some of us here are both visibly and invisibly disabled, some of us are currently TABs (temporarily able-bodied), and some of us are already PWDs (persons with disabilities). But all of us have joined together here to disrupt certain assumptions about both physical and learning disabilities, and none of us wants to continue to take “abilities” for granted.

Aesthetically and ethically and pedagogically, we aim here for the kind of “enabling conclusion” that will make it more possible in the future for students with disabilities in our writing classrooms (and for us, too, as teachers with disabilities in those classrooms) to be their own best advocates, their own authors, and their own best representatives.

We believe that even as our own limitations disrupt certain portions of our lives, like Foucauldian “ruptures” and Kuhnian “revolutions,” these disruptions provide rich veins to work and grist for our mills. These disruptions bring us—as they do other teachers—opportunities to enrich learning for those in our classrooms. We see differences in *abilities* (not in *disabilities*)—like other differences of gender, race, ethnic backgrounds, and class—as generative in their place within writing classrooms. Yet, even in their generative potential, we know that the most initially disruptive difference to composition teachers is likely to be the differing abilities of learners. These differences call into question the very notion of composition itself. For but one example, people without hands who, at an earlier time, could not “write” in the conventional senses can now write with technological assistive devices. Likewise and by extension, we suggest that when teaching learning-disabled students, sometimes all of us, teachers and students alike, must learn to “compose” without words—visually, graphically, orally, using new strategies that perhaps seriously challenge all our traditional pedagogical practices and our strongly held beliefs about literacy and writing as empowerment.

Earlier in our recent history, composition studies stumbled over post-structuralism and deconstruction. When the author disappeared, many of us in the field were afraid we would also be subject to a disappearing act and be rendered invisible. But many of us learned in, through, or perhaps even in spite of these challenging theories to find a place within a different world—a world more open, flexible, and playful. We not only survived but enriched our theoretical bases, our discourses, and our practices. Now we face a new and different challenge as disabilities move away from their position on the margin. The five of us seek to push toward the center and disrupt some previous patterns and positionings in our fields about the inherent ability *of* writing and the inherent ability (power) *in* writing.

The five of us, presenting different perspectives throughout this piece but now “speaking” in unison, believe that all of us in composition studies and college writing classrooms—whether at the teacher’s desk or in the student’s seat—are capable of meeting challenges, are willing to embrace, as we have formerly embraced, other “Others.” We are humble in our approaches here. We don’t have all the answers, but we have a powerful lot of questions, as Huck Finn might say. Embrace these hard questions with us—questions about the visibility of disability in the academy generally, about accommodations for disabled students (and teachers) in writing classrooms particularly, and about the not-so-binary distinctions (call it a continuum) between “abled” and “disabled,” be-

tween TABs and PWDs, between “normalcy” and “disability.” And in such an embrace, we all can learn how to meet the transitions most of us will need to make in the future. In the meantime, too, the composing of our lives and teaching will become richer as a result, enabling conclusions about abilities that we might once have barely imagined.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank some very important people for helping make this work truly “visible”: CCC editor Marilyn Cooper, for her support and vision concerning the emerging themes that she helped us identify in our first draft; Roberta Kirby-Werner and Joanne Buckley, for their readings and reviews, which helped us work through the thornier parts, particularly in building a more cohesive opening and closing and in “walking” around and through the contentious learning disabilities issues more “surefootedly”; and finally, Maureen Stanton and Melissa Goldthwaite, our own excellent readers, copyeditors, and compilers of multiple versions into this final piece.

Notes

1. If you are interested in a fuller, four-page history of “the disability movement” within CCC, contact Brenda Brueggemann, brueggemann.1@osu.edu.
2. This figure comes from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History current exhibit on “Disability Rights and American Culture” (see americanhistory.si.edu/disabilityrights). Thanks to Neela Thapar for the 1990 census statistics from the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of Census, 1996, for other relevant figures on disability among the workforce population (ages 16–64). Also thanks to Linda M. Long for referring me to the NIDRR’s 1998 *Chartbook on Work and Disability* and to Kathryn Maher for several government sites quoting similar figures.
3. These terms—PWD for “person with a disability” and TAB for “temporarily able-bodied” (meaning all those who aren’t currently PWDs)—are common parlance in disability scholarship and activist circles.
4. For samples of college course syllabi that either incorporate disability as an issue or even center on that subject in the humanities classrooms (especially in language, literature, and composition), we suggest the Disability in the Humanities (DS-HUM) Website, listserv, and syllabus bank: <http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/interests/ds-hum/index.html>. In addition, two of us have sample syllabi from courses we have taught in these areas: <http://people.english.ohio-state.edu/Brueggemann.1> and <http://people.english.ohio-state.edu/chu.1>.
5. Gerber and Reiff review studies that attempt to determine the long-term effectiveness of LD interventions; they find that LD students educated after legislation

required schools to provide services for them have not achieved greater levels of success than those educated before services were required. Kelman and Lester report similar findings in their review of longitudinal studies (147–52). In pointing to the different fortunes of those who study LD and those who have LD, I am not singling out the field of learning disability as especially culpable. My intent is to explore a mechanism at work in many fields, to understand the ways disciplinary discourse works to perpetuate inequities. David Bartholomae, Bruce Horner, and Min-Zhan Lu have made similar points in critiquing the field of basic writing, as does Trinh T. Minh-ha in describing the way anthropologists write about the native peoples they study. As Linda Alcoff argues in “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” having the authority to speak is a position of power, both a privileged and a limiting position. We are learning to be critical of our attempts to represent those who do not share our authority.

6. My analysis of LD autobiographies is based on essays published at the Internet sites of *LD Online* and *LD Resources*, including those I cite here: Dirk Funk’s “Finding Out,” Paul Orfalea’s “Succeeding with LD,” Thomas West’s “Left Behind at the Very Beginning of the Race,” and Sandra Westall’s “I Made It.” My other sources are Paul Ziminsky’s autobiography, *In a Rising Wind*, and Gerber and Reiff’s *Speaking for Themselves*, a 1991 collection of interviews with nine learning-disabled adults. I am grateful to learning-disabled writers for telling their stories. The stories they tell most often and most enthusiastically have heroes who overcame their disabilities to achieve normalcy; most LD authors support hierarchies I would challenge. But it was reading what they wrote that enabled me to see connections between LD and mental retardation and to understand that LD is not a sham or an excuse.

7. Michael Bérubé’s *Life as We Know It: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child* challenges the myth that people with mental retardation are unintelligent.

8. However, the sociological research Gerald Coles cites to support his attack on LD research also has methodological flaws, which he does not mention, as well as its own share of un-self-reflective researchers whose pre-existing assumptions impact their “findings” (i.e., that mothers are primarily responsible for their children’s linguistic development). For a fuller critique of Cole’s assumptions, see chapter 1 in my book *Learning Re-abled: The Learning Disability Controversy and Composition Studies*.

9. For discussions regarding controversial aspects of intelligence, see Coles, Gardner, Siegel, and Stanovich.

10. The idea that there are armies of children “willfully malingering to land special perks” is as widespread as it is preposterous. Adolescents, who more than anything else want only to be perceived as “normal,” are not lining up for admittance to a special education class so that they’ll have a few extra minutes on exams. Only the most desperate children in our educational system would risk enduring the stigma

revealed in comments from ignorant classmates, parents, or, worse, their own teachers, who think, as do most of the general public, that “LD” is simply PC for “lazy” or “stupid.” And if educators privately think that poor writers are really not too bright, they may unconsciously lower expectations for these students—the worst thing they could possibly do.

11. In spite of the 1973 and 1990 legislation, the general public continues to think of LD as a euphemism for more insulting terms, which is why, as Linda White explains in the previous section, those with an LD label have tried to distinguish themselves from the “retarded.” While this distancing is not admirable, it is perhaps understandable. Examples of insults regarding intelligence come from schoolchildren at the nearest bus stop as well as from administrators at major universities.

12. I should note that although I ascribe to the difference between *impairment* and *disability*, as my colleagues have noted, I did not make that distinction for my students; therefore, my use of the term *disability* in this article encompasses both medical impairment and cultural constructionism.

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