

Creating a Culture of Access in Composition Studies

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Although our profession has long been committed to the goal of accessibility, our movement toward that goal has proved dismally slow and frustratingly uneven. Consider, for instance, the printed articles and books that so many of us publish. We have not, as yet, taken on the professional responsibility of making sure that all such texts—both those aimed at students and those aimed at fellow teachers and scholars—are easily readable: by ensuring that they are in a digital form accessible by screen readers (and not simply a PDF with a single image unrecognizable to optical character scanners), by offering aural forms of such texts, or by providing large-print versions of such texts. This is also true, of course, of many digital texts, especially those that rely on multimedia elements, contain uncaptioned video, neglect to describe visual elements within the text itself, or mix sound and image but fail to provide plain-text transcripts. We could extend these critiques to the in-person aspects of our profession as well, our conferences and classrooms that are too often designed for nondisabled users. Inaccessible texts and spaces are deeply sedimented in our academic culture and structurally aligned along the axes of existing cultural formations—efficiency, capitalism, ableism, among other factors—all of which resist efforts affecting increased accessibility (Yergeau et al.).

Also complicating accessibility efforts is a shifting understanding of access itself. As a term, access is a moving target, a concept that sounds promising on its surface yet frequently offers little more than empty gestures. Critiques of the field's failure to engage the who, how, and what of access have been many, emerging from disability studies, critical race theory, and gender and sexuality studies (Banks; Dolmage; Mingus). Such critiques ask us to examine complex and intersecting politics around identity and participation. When access is only a question of texts—products divorced from labor/ers—those individuals seeking access are positioned as consumers, as bodies in need of help from those more able and privileged. A culture of access, then, is a culture of transformation, as opposed to a culture that “flattens” access as rehabilitation, or as inclusion for the sake of increased consumption (Alexander and Rhodes 431). Transformation, as Kristie Fleckenstein describes, is a “change radical enough to rewrite the rules supporting a particular arrangement of culture,” a move that disables the very design of cultural and institutional spaces (761).

The challenges we have identified are many. They are barriers to creating a culture of access, or what we might otherwise describe as an expectation that accessibility is a defining feature of our composing processes and our professional practices. How might transformative access live in practice? We briefly highlight examples of two significant efforts—by no means exhaustive of the access initiatives taking place—while also highlighting obstacles toward realizing a culture of access. We encourage compositionists to see these efforts and obstacles as shaping the values in our field, rather than representing “special” (read: marginal) exigencies.

Accessibility and the CCDP

Such complex challenges as those described above have inspired the efforts of the Computers and Composition Digital Press (CCDP) to make accessibility efforts both a pragmatic and political feature of its born digital book-weight projects. At the simplest level, the CCDP has adopted an accessibility policy that articulates our goal of making projects available to users who have a wide range of needs and preferences for accessing communicative modalities (visual, aural, alphabetic). In addition, over the past five years, the CCDP has attempted to build accessibility into the composition of all projects, so that such efforts are designed into the fabric of projects from the very start rather than added, reluctantly, at the end. The CCDP lets authoring and editing teams know—even at the earliest stages of proposing a project—that projects must include captioning and/or transcription for all audio, video, and multimedia content and authors should be prepared to “provide alternate formats for readers who request them.” As our awareness of accessibility issues has grown, the Press has also worked with authors to create web texts that can work well with screen readers, to include descriptive text for all images in published projects, to enable keyboard navigation of web pages, and to support browser settings for enlarging text. As a way of encouraging the profession’s larger recognition of accessibility as a social and cultural goal, in 2014 the CCDP inaugurated an annual award for Accessibility in Digital Composition, given to projects that further our understanding of accessibility in design and/or content. The truth is, however, that these first steps in publishing accessible multimodal projects are small, tentative, and insufficient. Ultimately, we aim to broaden our own and the profession’s understanding of accessibility practices in ways that extend beyond simple standards to embrace, instead, the spirit and practices of both universal and participatory design. To put it simply, the aim is to transform texts as much as it is to transform readers, audiences, expectations, and composing practices.

Composing Access

The Composing Access Project (composingaccess.net), co-sponsored by the Committee on Disability Issues in College Composition and the CCDP, is a collection of resources for creating more accessible conferences. Disability scholars have long advocated for more equitable conditions at conferences in the field. 2001 saw the publication of Brenda Jo Brueggemann et al.'s "Becoming Visible: Lessons in Disability" in *CCC*, a groundbreaking article that detailed the ways in which composition studies has systematically engaged in ableist and exclusionary practices. Composing Access, arriving some years later, emerged from this longer tradition of activism within the profession. In particular, this resource site grew out of the need for accessible presentations, of which there were (and still are) few. The site has since expanded beyond tips for individual presentations to advice for conference organizers on creating accessible conferences. Composing Access rhetorically positions access as woven into all aspects of a conference, from captioning videos, posting copies of presentations prior to the conference, and providing note cards as a non-verbal channel for audience members to pose questions to presenters. Furthermore, the resources address the creation of user-friendly social spaces that can be made more accessible with interaction badges and quiet rooms. Composing Access is expansive in its view of access, envisioning conference organizers, presenters, and attendees—the entire conference and professional community—as responsible for creating a culture of access that transforms the work of those in the profession.

Conclusion

While we do not believe that composition studies has established a culture of access, there are significant efforts beyond CCDP and Composing Access that indicate a culture shift is underway. For the past several years, the Computers & Writing conference, for example, has hosted web infrastructures that enable presenters to share work, across modality, before and after the conference has occurred. So too can we locate cultural shifts in the work of scholars such as Elizabeth Grace, who tirelessly advocate for the use of plain language, across academic and professional contexts, so that the work of our field might be transformed by those who have been historically characterized as intellectually incapable.

And yet, despite these efforts, our field too often remains attached to a vision of access that has more in common with helping the Other consume inaccessible texts than it does with radical transformation of the profession. A culture of access is a culture of participation and redesign. To put it simply: There is a profound difference between consumptive access and transformative

access. The former involves allowing people to enter a space or access a text. The latter questions and re-thinks the very construct of allowing. We encourage all colleagues to join in this project of questioning and re-thinking—for the future of the profession.

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