Review

Centering Madness in the Academe: Supporting and Learning from Mental Disability

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Price, Margaret. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. University of Michigan Press, 2011. 271 pages.

Universities are known as institutions of the mind. Teacher-scholars make a living by using their minds. Students, at least in the context of a liberal education, attend universities to expand their minds. So what does it mean, in the spaces of academe, to have a disability that affects one's mind? Margaret Price asks this important question in *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. In answering that question, Price exposes ableist "norms" at the core of academic discourse and higher education in general. Assumptions about energy and collegiality permeate our job postings, requirements for interviews and campus visits, and hiring decisions. Our environmental expectations demand comfortable-looking social performances at conferences and speedy production of scholarship. In our classrooms, we assess students for reasoned ways of speaking up and adherence to attendance requirements. In the most extreme of contexts mental illness lurks behind conversations about campus violence.

These assumptions and exclusions must concern writing program administrators as we support teachers, conceive of curricula that impacts students across the university, and manage the substantial demands of our work. *Mad at School* is an important resource for enabling us to both include and learn from individuals with mental disabilities. Price's primary contribution is a sharp critique of the ableism undergirding many of the most basic assumptions of higher education, and an insistence that educators not only critique, but do something about these inequities (57). Price accomplishes this scholarly, pedagogical, and activist work in an introduction, six robust

chapters, and a succinct conclusion pointing to further avenues for research and teaching. Each chapter focuses on varied sites, forwarding "not a single sustained argument," but a "kind of smorgasbord" (21) of issues, needs, and implications for mental disability in higher education. Price uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as her method and methodology, analyzing "rich features and salient patterns" of texts (Barton 23). That practice leads her to pinpoint several common topoi of academic discourse that mental disability challenges: "rationality, criticality, presence, participation, productivity, collegiality, security, coherence, truth, and independence" (30).

From the important critical work of *Mad at School*, I highlight three primary moves instructive for the theory and practice of writing program administration: 1) challenging norms of academic discourse; 2) offering suggestions for improving access in the everyday spaces of higher education for students and academic professionals with mental disabilities; and 3) turning beyond the everyday to spaces of crisis, self-representation, and independence and exclusion to learn from mental disability.

Price first employs CDA to interrogate how academic discourse conflicts with mental disability. In her first chapter, "Listening to the Subject of Mental Disability," Price joins conversations in disability rhetoric initiated by Catherine Prendergast and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson to assert that mental disability affects individuals' "rhetoricity"—or their ability to be perceived as capable of producing rhetoric, to be listened to. She then explores how various discourses perpetuate that loss of rhetoricity. Psychiatric discourse (such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disabilities, or DSM) as well as approaches taken up in rhetoric and composition, including Berlin's "rhetoric of reason" and various tenets of critical pedagogy, assume reasoned discourse and rational subjects as a starting point, excluding "the mad subject in academic discourse" (37). Likewise, Price argues that pedagogies of listening (Lee, Ratcliffe), while they decenter rationality, still fail to address a central question of rhetoricity and mental disability: "What happens to the rhetor who *cannot* be 'listened' to—because ze is not present, or fails to participate in discussions, or fails to 'make sense' on a neurotypical scale?" (44).

After challenging the very foundations of academic discourse, Price turns to the practical heart of *Mad at School* in chapters 2 and 3: a critique of the inaccessibility of academic spaces for students and teacher-scholar-administrators with mental disabilities. Here she provides myriad strategies for "ways to move" toward more equitable access. The difficulty of ensuring access in academic spaces is made vivid through Price's conception of "kairotic spaces": the "less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged" (60). These envi-

ronments and situations (e.g., classroom discussions, office hours, academic conferences, and job interviews) are unscripted, but they have serious consequences for students' grades and identities, and for scholars' professional advancement. Kairotic spaces are about timing, combining an expectation for "*spontaneity with high levels of professional/academic impact*" (61; emphasis original).

For students, kairotic spaces rely on the topoi of presence and participation, each grounded in a number of ableist expectations—particularly for attendance and classroom discussion. Presence is taken "as an a priori good" (64). Students who fail to be present are perceived to be unmotivated, underachieving, or simply bad (65). While Price does not argue that we should remove all attendance requirements, she urges educators to critique the logics underlying our insistence on presence as a physical performance and as the baseline for student success. Price also challenges educators to rethink participation (beyond the sharing of ideas verbally through rational discussion). What appears disruptive to our standards of normal academic participation "*might in fact be a student participating* in a way that performs, or attempts to accommodate, her own mental disability" (74; emphasis original). What educators interpret as rude whispering or note-passing "may be efforts to 'catch up' on discussion that is progressing too fast to follow; they might also signal that a student cannot speak in front of the group but deeply wishes to express some idea" (74). Even cell phone use may actually help a student stay active in thought or work through classroom anxiety.

For teachers or administrators wondering how to rethink classroom topoi such as presence and participation, a 15-page section of *Mad at School*, "A Way to Move: Redesigning the Kairotic Space of the Classroom," is an invaluable resource. Drawing on universal design (See Dolmage; Womack; Blevins), Price offers multiple suggestions to create environments that are "accessible to all learning styles, abilities, and personalities" (87). These ideas offer not a fail-safe checklist to reach inclusion, but rather ways to engage in the "consistent effort" of creating access for students (and oneself as the teacher) (87). (See also Annika Konrad.)

Among myriad compelling ideas, Price argues for demystifying the kairotic spaces of your classroom. What are your norms for class discussion? How will class material be shared – online, in handouts, in discussion? Explain what participation and presence means in your classroom, and provide various channels for both. For instance, consider offering the option for online discussion even during in-person class sessions. Price's own requirements for participation include assigning annotation of documents to engage students as "active interveners in texts" with details for

these annotations helpfully included in Appendix A and B (93). Participation can be made increasingly accessible by having students call upon one another, asking for volunteer note-takers for discussions, or using response cards on which students hold up answers or write notes to the instructor. Opening multiple channels of communication—offering online chat office hours, for one—may also mitigate anxiety and improve communication for students and instructors. Most importantly, teachers must understand that not all instructional and communicative approaches work for all students (or all instructors). Teachers "committed to creating more accessible kairotic spaces for those with mental disabilities" are not "'solving problems," but rather "finding ways to move" (101).

Access in academe also matters for scholar-teacher-administrators with mental disabilities. In chapter 3, "The Essential Functions of the Position," Price interrogates the meaning and implications of the Americans with Disabilities Act's requirement that individuals be able to perform "the essential functions of the job." She questions how our understanding of essential functions conflicts with and excludes mental disability. The academic job search and participation in academic conferences are two particularly exclusionary cases. Both are kairotic spaces, requiring performances of collegiality and productivity that are judged with real consequences: being hired or tenured (or not). Learning from mental disability, Price offers a range of "recommendations for professional practice" (129), including an increased focus on listening—at interpersonal and structural levels. In addition to rethinking time and other constraints on tenure, Price suggests focusing mentoring relationships on accessibility—"responsive to ways of learning, social styles, and communication preferences" (139). In essence, writing program administrators must not limit a focus on universal design to the classroom but extend that commitment to all of their work with students and teachers.

The everyday spaces of academe challenge educators to rethink assumptions about mental disability, rationality, and more. So, too, do our ongoing discussions around crisis and violence in higher education. Chapter 4, "Assaults on the Ivory Tower," addresses mass school shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University. Analyzing media portrayals of the student shooters in both cases, Price explores how "madness is generally assumed to be the *cause* of the shooters' actions," relegating mental disability to "a space of unrecoverable deviance" (144–45; emphasis original). Price persuasively demonstrates how linking mental disability, violence, and campus safety infringes upon students' privacy—their diagnoses, writing, and more. Specifically, the practice of treating students' writing as symptoms and prioritizing the referring of potentially mad or ill students

to medical resources further divides students with mental disabilities from the norms of academe. While providing students with access to resources is undoubtedly an important part of our role as teachers, Price argues that viewing individuals with mental disability as sources of violence fails to address "[l]arger social forces contributing to a culture of violence" (175).

In her two closing chapters, Price represents the voices and experiences of people with mental disabilities—particularly outside of academe. Chapter 5, "Her Pronouns Wax and Wane," examines three autobiographies composed by women with mental disabilities. Price analyzes how the authors inventively employ shifts between pronouns to assert their own counter-diagnosis, challenging topoi of coherence and truth. This chapter contributes to work on disability memoir and offers a potential essay for students to read as a model of close rhetorical analysis. Price moves into a qualitative study in Chapter 6, "In/ter/dependent Scholarship." Focusing on the experiences of three independent scholars with mental disabilities, Price employs accessible methodology—co-determining with participants the modes for interviews and co-analyzing the data. Collaboratively, Price and these three independent scholars examine topoi of independence in academe and how norms around scholarship, publication, productivity, and credentials often bar individuals with mental disabilities from participation. Conversely, the role of independent scholar offers a critique of those academic norms and an important venue for scholarship outside of the constraints of higher education.

The scope of *Mad at School* is at once admirably broad and pragmatically specific: critiquing the adherence to rationality and norms in academic discourse and providing ways to move toward access for students and teachers. What's more, Price's passion for bringing mental disability to the forefront of our discussions about higher education is apparent. "I wrote this book because I could not go any longer without writing it," says Price in the last line of her introduction (24). She similarly explains a deep commitment to including her final chapter focused on the experiences of independent scholars with mental disabilities "because, quite simply, I could not bear to publish this book without careful attention to those who operate outside the privileged borders of academe" (22). Careful attention is indeed what *Mad at School* offers: attention to people with mental disabilities, the challenges they face in higher education discourses and spaces, and the significant insight that they have to offer to educators and administrators—particularly in Writing Studies. Price urges each of us to pay attention, take action, and learn, reminding us that both listening and trying are necessary to support our diverse bodies and minds in the university: "we must try, think, query, flex, observe, listen, and try again" (101). That is the effort

and ethical commitment that access requires and that we all—our students, ourselves, and our colleagues—deserve.

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