

Dolmage, Jay. "Mapping Composition—Inviting Disability in the Front Door." *Disability and the Teaching of Writing*. Ed. Cynthia Lewiecki Wilson and Brenda Jo Brueggemann. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2008. 14-27. Print.

## **Mapping Composition—Inviting Disability in the Front Door**

**Jay Dolmage**

Composition is not always an accessible space. The work of scholars like Tom Fox has shown us that writing teachers must consider access, and that there is much work to do in order to open the doors of the university, to understand and combat economic, social and political forces of exclusion. We must also provide access to students with disabilities, who are often excluded from the physical spaces of the university in which we teach and learn. Composition has much to learn from issues of disability access. How disability 'fits' into our structures and practices reveals much about their potential for inclusion and exclusion. Attention to disability shows that physical structures equate with ideological structures. For all students to have access to those things composition has to offer—literate 'skills,' a voice, the words to write the world—we must ensure that disability is recognized and respected. Concurrently, as we re-distribute access, the possibility for composition to change will increase, but with a difference. We will have to stop believing that access is distributed from the top down. Access can only be fully realized as a circuit of interchange borne of interdependency. As we include more students with diverse goals and different backgrounds, teachers learn from their perspectives. In the following pages, I sketch a new map of composition, one that recognizes the ways students with disabilities have been excluded, the ways the academy has accommodated them, as well as the ways that disability, as an identity and an epistemology, has and will continue to push us to see teaching and learning in new, broader and more empowering ways.<sup>1</sup>

My three spatial metaphors come from the field of Disability Studies and articulate the ways space excludes, the way space can be redesigned, and the way space can be more inclusively conceived. My criteria for selecting these metaphors are simple: I want them to be readily recognizable. You might 'see' these spaces every day as you come to work—in the approach to your classroom or studio, its layout, in classroom

texts, in your response to student writing, in your paper prompts, your workshop design, your class website or message board. The metaphors are also spaces that are produced, ideologically, in the world in which you move. First of all, the university erects *steep steps* to keep certain bodies and minds out. Secondly, to *retrofit* our structures for access, we add ramps at the sides of buildings and make accommodations to the standard curriculum. Still, disability can never come in the front. But finally, in theory and practice, we can recognize the ways that teaching composition through *Universal Design* creates an enabling space for writing and a way to think broadly about ability.

In Composition's history as a remedial space (see Shaughnessy), or as a sorting gate (see Shor), from Harvard in the 1870s to CUNY in the 1970s, Composition grew as the space for writing and writers expanded. At the same time, Composition grew at a time when issues of ability were framed according to a deficit model. As notions of literacy developed from the idea of illiteracy, so too has ability been developed only as disability has been (often arbitrarily) marked out.<sup>2</sup> The enterprise of writing instruction has been an agent for this confluence, as well as a space for resistance.

Composition has been, from the very beginning, concerned with approaching an expanding institutional space in an egalitarian manner, while responding critically to the demand for ever more narrow interpretations of the bodies within it. Tom Fox critiques these narrow interpretations, which he identifies as standards, writing that “when access threatens change, standards are always the tools used to resist that change” (8), standards here being seen as quantifiable, measurable indices of writing ability and inability—always retaining and perpetuating cultural biases. Yet I would argue that our ongoing awareness of and challenge to this spatial and cultural boundary-drawing is also our legacy. I would add that Disability Studies can help us re-imagine the spaces of composition because Disability Studies best conceptualizes the tension between diverse bodies and narrow diagnoses (see Garland-Thomson; Linton, Mello and O'Neill).

As Brendan Gleeson has written, “disabled people in Western societies have been oppressed by the production of space...due in part to their exclusion from the discourses and practices that shape the physical layout of societies” (2). Disability is a reality—in the lives of those affected, and in the lives of those who believe themselves ‘immune.’ Disability is also *produced*, sometimes most powerfully by our uses of space. If the

composition teacher wants to treat students ethically and respectfully, she must consider the spaces where she teaches in terms of disciplinary attitudes, but also in terms of bricks and mortar, walls and steps that exclude bodies. The disciplinary and the institutional, the discursive and the physical, must be considered always in interaction. For this reason, we must map composition in terms of the exclusionary potential of spaces and see the potential for constructing alternative modes of access.

### STEEP STEPS

The *steep steps* metaphor puts forward the idea that access to the university is a movement upwards—only the truly ‘fit’ survive this climb. The steep steps, figuratively, lead to the ivory tower. Not only have these steps been impossible for many to climb, but because they seem to get more steep as we grow more tired climbing them, and because the final step itself comes to look like the side of a canyon, it is clear that the steps are steep for a reason. It is impossible not to think of the English professor as one of the architects of this numinous impediment. From the window of his office on the top floor, the professor can watch students struggle up, and come to understand that his job is, at least partially, to preside over the failure of the many and the success of the few. The tower is built upon standards. In many ways, this is an identity that the university has embraced.

I suggest that we have mapped the university in this way—as a climb up the stairs of the Ivory Tower—for particular reasons. Often, maps are created not to reveal exclusion, but to *create* it. Mapping is traditionally a mode of closing-off, of containment—of, as Kathleen Kirby writes, structuring a dominant subjectivity “through the delimitation of the external environment” (46). David Sibley, the cultural geographer who has perhaps most extensively theorized the exclusionary potential of spatialization, extends this idea of ‘structuring subjectivity’: “space and society are implicated in the construction of the boundaries of the self but...the self is also *projected* onto society and onto space” (86). As a discipline, the way we see ourselves is *projected* onto our classroom space. The steep steps metaphor sums up the ways the university constructs spaces that exclude. The ‘self’ or ‘selves’ that have been projected upon the space of the

university are not just able-bodied and ‘normal,’ but exceptional, *elite*. The university is the place for the very *able*.

Making disability seem inimical to the university has been a strategy used to shore up the identity of those invested in higher education. If those who do not ‘qualify’ can be vilified, marked out, and kept away, then those who make it up the stairs must deserve to. The creation of steep steps has always also been a means of creating ‘pure’ cultural, ethnic and class divisions—delimiting space delimits culture.

In Composition, such steep steps come in the form of a restrictive grammar and usage rules that allow writing to be added-up. As Mike Rose suggests, one of the most damaging assumptions about writing is that ability can be quantified via counting errors (347). Tom Fox concurs that there has been a historical pressure to “reduce writing to a set of discrete skills to be learned, especially the countable ones” (52). As Patricia Dunn points out, it is now that case that many “students who make the most surface errors end up on the lowest track” (“Talking” 103). Ira Shor ties this to the discipline’s history as a “curricular cop and sorting machine” at Harvard, and he defines this as “Composition for containment, control and capital growth” (92). He adds that, following the advent of open admissions and the remediation of students, “Basic Writing has added an extra sorting-out gate in front of the Composition gate” (92), to “slow the output of college graduates” and “manage some disturbing economic and political conditions on campus and off” (93). This sorting is, of course, more than just a managing of space, it is a discursive marking that reaches into minds and bodies. As Mike Rose notes, “to be remedial is to be substandard, inadequate and, because of the origins of the term, the inadequacy is metaphorically connected to disease and mental defect” (349). Lennard Davis points out that “language usage, which is as much a physical function as any other somatic activity, has become subject to an enforcement of normalcy” (100). This focus on standardization, Fox argues, also “mak[es] writing much more suited to the business of class and cultural discrimination” (26). Crowley and Hawhee point out that “usage rules are the conventions of written language that allow Americans to discriminate against one another. Questions of usage are tied to social attitudes about who is intelligent and well-educated, and who is not” (23). The result might be that we now teach “courses in coercive socialization” (Fox, 28). When the standards can’t be used to

keep certain bodies out, they might be used to shape those bodies and minds that get up the stairs.

Of course, the reality is that disability is always present; there is no perfect body or mind. There is no normal body or mind. The United States is a country within which one fifth of the population is affected by disability. ‘Even’ in the western world, we live in an age when, despite physical/medical efforts to avoid it and psychological/medical efforts to disavow and pathologize it, we all may experience disability at some point in our lives. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1996, 6-9% of undergraduate students reported having a disability (iii). Of these, 35% were learning disabilities (iii). We might also assume that many students with less visible disabilities ‘pass,’ hiding their disability or attempting to overcome it (see Brueggeman). As teachers of composition, we recognize the diversity of the students we teach. But we must also recognize our roles within institutions, disciplines, and perhaps even personal pedagogical agendas, in which we may seek to avoid and disavow the very idea of disability—to give it no place. This avoidance and disavowal brings with it its own spatial metaphor: I use the steep steps to express this negative force. That these steps are ‘real’ in the lives of people with disabilities adds to the power of the metaphor. The steps have a strong connotation in the disability community, and not just for people who use wheelchairs and crutches. In March 1990, ADAPT (American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit) staged a protest calling for passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act (subsequently passed) which was nick-named the Capitol Crawl. Hundreds of people with disabilities crawled and climbed up the Capitol Steps to show how the seat of power in the U.S. was physically inaccessible to them, and also to make a metaphorical statement about their struggle for power.

When I say that the academy *erects* steep steps, I am suggesting that the steep steps are constructed for a reason. It could be said that the academy is a primary enforcer of cultural norms. As James W. Trent and others have shown, the history of eugenic research, testing, and programmatic implication in institutions such as Stanford and Harvard reveals that universities have been the arbiter of ability in the United States. American academics have delineated and disciplined the border between able and disabled, ‘us’ and ‘them.’ These line-drawers were able to solidify their own positions as

they closed the doors upon others. The disabled, in this history, were more than left out: disabled people have been sterilized, imprisoned and killed. As Trent and others have pointed out, American academics systematically developed the means to segregate society based upon arbitrary ideas of ability. The university was the place for the most able, the mental institution the space for the ‘least.’ One way to map the spaces of academia and disability would be to look at the ways land was parceled out in the U. S. in the 1800s. While land grant universities were popping up in rural spaces, asylums were popping up in other rural settings—on old farms and abandoned land. From within one privileged space, academics were deciding the fate of others in similar, yet now pathologized, other and impure spaces.

Interrogating the steep steps metaphor works to highlight not just how space and spatialization are exclusionary, but also the ways that the distance between the hypothetical ‘us’ and the ‘them,’ the able and the disabled has a particular structure. In the writing classroom, when teachers try to ascertain what this structure of exclusion looks like, they search students’ writing. Mina Shaughnessy’s work perhaps best expresses this search, a search for error. In her diagnosis of basic writing, Shaughnessy suggests that “for the basic writing student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something” (7). She says that the basic writer is “paralyzed” as they move across the “territory of language” as though “being forced to make their way across a mine field” (11). Each of their errors, in this space, becomes a further “barrier” to progress (11). The risers on the stairs could represent these barriers or mines. Of course, Shaughnessy goes on to say that the errors are also, perhaps only, the ‘fault’ of the teacher. Despite this statement, decades later our institutions continue to diagnose the problem by analyzing the student. Kathleen Yancey writes that “as English teachers, we may not be sufficiently and or technically educated or trained to help the LD [learning disabled] student” (341). Despite this, she seems quite comfortable saying that students with learning disabilities “do structure the world differently than the rest of *us* do” (342, italics mine). Her suggestion is that “they can mimic structures provided to them” and then “practice, practice and practice again” to hold onto “typical ways of patterning information” (342). I picture students being put through a training regimen, being run up and down a set of steep stairs. David Bartholomae’s “The Study of Error” suggests we

need to do a “large, longitudinal study” to identify a ““natural” learning sequence” for basic writers and second language learners (267). The writers could then be pushed through this sequence, through another training regimen. Ironically, though Bartholomae indicates that his intention is to map how students learn, he charts only their (‘they’ are the re-named students that he diagnoses) errors and miscues. Essentially he is mapping how students fall down the stairs. Writing about students with learning disabilities, as I will later show, follows the same pattern. Clearly, disability, in the college classroom is not respected. It is something to fix. The method of ‘fixing’ disability focuses on patterns of the ‘typical,’ and the ‘natural,’ implying that disability is neither. As Tom Fox reminds us, “we fall into the trap of imagining that language standards and social boundaries are one and the same” (6). Mastering writing does not ensure academic access for students. As Fox also points out, mastering writing does not ensure class mobility or socio-economic success. In this way, ‘normalizing’ students with disabilities not only perpetuates the myth of typical or natural learning, but also reinforces standards that, even when mastered, don’t offer greater access. Instead, the process of *normalizing* (making typical or natural) the process of writing is used in service of exclusion, marking out the ‘abnormal.’ *They* are not *us*.

Min Zhan-Lu and Bruce Horner suggest that errors are often seen as “linguistic confusion” or as “cultural difference” (147-151). In these two models, the writer’s errors are identified so that the writer (not just the error) might be placed outside of the rational order of language, or outside of the dominant mode of discourse. Kimber Barber-Fendley and Chris Hamel, creating an inventory of our disciplinary attitudes towards learning disabled students, suggest that learning disabilities have always been identified with “bizarre errors” (512). These errors are characterized as having no rhyme or reason. In the case of the basic writer or the ‘LD’ writer, the disability is the writers,’ and the university thus marks them as foreign and irrational. Not surprisingly, foreign-ness and irrationality are two of the most commonly applied metaphors for people with (all types of) disabilities in the history of the western world. Of course, the similarity between treatment of basic writers and treatment of students with disabilities does not adhere across contexts. But the similarities suggest a common architecture. Both basic writers and ‘LD’ writers are marked out *socially*. Addressing this marking-out, Bruce Horner

suggests that the “distinction between error and its social implications is false” (140). Error, in his opinion (as in Fox’s), is a social achievement (141). Certainly, by labeling ‘LD’ errors as ‘bizarre,’ teachers absolve themselves of responsibility for understanding the error or the student. They stop teaching. But, more remarkably, this allows the teacher to label anything ‘bizarre,’ or beyond their comprehension or imagination, as ‘disabled.’ The move is to disavow the error and dismiss the student, and their writing, as bizarre, far from ‘normal.’ This version of foreign and irrational, bizarre disability serves to reinforce the fiction of the writing teacher’s natural, typical, rational ability.

Clearly, Disability, in the college classroom is not respected—it is something to identify and then to fix. The method of ‘fixing’ disability focuses on patterns of the ‘typical’, and the ‘natural’, implying that Disability is neither. Moreover, as Tom Fox reminds us, “we fall into the trap of imagining that language standards and social boundaries are one and the same” (6). Mastering writing does not ensure academic access for students. Also, as Fox points out, mastering writing does not ensure class mobility or socio-economic success. In this way, ‘normalizing’ students with disabilities not only perpetuates the myth of typical or natural learning, it also reinforces standards that, even when mastered, don’t offer access.

Conceptualizing the existence of steep steps, steps built by us as teachers, between ‘us’ (the eminently able) and ‘them’ (the irrevocably disabled) might help us to understand that spatial metaphors and social attitudes are (at least) as persistent as physical structures. These persistent practices, and persistently exclusive spaces, are part of the map of composition. As compositionists, we often like to believe that our classes are the most accessible, the most broadly applicable. All students take our classes, across the campus and across the curriculum. We are keenly aware of issues of class, race and gender, and when this isn’t the subject matter of our classes, it is at least a key consideration of our pedagogy. Yet we need to ask ourselves some important questions. Are our classes physically accessible? When we conceptualize the open-ness of our classes, our awareness of important issues of identity, are there identities that we leave out? How do these two questions necessarily entail one another? How can we have an open intellectual space if we have a closed physical space? How might we chart the steps of our own “ascendance” up the steps? What forces move up and down, what snakes and



ladders exist, effecting students' progress? What are the attitudes, requirements and practices that might represent boundaries, risers on the steps?

### THE RETROFIT

To *retrofit* is to add a component or accessory to something that has been already manufactured or built. This retrofit does not necessarily *make* the product function, does not necessarily fix a faulty product, but it acts as a sort of correction. It adds a modernized part in place of, or in addition to, an older part. Often, the retrofit allows a product to measure up to new regulations. The retrofit is applied to automobiles, usually, and concerns the need to get them 'up to spec.' Retrofits may be seen as mechanical, or as a matter of maintenance; thus they aren't creative. Retrofitting is also often forced or mandated. Another entailment of the retrofit is that it is a stopgap measure. This leads to the entailment that a retrofit can, in fact should, be given low priority. Thus, as a building is retrofitted to accommodate disability, as per the 'specs' of the Americans with Disabilities Act, ramps are added onto the side of a building, or around back, instead of at the main entrance. The ADA calls for *reasonable accommodation*. Common reason then seems to dictate that disability is supplemental to society, that it is an after-thought.<sup>3</sup>

The construction of elevators or ramps instead of steep steps are well-intentioned ideas; they speak to our desire for equality. Providing accommodations for students seems only fair. But the metaphor of the retrofit shows us that we'll go to great lengths to avoid re-engineering our pedagogy—adding something on to accommodate also ensures that the culture won't change. Moreover, too often we *react* to diversity instead of planning for it. We acknowledge that our students come from different places, and that they are headed in different directions, yet this does little to alter the vectors of our own pedagogy. Instead, we add one week of readings on issues of gender, one week on issues of race, and we often place these weeks near the end of a course, where they might be pre-empted if other concerns spill over. Most often, the only time disability is spoken or written about in class is in the final line of the syllabus, when students are referred to Disability Services should they desire assistance. The message to students is that disability is a supplementary concern. The sentence about Disability Services gets the syllabus up to spec. Teachers 'deal with' disability via the ideological equivalent of a

ramp. Disability as an identity category can come in the side or the back entrance if it is to be included at all.

Of course, the intellectual implications of the retrofit are many. When we look at the buildings of our universities and cities, we see how thought about disability has almost always been a side-thought or an *afterthought*. Count the appended ramps, the painted-in parking spots, the adapted freight elevators. In our own theoretical history, similar oversight and after-sight is evident: in Tom Fox's ground breaking article on "The Backlash Against Access," disability is not mentioned. Or, rather, it is a part of the ubiquitous "other marginalized groups" (1). Yet, disability might have provided a crucial category for the consideration of access. Indeed, as Fox concentrates on the myth of standards and the problem of believing that access to skills equates with access to power, disability could provide perfect examples.

Linda Felmeier-White exposes the possibility that, in fact, what I would call the retrofit can also be used to further exclude students with disabilities in writing classes. The accommodations model, much like the retrofit, seeks to level the playing field and, quite literally, get the classroom up to spec.<sup>4</sup> Responses to this makeover of space come in three main forms:

1. On one hand, students with 'disabilities' get ranked, sorted. As Linda Feldmeier-White writes, "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" (375). Incorporating discussion of accommodations into a discursive field relying on the language of testing, diagnosis and sorting perpetuates the vulnerability, and also leads some students to choose to 'pass,' to avoid being identified as 'disabled' at all costs.
2. The other response comes from teachers who, as Patricia Dunn writes, "[find] or, if necessary [invent] an extreme example of LD students' 'demands.'" The validity or veracity of a students' claim to 'disability' is debated by the teacher, rather than defined by the student or even by the legal and medical paradigm. Students with learning disabilities come to be seen as "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 the shrinking pie” (378).

3. On the other extreme, accommodation and retrofitting are often seen as acts of charity. Really *good* teachers and administrators, who really *care* about ‘them,’ *help* them to overcome themselves.

Finally, whether the student is ‘processed’ via testing and then seen as flouting disability; or the academy makes accommodation its moral mission, making students with disabilities objects of pity; or the student evades this process and remains ‘invisible’—students with Learning Disabilities face a difficult terrain. I want to suggest that, in some cases, a retrofitting can be useful, can aid students in their navigation of this space just as an elevator or a bridge might enable mobility. It is important, however, to recognize that the retrofit is often only an ‘after-the-fact’ move because ‘the facts’ refuse to recognize disability as a reality, or ‘the factors’ cast disability as a strategy, or ‘the benefactors’ claim accessibility not as everyone’s right, but as their opportunity to provide charity.

I want to suggest that we need a more sophisticated form of negotiation in order to retrofit structures and practices in the best possible way. With the above-mentioned attitudes towards disability, negotiation is rarely evident. Instead, people with and without disabilities are forced to work around an inaccessible environment, never cooperating because too often their concerns are perceived as divergent. I want to say that the violence of literacy, in our classes, will continue until negotiation becomes common practice. The first step is to recognize disability as an embodied fact, an identity. To ignore this fact is to do violence. We know, perhaps too well, that we neither compose normal, nor do we ever fully recognize what normal is. That said, we need to allow for an environment in which students can claim difference without fear of discrimination. This environment *must* include disability, although currently, it rarely does—and the environment must include not just physical disabilities. Further, disability cannot be seen as something one person diagnoses in another. Disability must be seen as socially negotiated; people with disabilities must be seen as the moderators, the agents of this negotiation.

In “Disability Geography,” Deborah Metzger and Pamela Walker emphasize the importance of *negotiative* roles for people with disabilities. The authors write that

“individualized approaches are designed to enhance community presence and participation” (127). This individualized negotiation would expand “social-spatial lives of people with developmental disabilities and [promote] increased control and spatial choice” (127). In the field of composition studies, Horner and Lu write most extensively about the importance of negotiation, of working *with* students rather than on, at, or around them (see Representing the Other). What we have learned, following theorists like Fox, Horner, and Lu, is that the inclusion of each individual in the discussion forever changes that discussion. Further, each conversant has a stake. It is in this way that writers with disabilities can be allowed to ‘evolve’—not towards cure, but towards an identity through negotiation, a negotiation in which all abilities and disabilities have a means of communication. As Horner writes, error, in this conversation, would be “a failure on both the part of the writer and reader to negotiate an agreement” (141). The teacher, in this scenario, has no need, and no right, to define her students’ disabilities. Nor is the responsibility for retrofitting the classroom solely hers. Instead, all students and teachers, coming to the conversation with varying abilities, must redefine what they are able to do together. This would be what Paolo Freire called “co-intentional education,” emphasizing the right of every student to be the re-creator of the world (69). Patricia Dunn, one of the only scholars in composition and rhetoric to have done extensive qualitative research into student perspectives on learning disabilities, finds that LD students have a sophisticated meta-cognitive awareness of themselves as learners (152). She concludes that these students themselves are experts on learning, and have much to offer to the ‘mainstream.’ Yet she warns that “total immersion in the mainstream, without altering the mainstream, will not work” (132). Therefore, changing the spaces in which we teach is necessary if we want to teach and learn from all students. Students with disabilities have a right and an insight that should allow them to re-map, re-create and re-write the world in which they learn.

#### UNIVERSAL DESIGN

The retrofit is an after-the-fact construction. It is always *supplemental*—always non-originary. But as a supplement, to retrofit is to *fix* in some way. Unfortunately, this ‘fixing’ provides little opportunity for continued refitting, for process. In developing my third metaphor, I want to emphasize the importance of the *priority* of Universal Design.

The word *universal* is problematic for many. I hope to show the ways we can respond to this trouble productively. However, I choose to write about Universal Design mainly because of the verb—design. This suggests that UD is a way to plan, to foresee, to imagine the future. The ‘universal’ of UD also suggests that disability is something that is *always* a part of our world-view. Thus, when UD is successful, it is hopeful *and* realistic, allowing teachers to structure space in the broadest possible manner.

Universal Design is defined as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Center for Universal Design). Principles for Universal Design, developed by a team of researchers at North Carolina State University, and now widely accepted as definitive of the concept, include:

**Equitable Use:** The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.

**Flexibility in Use:** The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.

**Simple and Intuitive Use:** Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.

**Perceptible Information:** The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.

**Tolerance for Error:** The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.

**Low Physical Effort:** The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.

**Size and Space for Approach and Use:** Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's body size, posture, or mobility. (NC State University)

I want to point out that Universal Design, as a list, and as applied solely to the physical environment, as in this example, looks a lot like a set of specifications. Indeed, UD is

often interpreted in this way. But institutions like Ohio State University and the University of Washington have used these criteria to design pedagogy. They too provide lists, suggesting that teachers encourage collaboration and cooperative learning; that they fluctuate teaching methods and diversify media; that they allow students to show their knowledge in a variety of ways. Most importantly, however, in documents like Ohio State's "Fast Facts for Faculty" on UD, teachers are encouraged to "permit," "listen," "update," "guide," "clarify," "review," and "allow" (3). These are the verbs of Universal Design, and even though they may ring of paternalism, they are useful because they function as much more than specifications. I would add the verbs "negotiate", "respect", and "assume ability" to emphasize the co-constructive relationship between teacher and student, one premised upon a respect for students' intelligences and for the possibility of creating change through a collaboration that respects differences instead of erasing them.

One of the central tenets of UD is that it helps all students, regardless of ability.<sup>5</sup> Steve Jacobs, writing about the "Electronic Curb-Cut Effect," suggests that many of the things we now take for granted, technologies that improve everyone's quality of life, were originally designed for people with disabilities. If disability hadn't broadened our conception of access to technology, made it more universal, we wouldn't have the typewriter, the stereo recorder, the transistor radio, the flat-bed scanner, the p.d.a, the pager, watch alarms, e-mail. Universal Design has already changed our world.

Universal Design offers composition a way to locate itself not in response to changing, hostile geographies, but as a proactive architect of future possibilities. The emphasis on 'design' allows us to recognize that we are involved in the continued production of space. Universal Design is *kairotic*, in this sense, seeking the opportune, but also acknowledging that context forever shifts.

Universal Design as epistemology also seems to entail new theories of subjectivity and agency. Universal Design responds to the idea, here expressed by Lennard Davis, that "what is universal in life, if there are universals, is the experience of the limitations of the body" (32). Difference, Davis asserts, "is what we all have in common" (26). This is not to say that we are all disabled, but to show that "we are all non-standard" (32). In response to this, we can either disavow our difference and project it upon others, or we can join in an "ethic of liberation" (29). Davis suggests that

disability epistemology, or ‘dismodernism’, to borrow his phrase, shows us that identity is not fixed but malleable, that technology is not separate but part of the body, that dependence, not individual independence, is the rule (26). Negotiation gains importance. In an academy, a classroom, and a conversation that is truly accessible, that strives to acknowledge (and create) place for our different bodies and minds, that has the power to lay bare the workings of societal discourse, and to affirm identity, Universal Design is disability praxis. We are not set free into an undifferentiated universe, but we begin to look for the broadest spaces in which we all share experience. Making space for others does not deny their difference but affirms a shared connection based upon this difference.

Universal Design as praxis is still a matter of social justice. If composition is asked to take part in its own design, if we see this as a possibility, then we can also recognize the priority of negotiation, the importance of including everyone in the discussions that create space. For UD to be a transformative agenda, we are reminded that our work must be change-enhancing, interactive, contextualized, *social*; must allow individuals to rewrite institutions through rhetorical action; and must push us all to think broadly and generously.

On the other hand, of course, there is the possibility that this embrace is too large, too broad. Unfortunately, the idea of the ‘universality’ of this metaphor also leads to its nearly universal dismissal. We see ourselves as teaching in highly localized contexts. For this reason, our skepticism about the universe of Universal Design is well-founded. Whose universe will this be? Yet, UD does offer ways to move, theoretically, that have everything to do with the universal—not as a means of homogenization, but as a way to complicate divisive notions of difference with new models of cooperation. The Ohio State document insists that “Universal Design does not remove academic challenges; it removes barriers to access. Simply stated, Universal Design is just good teaching.” However, it is telling that this defense is necessary. Many object that ‘just good teaching’ could lead to the same old neglect of and the same old invisibility for disabled students. For this reason it is not enough to focus only on Universal Design. At the same time, we need to recognize the persistence of the steep steps and the consequences of the retrofit. Doing so, we can be reflective teachers *as* we become progressive teachers, committed to respecting the rights of all students to design the spaces of composition.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Nedra Reynold's mappings of composition's "imagined geographies," and to Ellen Cushman's metaphorical interpretation of Rensselaer's steps, as starting points for my thinking in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> I allude here to the fact that 'literacy' in its contemporary sense only came into use in the late nineteenth century. Previously, to be literate meant to be familiar with literature. Also, as Marx and Foucault point out, and as Disability geographer Brendan Gleeson reminds us, the factory "produced physical disability on an industrial scale" (109). Pre-industrialization, though there were ideas of ability and disability, society did not comprehensively 'sort' its citizens using disability as criteria. Concurrently, illiteracy has been a way to 'sort' society, determining the strata of the labor force in similar ways. In these ways, the idea of *disability* and *illiteracy* might be seen to have developed in similar ways, at similar times, in the Western world, the prefixes being used with particular, and similar (perhaps connected) ends in mind.

<sup>3</sup> Since the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act in 1990, the public has begun to see disability as an issue of space. This issue is constructed as a matter of compliance, as the dominant terminology of the act is the idea of "reasonable accommodation." Disability comes to be seen in physical artifacts such as the elevator, the automated door, the ramp, the wheelchair parking space. These spaces, seen first, are then connected to people with disabilities only when they traverse this 'other space,' when they park their car, for instance. These spaces are in fact somewhat prosthetic: they are correctives, substitutions. These spaces are noticeably exclusive—they are explicitly not for the able-bodied. Yet I don't want to be too critical of such additions. Since the ADA, at the very least, people with disabilities have been given space. This access to space has been a crucial part of the lives of people with disabilities as they have moved through the world (historically, moving outside of institutions like the sanatorium and into institutions like the bank or dance club). What should be unsurprising about this history is that space has always been an issue of social justice. Think of buses in the South before 1956, with their front and back, and buses now, some with chair lifts. Even post-ADA, and certainly outside of the United States, people with disabilities are still fighting to have their rights recognized, still fighting for equal access and for reasonable



accommodation. The ADA, then, has brought the connection between disability and space into the public consciousness.

<sup>4</sup> The accommodations have always been initiated or carried out, or otherwise anchored, by the actions of university offices, which, first and foremost, are concerned with enforcing the ‘reasonable accommodations’ mandated by the ADA.

<sup>5</sup> There is some danger here of falling into what Critical Race Theorists would call *interest convergence*—the idea that conditions for the minority group improve only once the effort can be justified as helping the majority as well. In arguing for Universal Design instead of accommodations, many have suggested that UD is of greater benefit to more students—UD can take adaptations and use them to help everyone. Yet such an argument can lead to a situation in which the needs of the majority once again trump the needs of those who have been traditionally excluded—people with disabilities. The argument ‘better for all students’ must be constantly interrogated.

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