

Review

Toward an Interpretive Framework for Access in Writing Programs

Annika Konrad

Titchkosky, Tanya. *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*. University of Toronto Press, 2011. 192 pages.

“I’ve never had to deal with accessibility because I’ve never had a student with a disability in my class.”

“But I wasn’t trained to deal with students with disabilities.”

“If a student’s accommodations document asks for extended time on tests, but we’re only writing papers, then I don’t change anything.”

These are some of the claims I have heard instructors make about disability. In *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*, Tanya Titchkosky argues that what is say-able about disability reflects our unexamined assumptions about what disability is and how access is created. The say-able things above, whether intentional or not, reflect disability as a visibly apparent problem found within an individual that needs to be treated using proper methods delivered by a bureaucratic entity. This is how universities often conceptualize disability, and it is through these means that students with disabilities receive accommodations. College instructors also depend on university services to address disability as an individual problem; for example, instructors are often required to include a statement in their syllabus that points students to disability resources, and they wait for students to present documentation that justifies individual accommodation. Titchkosky argues that relying solely on bureaucratic approaches to treat access on an individual basis makes disability an essentially excludable category of partial, maybe, contingent, not yet participants. Ultimately,

Titchkosky offers a conceptual framework that writing programs can use to move beyond bureaucratic approaches to access to practice interpretive approaches that involve constant, critical reflection upon relations between bodies and spaces.

Scholars in the field of Rhetoric and Composition/Writing Studies who research disability have also warned about the dangers of approaching disability as a bureaucratic matter. In “Where We Are: Disability and Accessibility,” Tara Wood, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson argue that checklists for accessibility reduce disability to an individualized problem that is “over there” (147). Instead, Wood et al advocate that disability should be perceived as an opportunity to experiment with our own practices like “adaptation, creativity, community, interdependency, technological ingenuity, and modal fluency” (148). Similarly, in “Suggested Practices for Syllabus Accessibility Statements,” Shannon Madden and Tara Wood recommend that it is time to move beyond legal obligations for access. One way to do so is by recrafting our syllabus accessibility statements to reflect a more inclusive classroom space where access is co-constructed rather than only obtained through bureaucratic means. For similar arguments about other shortcomings of institutional conceptions of difference and the opportunities of relational, rhetorical approaches, see Kelly A. Whitney’s review of Stephanie Kerschbaum’s *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference* and Elisabeth Miller’s review of Margaret Price’s *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. What Titchkosky offers our field, however, is a rich, layered interpretive framework for critically interrogating our own assumptions about what disability is and where access lies. Titchkosky’s framework moves access from the realm of bureaucracy to the realm of perception. By engaging Titchkosky’s methodology of a politics of wonder, writing program leaders and instructors can critically examine their own perceptions of what disability is and where access lies. In doing so, we can use access as an interpretive lens for all that we do within writing programs.

A politics of wonder as Titchkosky defines it is a means of understanding access and disability as acts of perception or “a restless reflexive return to what has come before” (15). Engaging in a politics of wonder involves asking reflective questions about interpretive scenes of access. Titchkosky’s book is comprised of interpretive scenes of access drawn from her experiences advocating for access in her role as a professor in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Repeatedly applying questions such as “Who needs access? What is disability? Where is disability? When is access?” to these interpretive scenes reveals countless assumptions about who belongs, when, where, and how in univer-

sity life. Here I review a few examples of how a politics of wonder uncovers unexamined assumptions about disability, and I contextualize them within writing program administration.

Refiguring relations around access begins with the work of understanding what access is. The predominant understanding of access is that it is something that is granted or not, that either people have it or do not, and that it is something which can be arranged with appropriate policies, procedures, resources, tools, and documents. In other words, it is inherently tied to bureaucracy. While she recognizes that access does need to be legally protected and physically provided, Titchkosky argues that access also needs to be understood and questioned as interpretive relations between embodied experiences and the times, spaces, places, and social environments they inhabit. Access is an act of perception that orients our understandings of who does and does not belong in social space. People whose embodied experiences depart from what is naturally expected—such as people with disabilities—are perceived as less valued, less human, and in need of assistance and care. When we perceive disability as an individual problem, Titchkosky explains, we fail to notice the ways our perceptions naturalize only some bodies and some environments, making disabled people “justifiably excludable.”

Interpretive scenes of access are often organized around cost and the quantification of bodies. Titchkosky recalls encountering these concerns in response to her efforts to use department grant money to build a flexible classroom space for up to forty students. She was met with a demand for information about who exactly will use this classroom because “you can’t accommodate everybody.” Examined through a politics of wonder, perceptions that insist upon “Who? Who will potentially be present? How many will actually need access?” reveal normative assumptions about “the ordinary shape of participation—the shape of the person and the shape of the space” (40). The danger of leaving assumptions about the relations between bodies and spaces unquestioned is that belonging is left to bureaucracy, and the effect is “actual bodies disappearing, becoming illusory background figures on the foreground of bureaucratic management” (39). While cost is likely also a concern for many writing programs, writing program leaders need to utilize their resources to maintain agency over “the shape of participation” (40). As scholars who have long been attuned to the socially situated nature of language and identity, we need to use our resources to avoid perpetuating the bureaucratic disappearance of people whose embodied experiences place them outside normative interpretive relations.

Questioning what we imagine disability to be is also imperative to engaging in a politics of wonder about access. One way to approach this

is by examining the signs we use to signify access. Titchkosky takes the universal access sign (the white stick figure in a wheelchair on a blue background) as her case study. She tells a story about noticing signs of universal access in her workplace that mark doors that are too heavy, too narrow for wheelchairs to pass through, doors with automatic openers that lead to stairs, etc. When signs of access mark spaces that are not actually accessible, they construct disabled people as a “partially imagined may-be” (64). Like bureaucratic procedures that treat disability as a contingency, these misleading signs of access shape our collective imaginations of disabled people as partial participants. Writing program leaders and instructors need to engage in a politics of wonder about their own signs of access—e.g., syllabus accommodations statements, readings about disability, instructors’ mentioning (or not) of disability resource centers, etc. As Madden and Wood ask, what message are we sending when we place information about disability resources at the bottom of our syllabi? What message are we sending when we speak only about disabled students in terms of accommodation? Or when we do nothing more than review accommodations guidelines with instructors in training? By asking ourselves these questions, we can begin to see how our own collective orientations toward disability “can also be made contingent – made into a maybe” (67).

In addition to critically examining what we imagine disability to be, we need to prevent the justification of the absence of access in our programs. Titchkosky demonstrates how disability appears “as a justified absence” in the ordinary exclusionary talk of her colleagues (70). Titchkosky lingers on one all-too-familiar say-able refrain relative to disability: “You know, I mean, things just weren’t built with people with disabilities in mind” (73). Even if people disagree with these excuses for inaccessibility, “it remains an unexamined ‘fact’ of social life that it is reasonable to seek a reason for the lack of access” (77). The problem with giving reasons for inaccessibility is that it normalizes inaccessibility and conditions people to not even notice the absence of accessibility and the absence of people with disabilities. Say-able claims about inaccessibility solidify people with disabilities into a category that is justified as “essentially excludable.” Writing programs should not participate in the justification of exclusion but rather serve as leaders in noticing the absence of accessibility and students with disabilities in our buildings, classrooms, curricula, technologies, and values. By challenging justifications of exclusion, “perhaps we can begin to remake that which has conditioned consciousness by telling a new story about who and where we are” (91).

Bureaucracies structure students with disabilities as not only partial participants in space but also in time. In Titchkosky’s interpretive scenes, access

is repeatedly postponed. In exploring this concept, she recounts her experience of advocating for notifications of closures of accessible washrooms. If students who rely on accessible washrooms are not notified of their closures, they cannot participate. When bringing this matter to the attention of the university, she heard a variety of arguments that rely on the contraction and expansion of all—"should 'all' students receive notifications of accessible washroom closures when they already receive too many emails?" and "We are not just talking about access to washrooms here; we need to talk about 'all' matters of exclusion" (106). While all gets contracted and expanded to determine an appropriate bureaucratic measure, the students who depend upon accessible washrooms disappear. Titchkosky argues that perceiving access in relation to "all" reveals that "disability, unlike window cleaning, is not yet imagined as an essential aspect of all of our lives" (109). In another interpretive scene, students who brought movable desks into the hallway outside a flexible classroom agree to move their desks for the students who use wheelchairs and canes, but only when they arrive. Through the lens of "When?" we see access as a contingency, as something that needs to be dealt with "not yet" but when those students arrive. While arguments for universal design and flexibility are useful for making accessibility relevant to all, Titchkosky warns that these arguments can postpone access, and in the meantime, individuals who really need it disappear.

Conceptualizing access as interpretive relations between bodies and spaces should not sound unfamiliar to professionals in our field. We have long been attuned to the socially situated nature of learning and identity, and we are always negotiating our values within bureaucratic spaces. Yet writing programs themselves can function as bureaucracies that treat disability as an individual problem to be fixed. Rather than reinforcing a bureaucratic approach to disability that solely relies on accommodating individual problems, we need to employ a conceptual framework for access as an act of perception at all levels of writing programs, from how we design our curriculum to our teacher preparation and models for instruction. When instructors say, "But I wasn't prepared to work with students with disabilities," we hear a cry for information about individual disabilities and strategies. We need to refocus instructors' attention away from accommodating individuals toward the spaces, times, and social environments we construct in our programs, buildings, and classrooms that create disability and inaccessibility.

Rather than ignoring or dismissing bureaucratic and individualized approaches to disability, we need to engage them as part of the current perceptual landscape of access. Individual accommodations are useful for many students, but our work does not stop there. We must turn the atten-

tion of our leaders and instructors to locating disability and inaccessibility in our collective interrelatedness because as Titchkosky says, “It is in culture, in the midst of others, that disability is made; in this way, we are never alone in our bodies” (59).

WORKS CITED

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Annika Konrad is a PhD candidate in Composition and Rhetoric at University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her writing on the rhetorical experiences of people who are blind and visually impaired has appeared in Reflections and will be reprinted in Best of the Journals in Rhetoric and Composition (Parlor Press).