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Critical Imagining of Accommodation Letters for Transformative Access in the First-Year Composition Classroom

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More than thirty years have passed since the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADA), and major advances for access have been made. However, access remains an unfinished task, with many communities and individuals laboring to gain access that should be inherent and legally protected. Access is often thought of in terms of physical access, removing a "barrier" that might prevent someone from joining in space, such as the need for curb cuts to ensure a wheelchair user can safely navigate a street. Technical and professional communication scholar Lisa Melonçon defines accessibility more expansively, writing, "the material practice of making social and technical environments and texts as readily available, easy to use, and understandable to as many people as possible, including those with disabilities" (5). Access can be understood as the ability to engage with a space in addition to the material objects found (or absent) in a space.

Despite idealistic premises of the academy, higher education institutions are often inaccessible. I have experienced what some mentally disabled and Mad people call the diagnosis du jour, or diagnosis of the day (Prendergast 192). The psychiatric system has diagnosed me under a wide range of conditions and disorders in my early adulthood. Changes in diagnostic criteria can have significant impacts upon one's lived experience – changing prescriptions/prescription dosages, new treatments, and the identity impacts that come with new medical language. As an undergraduate, after a year-long medical leave of absence from school, I met with Utah State University's Disability Resource Center. The individual I worked with said there was nothing they could do to help me, presumably because of the nature of my diagnoses. Broadly, this project seeks to reduce the harm I encountered as an undergraduate student who was told the university could not help me. My experiences with ineffective academic systems are not unique to me. As Anderson et al. note, a significant number of students are unaware of the accommodation options they have. They write, "according to a 2020 survey (Mental Health America, 2020), 70% of students with mental health disabilities were not registered to obtain accommodations, and 33% stated they were not aware they were eligible" (Anderson et al. 6).

As a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) and instructor of record for first-year composition (FYC) courses, I have often received accommodation letters on behalf of my students. Often, the accommodation notes something that does not exist in FYC, such as additional time for exams and quizzes. Building upon my own identities as a person and scholar, in this article, I set out to investigate the relationship between accommodation letters and access in FYC classrooms and argue that the accommodation letter is only a starting point for the ongoing enterprise of access.

Despite academic institutions' legal, moral, and pedagogical responsibility to ensure all students have access to their learning spaces, accommodation at a higher education institution requires student labor before anything can be done. Students need to submit documentation of their Mad identity and/or disability to a designated campus office to obtain formal academic accommodations at a university. This automatically excludes students who are unable (or unaware) to secure a medical diagnosis – a requirement complicated by the uneven barriers to acquiring medical care. The office then sends letters to all applicable instructors on behalf of the student. These letters serve multiple functions beyond simply resolving student access needs; the letters exist to address pedagogical concerns, student access fatigue, and moral concerns about access, but often prioritize legal compliance.

Definitions and Naming Practices

I identify these letters as "accommodation letters," which is the term I will use throughout this article. One of the challenges of studying these letters is the wide variation in language and practices around these letters. Individual institution calls these letters something different. Clemson University, where I study and teach, officially calls them faculty notification letters, and my students at Clemson call them "SAS letters" (Student Accessibility Services letters). Other institutions have a range of naming conventions. However, as all these letters exist to establish and provide notification of accommodation, I use the term accommodation letters, while acknowledging its limits. As I will show, the framework of accommodation exists within an uneven power structure between students and academic institutions.

In using the accommodation letter, I imagine all correspondence between a university office and instructors of record sent on behalf of disabled and/or Mad students could fall under this broader definition of the term. I use the term "letter" as these documents often adhere to the conventions of a letter addressed to the instructor of record, although they are generally delivered through email communication or learning management systems (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, etc.), not as a physical letter. An accommodation letter generally sets out a specific accommodation a student has been granted, such as time and a half on exams, the ability to record lectures, or the need for captions/ASL interpretation.

Naming is of particular importance for disability and Mad identity. I follow Margaret Price's use of the term mental disability. She writes, "Following Lewiecki-Wilson, these days I'm using mental disability … this term can include not only madness, but also cognitive and intellectual dis/abilities of various kinds. I would add that it might also include 'physical' illnesses accompanied by mental effects (for example, the 'brain fog' that attends many autoimmune diseases, chronic pain, and chronic fatigue)" (*Mad at School* 19). While mental disability includes a wide range of identities and experiences, I also still use Mad as a separate term. Mad studies and disability studies have a great deal of overlap; these two terms represent two distinct theoretical traditions. I pull from

disability studies and Mad studies to frame my rhetorical analysis. Following current practices, I also deliberately capitalize “Mad” when referencing the specific community (e.g. Beresford). Capitalization is often done to demonstrate the distinction of Mad as a reclaimed term of identity, not mad as a historical pejorative. As I will go on to show, the naming and the language of the mental disability and/or Mad identity is of particular importance for access and ableism within academic settings, as an act of disclosure.

The role of naming and terms is particularly important in disability and Madness communities and spaces. Price calls attention to this feature, noting, “The problem of naming has always preoccupied DS [disability studies] scholars, but acquires a particular urgency when considered in the context of disabilities of the mind, for often the very terms used to name persons with mental disabilities have explicitly foreclosed our status *as* persons” (*Mad at School 9*). I use person-first language (e.g., “person with autism”) as well as identity-first language (e.g., “autistic person”) throughout this essay. My deliberate rhetorical choice, though perhaps adding complexity for the reader, is done to recognize the distinct language preferences of community members and avoid preference to any one term or language practice; moreover, I do not want to imply there ought to be a universal terminology. There is a great deal of diversity in preferred language among individuals, as there is a great deal of diversity in mental disabilities and Mad identities. I hold that diversity is a positive and have chosen to reflect this in my term use.

While the accommodation letter exists to satisfy legal and institutional needs, it can also open dialogue between students with their instructor and the SAS office, ideally decreasing the access burden for the student. However, disclosure can be a risky endeavor for students and instructors. “In academia, where the mind is highly valued, there is fear among both students and faculty of disclosing any variations of the mind. The mentally disabled are often stripped of rhetorical significance and denied personhood, dismissed as rhetorically *un*sound” (Hitt 15). Rhetoric and writing professor Clay Spinuzzi reminds readers of the rhetorical nature of access: “*Accessibility* is a rhetorical enterprise, one that must seek consensus across very different stakeholders” (190). Those stakeholders include students, instructors of record, university staff (such as accessibility office coordinators), university administrators, and graduate instructors whose dual roles can contribute to difficulties when it comes to asking for and obtaining accommodations.

Pedagogy and Accommodations Within the Undergraduate Classroom

Disability studies scholars Price and Jay Dolmage, among many others, have called attention to higher education contexts as creating and maintaining student access barriers: “The university erects steep steps to keep certain bodies and minds out” (Dolmage 42). Dolmage’s extended metaphor of the academy’s “steep steps” expands the idea of access beyond the built environment of campuses and includes the course design, assignment descriptions, learning management systems, and discussion boards, among many other examples. “The connected feeling is that the spaces and architectures of the university have been and should continue to be designed to filter out

certain bodies and minds" (Dolmage 44). Barriers to access and accessibility breakdown are part of Dolmage's steep steps. The problems of access in higher education institutions exist as part of a filtering of bodies in social systems. Academe can overintellectualize the lived experience of communities. The politics of exclusion are at play here: who is listened to and who is not, who has rhetorical power and who does not.

Disability studies and Mad studies perspectives can enhance the pedagogical choices of FYC instructors to enhance access. However, individual fixes or retrofits, to use Dolmage's term, cannot resolve social issues of access. The assumption that the accommodation letter exists to resolve access needs puts too much of the onus on individuals, including instructors and Mad/disabled students, over systemic issues. Dolmage writes, "retrofits are not designed for people to live and thrive with a disability, but rather to temporarily make the disability go away" (70). Accordingly, the accommodation attempts to make the disability "go away." The very approach of accommodation as a mode of access is positioned within power structures of the student, academic institution, and the instructor of record. Dolmage likens accommodation to defeat devices—tools to "trick" emissions control tests in Volkswagen cars (73). Defeat devices in cars do not aid in emissions concerns, but they meet the legal requirements. Accommodation letters are a productive object to consider because they exist as a moment of rhetorical exchange between students, academic institutions, and instructors. Moreover, these letters are a frequent document in higher education that demonstrates academic institutions' attitudes and systemic priorities.

Timed Assessments

One of the most common accommodation requests is extended time on timed assessments. However, timed assessments are not common in all academic disciplines, such as the humanities and arts. Nevertheless, the standard letter will have the same language and accommodation regardless of the specific discipline of the course in question. While this accommodation is designed to support students' accessibility needs, additional time simplifies how people with disabilities and/or Mad identities move through spacetime. However, the "additional time" accommodation is that this accommodation request is relatively easy to comprehend and administer for non-disabled/non-Mad instructors.

Moreover, the experiences of disability and Madness complicate how instructors and students might think about time. The way individuals who identify as Mad and/or disabled interact with time may be particular because much of the world is created for non-disabled and non-Mad bodyminds. Every day actions may take longer for these individuals. For example, someone with ADHD may take longer to complete certain tasks, including schoolwork. Someone with depression might lose their sense of time, which can include forgetting to eat meals or complete an assignment because their perception of time has shifted. Those with Mad identity can experience time periods or actions that they later do not recall – perceptions of self through time can also be impacted.

Moreover, this accommodation implies that there could be a quantifiable "fix" or solution to disability. Price writes that "As an uncanny problem, disability resists being written into policy and resists being fixed—in both senses" (*Crip Spacetime,* 6). Here, Price is calling attention to the limits of accommodation as a practice; institutionalized accommodation views disability at the individual level rather than recognizing it as a socio-cultural component of lived, human experience. The other sense of "fixed" to which Price refers implies that there can be a "fixed," or static solution to disability. Accommodation seeks to "resolve" as a return to "normal" for students' bodyminds and assumes that these solutions, and these "problems" are static.

In my experiences as an FYC instructor, I have heard my peers at multiple institutions express that they do not need to make any pedagogical or course changes to accommodate students with institutional accommodations for "additional time" for formal assessments. Perhaps because FYC and other writing-intensive courses often do not have formalized, timed assessments such as timed exams or quizzes. However, it is an ableist and sanist impulse to assume that there could not be another access issue for those particular students, even in a FYC, writing-intensive course. These passing comments reflect a limited understanding of the concept of access as well as disability and Madness as socio-cultural identity markers and are demonstrative of broader systematic and systemic issues across academic institutions regarding access. Many FYC instructors, like many other academic instructors, believe the accessibility letter is the "final word" in student accommodations for their courses. Again, the institutionalized concepts of access posit the "problem" at the individual student level. Therefore, instructors seek "solutions" to perceived "problems," i.e., accommodation.

Extensions

To avoid the "steep steps" and the retrofit nature of accommodations, instructors should think proactively about access during the course design process. I have a note in my syllabus inviting students to talk with me regarding access needs in the class, independent of any formal accessibility office. While the "come talk with me" approach can further assess fatigue concerns, a disposition demonstrating a willingness to listen is positive. My syllabus also reflects my flexibility with extensions for writing projects. I grant any student an extension on a writing project if they notify me prior to the original due date. I typically give students 24-48 additional hours on projects. While this flexibility might not seem structured in disability studies or Mad studies, I consider this an inclusive pedagogical practice. This choice recognizes that time does not move in the same ways for all students at all times. I seek to create opportunities for access where my students are not forced to disclose about their bodyminds if they do not want to do so. My experiences as a student and now as an instructor have motivated me to critically investigate the rhetorical and pedagogical dynamics of accommodation letters in higher education. Drawing from my own experiences, granting flexibility to students can be difficult as I balance my access needs within the labor of a PhD program. My own academic responsibilities on my time are why I limit these extensions to only a few days.

The work of access should continue beyond the binary yes/no consideration of the timed assessment in the course. Wood et al. call out against access checklists in design. They write, "while we could offer a checklist, and it would cover many important topics, it would be contrary to the direction in which we want to push writing teachers, which is a more holistic, recursive approach, one in which disability becomes a central, critical and creative lens for students as well as teachers" (148). Disability via student and instructor perspectives should be centered beyond prioritizing a checklist or accommodation letter. My suggestion of extensions in FYC is not intended to serve as a checklist – e.g., give students more time, and all access problems go away. Rather, I offer my approach to extensions as but one example of a way to center access actively.

FYC instructors do not necessarily have comprehensive pedagogies that address and anticipate the students with disabilities and Mad identities in their classroom. Dolmage's "steep steps" echoes again here, as instructors do not always have the time or resources to fully support their students' needs or resolve accessibility issues in their courses. Pedagogical and access concerns are often seen as an instructor's problem rather than an institutional responsibility. A lack of time and resources is pervasive across academic institutions. However, contingent and graduate student instructor status can make these material factors even more pressing. Accessibility and accommodation policies can vary from institution to institution, as I have experienced teaching as a master's student and then teaching as a PhD student. Such factors can be especially difficult for graduate students who work in the split role of student and instructor – developing their pedagogy while also developing their scholarly identity. In my role at Clemson as an instructor and graduate student, I worry about possibly encountering my students in the Student Accessibility Services Center and the Counseling and Psychological Services Center. Both exist for students; however, I hesitate to utilize these resources because of my split role position at the university. Concerns of seeking institutional support are examples of power dynamics in higher education.

Kairotic Space

Price's concept of kairotic space is one example of the impact time has on everyday events for Mad/disabled individuals. In *Mad at School*, Price defines kairotic space as "the less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged" (60). Some examples of these kairotic spaces may be virtual or in-person. Kairotic spaces in higher education include classrooms, class discussions, conferences, Canvas discussion boards, and office hours with professors. A student meeting with a disability resources office at a university is also an example of a kairotic space. That meeting, which might appear to be "business as usual" for the staff, can be a high-stakes environment for students seeking accommodations. The requirement of institutionalized accessibility requires students' disclosure of Mad identity and/or disability status. However, the act of self-disclosure may necessitate discussion of traumatic/stressful events for the student. Students may also have experienced stigma in the past when self-disclosing, making this kairotic space a complex experience.

Access Fatigue

The purpose of the accommodation letter is to minimize the number of kairotic spaces where a student would need to experience this act of self-disclosure with institutional officials. While accommodation letters are meant to reduce the fatigue students encounter when gaining access, some of the limitations of the letters also inadvertently contribute to students' access fatigue in higher education. Annika M. Konrad defines access fatigue as "the everyday pattern of constantly needing to help others participate in access, a demand so taxing and so relentless that, at times, it makes access simply not worth the effort" (180). Access fatigue would include all the labor and work required to get access needs met in social (and a variety of other) situations. The accommodation letter seeks to alleviate or reduce the access fatigue a student might encounter in their courses. However, for a student to obtain both the accommodation letter and the course specific accommodation is often a complex challenge. If an instructor cannot actualize the access need for their student, then the access fatigue is exacerbated.

Price calls attention to the limits of access in *Crip Spacetime,* stating, "The current approach to access isn't just ineffective; it's actively making things worse" (7). When the accommodation letter fails to communicate a student's access need in a particular course or when an official institutional accommodation cannot specify a student's access needs, both events further exacerbate access fatigue for students. A common pedagogical remedy to this problem is for instructors to state something like: "Come talk to me if you need any additional support." While this is a positive and well-meaning statement (and one I have made myself), it still places access labor on the student and often implies at least some level of student disclosure of disability/Mad identity status.

Furthermore, the student who self-discloses to their instructor faces the risk that an instructor may not believe, recognize, or understand this self-disclosure and/or its relationship to the student's access need. For example, an instructor might say that a student's declared generalized anxiety disorder is "in your head," or "everyone worries," "college is hard," or other similarly harmful statements. The power dynamics between students and an instructor are an inherent complexity in this kairotic situation. Creating avenues for students to speak with instructors about their individual access needs is a benefit; the issue comes when the only possible way to resolve access needs is limited in that way. The letter can serve as an opening to access possibilities, but it is not the end of access in and of itself.

Conclusion: Legal Frameworks of Access

While accommodation letters aim to alleviate student access fatigue and provide accommodation across courses, accommodation letters also exist to prevent potential lawsuits against the university. Accommodation letters are not primarily about student access or pedagogy but about risk management. A great deal of scholarship

surrounding accommodation letters centers on legal frameworks, not critical disability studies or Mad studies' perspectives. Often, these texts serve to instruct audiences on how to minimize labor for these offices and/or reduce the number of students who come to these spaces. Legal scholar Michael R. Masinter's article "Avoid the Word 'Reasonable' in Accommodations Policy" in *Disability Compliance for Higher Education* is one clear example of legal-based writing focusing on risk management over student access needs or critical pedagogy. Facilitating access can be understood in two distinct ways: compliance-based and transformative. "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" (Brewer et al. 152-53). Thinking beyond just the written words of an accommodation letter can better enable transformative access. Access being reduced to legal standards invokes Dolmage's defeat devices whereby access can meet legal standards but mask other discrimination (74).

Transformative access calls on instructors to imagine beyond accommodation letters or compliance-based policy. Such pedagogical moves would better facilitate FYC classroom contexts. Rhetoric and composition scholar Michael Neal gave a talk during the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) 2024 session titled "Moving Toward Accessibility: Addressing Two Myths of Universal Access in Online Instruction." Neal's argument expanded Dolmage's retrofit directly into a rhetoric and composition context. One of Neal's major contributions was an extended visual metaphor of access as the "North Star." When considering access as the "North Star," instructors may be able to reframe previous conceptions they had about how access fits into their classrooms. Access is not the destination, but rather an ever-present guide, Neal argues. While Neal was not talking about the specific impact of accommodation letters, his articulation of destinations and guides is poignant to FYC instructions and the limitations of accommodation letters in higher education. The accommodation letter was never intended to be an end in and of itself. Yet, so often, it is perceived to be the "final word" on accommodations by instructors -- to carry Neal's metaphor further, the accommodation letter might act as a star chart: a tool that could help one see the North Star and better situate themselves in the night sky. I am not calling for the removal of accommodation letters; rather, I call on FWC instructors to consider the letter as part of a transformative pedagogical action.

Instructors ought to think *with* and *through* disability and Madness rather than simply thinking *about* madness and disability (Price, *Mad at School*). "Mad studies is a movement, a discipline, and a form of activism, thus it is a praxis. It can be seen as the first survivor-led movement which has sought to develop strong philosophical and theoretical principles" (Beresford and Rose 5). Beresford and Rose demonstrate what Mad Studies offers the global paradigmatic mental health knowledge base while also acknowledging the existing shortcomings and Western focus of Mad Studies. They write, "psych understandings continue to privilege individualizing explanations" (2). A Mad studies praxis in a FYC context would help move past biomedical models that frame disability and Madness on a single individual. "Mad studies offers a route to decolonisation [sic] (of GMH) [global mental health] consistent with decolonising [sic]

aims and values. Thus: It is collective, Ideologically committed, but culturally and philosophically open, Participatory rather than directive, Committed to inclusion and the valuing of experiential knowledges and diversity" (Beresford and Rose 5-6). The participatory and community focus connects Mad Studies praxis with other established pedagogical traditions like critical pedagogy.

Lastly, there cannot be a point where access issues are considered "solved." Bodyminds will never be static, unmoving objects. Calling back to the visual metaphor of the North Star, FYC instructors ought to view access as a guide rather than a fixed destination. Instructors should remember that the accommodation letter is not a good in and of itself, but the letter is one point among many that can aid students. We move towards access while acknowledging that we never fully reach it. Moreover, disability and Madness are not experienced in isolation. Direct pedagogical response can deprivilege the academy's focus on disability as an individual problem in need of solving. Critical pedagogy is one approach that might help center varied student lived experiences, including disability and/or Mad identity, within the classroom. One of the benefits of critical pedagogy is the focus on community; a community focus can give rise to knowledge-making that would not be possible within other frameworks. Critical pedagogy as a framework asks educators to critically engage and consider what they are trying to accomplish with their pedagogy. FYC might consider how Madness and disability are excluded and/or included in the FYC classroom. Are there readings by writers with disabilities and/or Mad identities? Are personal narratives welcomed and validated in the classroom? Do teaching and learning actions facilitate possibilities of hope?

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