Toward Inclusive and Multi-Method Writing Assessment for College Students with Learning Disabilities: The (Universal) Story of Max

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Abstract

This essay draws on current research on learning disabilities (LDs) and writing pedagogy, writing assessment scholarship, and my own case study research to explore options for an inclusive, multi-method model of writing assessment with and for LD students. I highlight the experiences of one student writer (self-identified as autistic) in particular: Max. In the first part, I engage concepts of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and arguments involving connections between LD and basic writing students. In the second part, I detail how peer-to-peer and portfolio pedagogies can enact principles of UDL for all student writers. In part three, I offer multivoiced case study research with Max and two other course-based tutoring participants: his instructor, Mya, and the tutor, Sara (self-identified as dyslexic). I describe the interactions of all three participants as they worked together and with other students in a developmental first-year writing classroom. I also touch on the subsequent collaborative activities we undertook together, including presenting our work at local and regional conferences. In the final part, I offer four principles for building and sustaining inclusive assessment mechanisms for LD and—by design—all student writers.

> *Hello everyone! My name is Max, and I'm a junior majoring in Accounting at X State University in X. To tell you a little about myself, I was born with autism, obsessive compulsive disorder, and anxiety. Autism presents challenges with speech and language and, due to my having this disability, I have always struggled with comprehension and writing in school. When I was in grammar school, I could not even write one para-*

> *graph if I did not have total guidance from my parents and my teachers. I always felt very vulnerable because of my disability, but liked school and was determined to go to college.*

Max, a student with high-functioning autism, expressed these opening words aloud eloquently and passionately in our panel at a 2012 regional writing center conference. Let's juxtapose Max's personal sentiments (which readers will hear more of throughout this article) to some broader statistics regarding students with learning disabilities (LDs):

- According to Boyle et al., "Developmental disabilities are common and were reported in 1 in 6 children in the United States in 2006-2008. The number of children with select developmental disabilities (autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and other developmental delays) has increased from [12.84% to 15.04% over 12 years], requiring more health and education services" (1034).
- Shannon Walters reports that "Directors of Student Disability Services at two major universities estimate that only half of students with disabilities report their disabilities and note that students with disabilities often forgo accommodations for which they are eligible because they believe their instructors will treat them differently" (427).

During a case study of course-based tutoring in a developmental writing course at a four-year comprehensive state university, I came to know Max well. My involvement with him, his peer tutor Sara (who also identified as having an LD, dyslexia), and their instructor, Mya, led me to investigate disability studies theory and research. I soon found myself confronting the question of what is the best sort of learning environment for student writers with LDs. Like Amy Vidali, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson—editors of the 2008 special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* "Disability Studies in the Undergraduate Classroom"—I became concerned with questions of how higher education is welcoming these students and how we might work toward designing more accommodating conditions for neurodiverse students, accommodations that—by design—might also benefit all students, teachers, and writing programs. Like Vidali in her 2015 *WPA* essay "Disabling Writing Program Administration," I wanted to attempt "the challenge of disabling WPA narratives," in order to "invite disability in new and diverse ways" (47) in relation to discussions of writing assessment.

While there is a substantial amount of literature on ideal learning environments for student writers with LDs, and recent writing assessment scholarship urges principles of multi-method and inclusive design (see,

for example, White et al. 142-68; Inoue, *Antiracist* 283-300), all instructors of writing could benefit from more explicit discussions of how these two issues intersect. In other words, how might the needs of LD students fit within current writing assessment designs and practices? The following multi-voiced study offers WPAs a framework for designing inclusive, multi-method models of assessment for LD student writers. This framework is based on working toward two universal goals: 1) first and foremost, the idea of universal acceptance and 2) the idea of universal accommodation. Specifically, I describe an assessment frame that includes mainstreaming LD students, a focus on peer-to-peer and ePortfolio collaborative performances, and multi-method measures that include student self-representation. Following Patricia Dunn's exhortation that "Young people's versions of their experiences should be just as valid as the version given by the most credentialed among us" (97), and in the spirit of the disability rights movement motto "Nothing About Us Without Us," I relay the story of Max via case study research with other course-based tutoring participants, his instructor Mya, and his peer tutor Sara. I represent their collaborations—in their own words as much as possible—as they worked together and with other students in the developmental writing classroom. I hope to ultimately offer fellow instructors and WPAs suggestions for ways we can continue to work with like-minded thinkers to build more inclusive assessment mechanisms for LD (and all) student writers.

Why Design for Inclusive and Universal Assessment?

> *My first year experience at college was nerve-wracking at first mainly because I had no idea what to expect. I felt fairly confident that I could hold my own in the mathematical courses, but I worried about how I would survive the challenges of the English courses I would need to take to graduate. Math came easy to me as it is very concrete: there is always a right or wrong answer. English was another story altogether. There were many questions that I had in my head: Would I be able to keep up with the rest of the class? Would I get confused about the directions for assignments? Would I understand the material in order to write appropriate responses?*
>
> *Fortunately, I was placed in a remedial English course to better prepare me to handle the challenges of the required English courses I would need to eventually take. Having the opportunity to be a student in this course was an important stepping stone for me to work on my language and comprehension skills with reading and writing. At the point that I began college, I was able to organize my thoughts better and understand that*

> *sometimes things are not always concrete. But I had a long way to go. I still depend greatly on other people to help me, and I needed to gain confidence in myself. I wanted to work on developing my thoughts and ideas in an organized manner. I wanted to become a better writer. . .*

What are some ways we—as teachers and administrators—can work toward attitudes and methods that embrace universal acceptance and design? And why should we? Like Max, so many students come to college with their fair share of anxiety and trepidation: returning, non-traditional students; students with social anxiety; students who have been labeled remedial or basic in their math or writing skills. Writing studies scholars have been thinking about these questions in terms of accommodating the many faces of student learning and performance ability, and several—from a variety of angles, including professional and technical communications (Greenbaum; Walters) and writing center theory and practice (Kiedaisch and Dinitz; Mann; Brizee et al.; Babcock and Daniels)—have answered by advocating theories and principles of universal design. The Center for Universal Design explains that its intent "is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost. Universal design benefits people of all ages and abilities." Further, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) attempts to design curriculum that accommodate as many people as possible, while still pushing against a one-size-fits-all pedagogical solution. Several of the elements of their comprehensive accommodation frame feature pedagogical methods and strategies familiar to writing studies, including

- teaching for transfer;
- developing cognitive and motivational scaffolds;
- designing multiple forms of performance modeling, mentoring, and feedback in problem-exploring situations;
- fostering peer-to-peer collaboration and support; and
- providing options for self-regulation, self-assessment, and reflection. (National Center on Universal Design for Learning).

The developmental writing classroom, like the one Max found himself placed into, is a pedagogical location where this sort of balanced, multidimensional philosophy makes sense to think more about.

But, starting with an often crucial first question in writing assessment, should students with LDs be placed in typical developmental writing classrooms in the first place? Kimber Barber-Fendley and Chris Hamel argue that it is impossible to establish a neutral or equal playing field for LD students in the writing classroom. Instead, they propose alternate assistance

programs that provide supplemental instructional resources outside of class. They argue that supplemental instruction conducted outside of the classroom can better support LD students' privacy and dignity. However, disability scholars like Vidali and Mark Mossman disagree. Vidali urges us to do what we can to unify basic writing and LD pedagogies in the same classrooms ("Discourses"). She believes that LD students have much in common with more traditional basic writing students (including that they are both overcoming some sort of learning deficit that labels them as other) and benefit from the structural support systems afforded basic writers in all their various diversities. This integrative attitude echoes Mossman's belief that, for LD students, classroom environments need to be places where they can claim power and equality through what he posits as a process of "authentification." This process occurs, Mossman explains,

> when disability is understood as 'normal,' and in our classrooms this process of normalization happens only when we allow our students, all of them, to speak, to fully participate in the discussion, when we give them, all of them, a normalized status. (656; also see Dunn, 110; 163-64)

Universal acceptance, like the type called for by (self-identified) autistic scholars Scott Robertson and Ari Ne'eman, starts with deep listening for what makes LD students unique, as well as what pedagogical methods and assessment mechanisms might work toward authentification and inclusivity. Taking steps toward universal accommodation means engaging all students in aspects of personal and social development via writing practices that cultivate deep meaning-making activities through clear writing expectations and interactive writing processes (Anderson et al.). Two commonly used pedagogical tools in writing classrooms—peer-to-peer collaboration and ePortfolios—can be combined to help writing instructors work toward universal acceptance and accommodation, for all students.

Two Tools for Universal Learning Assessment: Peer-to-Peer Pedagogies and ePortfolios

> *One of the best features of my introductory English course was the built-in support system that was available to me. It was a small class, and my professor was able to give all of us individualized assistance. In addition, the class had a peer tutor who was always available to help me. My tutor helped alleviate my anxiety over the understanding of assignments, as she would go over the specifics with me before I started it. She gave me ideas and examples to consider when I worked on my essays. I learned to use an*

> *online site for creating my writing portfolio. My teacher and peer tutor were able to monitor my work on the site and give me the important feedback I needed in order to improve my writing.*

Whether intended for LD or able-for-now students, strong currents in writing studies have flowed toward the adoption of peer-to-peer (including peer review and response, writing center, and writing fellow) and portfolio pedagogies as strategies for accommodating a wide array of student learners. The complex relationship between how students perceive what it means to write at the college level and how instructors go about facilitating this learning has led writing studies scholars for the past thirty years to link the importance of reflective and metacognitive practice to writing assessment, especially holistic assessment (Yancey; Huot and O'Neill; Carroll 120–26). Composition scholars have further linked the importance of reflective and metacognitive practice to portfolio assessment (Yancey; Huot and O'Neill; Wills and Rice; White and Wright; Yancey et al.; Condon et al. 45-71). Kathleen Yancey's extensive portfolio and ePortfolio research maintains that writing portfolios are exercises in substantial reflective activity. She further links reflection to identity formation or formation of the self. She writes, "The self provides a lens through which we can look backward and forward at once, to inquire as to how it was constructed . . .The self is constructed quite explicitly through reflection" (498-99; 500). If we continue to help all students (and ourselves) think of the reflective process as the creative and critical exploration of the self through writing, through time and attention, we will enable students to simultaneously look back to their former selves while looking forward to their potential selves. It will also enable a more creative and critical presentation of those potential selves to the assessment world of multiple readers and audiences.

Among the questions that portfolio assessments enable us to ask, then, like what, how, and why am I supposed to be learning here, the question of with and from who am I learning—or the question of models—is an important concept for designing inclusive writing assessments. Social learning theory, including five decades of pioneering research by Albert Bandura, posits that students acquire much information about their capabilities through knowledge of how others perform. Things like goal achievement and motivation are affected when students perceive their performances as either similar to or significantly different from others. Students will attend to models when they believe the modeled tasks will help them achieve their goals. One interesting connection between peer-to-peer pedagogies and metacognition is the idea of coping and mastery peer models (Bransford et al. 67, 279; Carroll 136-37; compare to Condon et al. 92-113). Coping models initially demonstrate the typical fears and deficiencies of observ-

ers but gradually improve their performance and gain confidence in their capabilities. Mastery models exhibit high confidence and flawless performance from the outset. In order to learn from models, students need to see a variety of performers, with different modeling styles. A diversity of models might also address students' various learning styles and predilections. Modeling for universal learning would involve not only providing a writing environment where motivation-enhancing short-term goals are explicitly built into lessons and chances to view both coping and mastery models abound, but would also encourage students to reflect on their collaborative experiences.

Equitable Assessment in Action

> *Many times our class was broken up into groups, and through peer editing, we were able to learn from each other's strengths and weaknesses. We supported each other, and I began to get involved in class discussions because I knew no one would ridicule me. I was okay with making mistakes, as I knew I would be guided in how to correct them. When I did not understand something, my professor and tutor would patiently explain the material to me. My fears lessened as my confidence grew, and I took more chances with my writing—which was a big step for me.*

During my case study research with Max and his classmates, his tutor (Sara), and his instructor (Mya), I witnessed peer-to-peer and ePortfolio pedagogies intertwining in compelling ways. The first time I visited the class to observe participant interactions during peer review and response, I noticed Max visibly struggling. His two peer group partners seemed to be experiencing no trouble at all. The peer tutor, Sara, who was circulating around the room, saw that Max was having trouble. She later said:

> I noticed Max looking nervous over in his seat so I went over to see what I could help him with. His partners Kim and Adrianne already had their computers set up and were starting the assignment. Max wasn't as far along. He hadn't even logged into the computer.

Sara spent much of the remaining class session helping him get on track with the multiple complex organizational and communicative tasks students needed to negotiate during this peer review and response session: working with online files, following the response guidelines and instructions, and reading and offering feedback to his group members.

During my second visit, just one month later, I noticed both Max and his peer response partners taking on much more interactive collaborative roles. Max seemed in much better shape—no visible worries. I noticed that

rather than frequently asking Sara for help, he seemed to be much more involved with his two partners. In contrast to what I witnessed during my earlier visit, Max seemed to have a good grasp of what he was supposed to be doing. He asked his partners a question and they helped him; they asked him questions and he helped them. I was impressed with how well all three students in Max's group were communicating and interacting. In contrast to my last visit, Sara only came over to the group a couple of times. At one point, the group talked about works cited pages and the fact that neither of Max's partners did one, but that he did. Sara ended up spending much more focused time with other students, including a male student who was having difficulty with citations and formatting. Sara gave her impressions of her involvement with Max and his group members in this second peer review session: "I looked at Max's work and realized he was very ahead of the game. He had his ePortfolio set up very nicely. He already had one paper posted and was almost ready to post another."

By the time I interviewed Max near the end of the term, I found out much more about his personal and social journey as an autistic student, a journey that whispered the importance of inclusive writing assessments. He spoke of specific teachers he felt were rude and disrespectful: a "crazy" sixth grade teacher in the resource room who would yell at him; a history teacher in his sophomore year of high school who was "ignorant of him and not a very nice person" and, in addition to being mean and rude to everyone else in the class, (Max would find out) he made fun of Max outside of class. When reminded of just how emotionally challenging school can be for all students, the importance of working toward universal acceptance in attitude and action becomes paramount.

Max went on to say that he has trouble with writing prompts and does not do well with standardized tests like the SAT. He said that he does not think it is fair that students with LDs have to take and pass those tests. He feels, rather, that they are far too time consuming and that a better indication of any student's intelligence is how hard they work. Regarding the SAT and ACT, he said, "It's hurting a lot of people, especially those with learning disabilities." He feels that in college he is better able to advocate for himself; he has become more independent, and only relies on the campus Disability Resource Center for paperwork to give to his instructors asking for extended times for test taking. He said he was given the option by Mya to move from English 110 on to English 112, but he chose to go to the intermediary English 111 instead because he wants to eventually "kick butt in English 112!" He said that while he feels he is getting much stronger on so many things with his writing, he believes all the constant practice with

planning and revising is making him so much better. During our interview, Mya emphasized this important point:

> By the end of the course described above, Max proved to be the most successful student in the class and was deemed ready by several teachers/readers [during end-of-term portfolio norming sessions] of his work to be offered the chance to skip a level. This is huge, I think, since only about two to four [English] 110 students per semester are invited to do so. And he came from so far behind, at least in confidence, that semester.

Max's words regarding the inequity of standardized tests versus the sort of meaningful assessment he experienced in his first-year composition courses, underscores the importance of universal accommodation in writing assessment design. Vidali et al., reflecting on their *DSQ* special issue, found it somewhat disconcerting how often they received submissions describing traditional instructional practices like timed-writing, lecture-based class formats, and heavy reading and writing loads. This led them to a qualified lament: "While the presence of disability 'curricula' or 'content' in so many locations is impressive, the adoption of inclusive *pedagogies* appears less common" (also see Greenbaum 41).

Max's peer tutor, Sara, told me about the class's end-of-term party. It stands in stark contrast to the first time I saw Max struggling in the classroom:

> Today we had a party for our last day of class . . .It was amazing to see Max interacting with all the students. They were including him in the conversation and you could hear the joy in his voice. I thought this was amazing because Max had been very uptight and nervous for the first part of the semester. This class has been so accepting of him, so he finally started letting a little loose. After one class about half way through the semester I was talking to Max after class and he told me that college was so much nicer than high school; the people are so nice. I got the impression that Max's high school was not very accepting of him, so it was great that Max got to interact with a wonderful group of students. As class came to an end, each student said goodbye to all the other students. It was a great end to the wonderful semester with these students.

What if we could give every student—as much as possible—such experiences to associate with writing, as they move through their time in college, as they look back from their professional lives? What if assessment systems were designed with a single universal-as-possible student like Max at the center, as the gravity that all other parts of the system orbited around? We

might see a system of universal social imbrication and support like the one represented in figure 1.

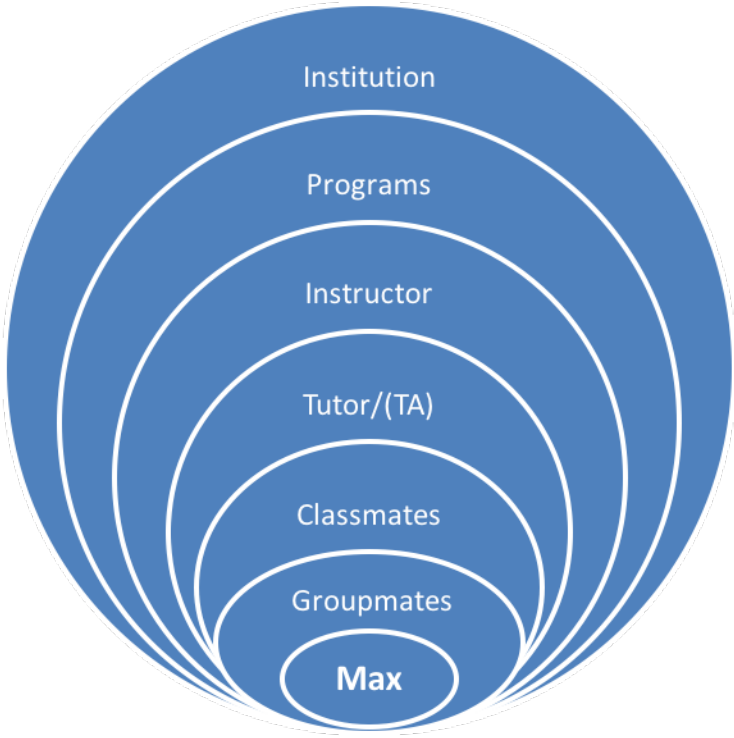

Figure 1. System of universal social imbrication for equitable assessment

I came to reflect on what I was observing and hearing with Max and his colleagues as very much in line with a universal design for learning philosophy. In her mediations on the accommodation of autistic students in the writing center, April Mann relates how writing center studies has had to come to terms with some pedagogical beliefs about student autonomy and teacher control and directiveness, instances where "tutors working with students with [autism spectrum] sounds very similar to best practices advice for writing teachers and tutors in general. The difference," she found, lying "in how much help students might need, not in the type of help they might need" (53). The types of recursive, multi-dimensional writing situations Max experienced in his developmental writing course exemplified this universally inclusive emphasis on "how much" rather than "type." In the end, I believe the collaborative learning environment established by the close instructional partnership between Mya and Sara enabled *all* students

in their basic writing course to experience learning to write and writing-to-learn at an optimal level. Further, the collaborative research process—including conference presentations like the one delivered throughout this article by Max—in which all participants engaged added another important metacognitive learning level. Since all participants were interviewed and followed up with in depth, gathered together to reflect on their experiences as a group, and were involved in the textual interpretation and analysis of the data presented, all participants experienced multiple learning moments in relation to the overall case study. Over the course of seven years, all participants have had an active and dialogical role in their own self-representation.

Principled Suggestions for Designing Inclusive Writing Assessments

> *I think one of the best benefits of my intro to English class was that I found I actually liked English. I enjoyed reading and discussing the material the most, but even the part I always feared,* writing*, became more enjoyable. I felt a sense of pride and accomplishment when I would write something and receive positive feedback from my professor. Writing will always remain my biggest challenge, but I have come a long way, and I feel confident that I will continue to grow.*

Scholars in WAC and their disciplinary partners have reported success in developing cross-curricular cohorts that closely collaborate in efforts to design effective writing assessments (Broad et al.; Yancey et al.; Anson et al.; Soliday; White et al.). When students work closely with other students, and their writing process and product performances are delivered via ePortfolio, they are enacting a similar collaborative network of enterprise: holding a stake in, engaging in, and contributing to the mechanisms of their own assessment. Throughout this little essay, my colleagues and I have tried to offer some of the implications of why we should continue to think conscientiously about designing for universal acceptance and accommodation. I'd like to end with four principles for ways we can continue to work with like-minded thinkers to design more inclusive assessment mechanisms for LD—and, in the process, all—student writers.

Principle 1

Assessment loops must begin with the valuing of student input that (for programs that use it) directed self-placement (DSP) can provide, and include mainstreaming of LD (Vidali; Mossman) students as much as possible. Recall how Max performed so strongly in his developmental English

110 class that he was deemed by Mya and other readers of his portfolio ready to move directly from English 110 into English 112. Yet he chose to go to the intermediary English 111. I believe his collaborative and reflective experiences in English 110 made him much more metacognitively aware of the probable value of taking that intermediary English 111 course. Max felt he could benefit from more practice, more time, and more thoughtful cognitive and motivational scaffolding (Mackiewicz and Thompson) that would support his desire to "kick butt in English 112!"

Principle 2

Assessment must be performance or "labor" focused (Inoue "Grade-Less;" "Teaching"; *Antiracist*). This includes prioritizing the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing* "habits of mind" while coaching students toward the sorts of performance outcomes we might desire in writing assessments (White et al.) Recall, during my interview with Max he described what he felt was the undue stress placed upon him in high school by standardized tests. He feels that they are far too time consuming and that a better indication of any student's intelligence is how hard they work. The SAT and ACT, he said, are "hurting a lot of people, especially those with learning disabilities." Assessment mechanisms like (e)portfolios allow for much more equitable learning environments for all students, providing them—and instructors, and programs—with the time and space needed for optimum learning, development, and reflection (see Condon et al.).

Principle 3

Assessment must be multi-method, including self-assessment measures and (continuing from DSP) with inclusion of student voices/stories (Dunn; Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann; Hobgood). Students should be considered major stakeholders in assessment loops, stakeholders—like Max and his tutor Sara—whose points of view are as equally valid and reliable as other assessment measures.

Principle 4

Assessment mechanisms must ask: How well are we facilitating LD students' personal and social development (Anderson et al.) and preparing them for life after college (MacNeil)? In order to do this and effectively gauge the progress of individual students, as well as to what degree programs are meeting the needs of these students, assessment must be (a) collaborative, socializing students through activities like guided peer review and response; and (b) longitudinal, scaffolding recursive pedagogical

processes that facilitate self-regulation through delivery mechanisms like ePortfolios and meaningful mentorship experiences.

On that longitudinal note, I'd like to end this essay with where we began, the words of Max from the latest email reply I received from him:

> Dear Dr. Corbett,
>
> I want to say hello and wish you a Happy Holiday & Happy New Year! I read the story that you wrote and I really liked it. I'm forever honored for being part of your research. I learned a lot from you, Professor [Mya] & Sara. I wouldn't be as successful as I am today without all of your help.
>
> In the spring of 2014, I graduated from X State U cum laude with a 3.63 GPA. I'm currently working as a Finance Clerk in the Accounting Department at City Hall. I really like the people I work with. I never thought that I would be working for my hometown. I hope everything is well with your job and that the new year goes well.
>
> Sincerely,
> Max

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