

Letter from the Editor

Kathleen M. Hunzer

In November of 2011, when Temple Grandin spoke on our campus, she shared that when she thinks about ideas and concepts, she thinks not in words but in pictures. She also spoke about how rather than thinking in a top down fashion, she thinks in a bottom up style, which makes traditional writing tasks difficult for her. The example she cited was this: think about the word *dog*. When a person who is not on the autism spectrum (sometimes this person is called neurotypical) hears the word *dog*, that person can generalize about the term *dog*. When someone on the spectrum who is a primarily visual learner hears the word *dog*, however, very specific images come to mind rather than a generalized notion: a poodle from a neighboring house, a Doberman seen at the park last week, a pug from a TV commercial, a German Shepard that patrolled the airport last month, etc. In other words, this person sees each of these as distinct pictures that flash through her mind as she thinks of the word *dog* rather than a generalized image of a *dog*. In order to then generalize, the person with autism who is primarily a visual learner looks for the elements that tie all dogs together: They are all classified as canine, all have the same shaped nose, all have the same basic physiology, etc.

As I drove home that night after her talk, I had an odd thought: here is Temple Grandin—a highly intelligent, internationally-known, and well-published person who has practically single-handedly improved her industry, yet if she were in *a traditional* composition class, she likely would have done poorly because her thought processes do not match the neurotypical policies and assignments used in many traditional writing classes. As I imagined this brilliant mind not doing well in one of my first-year writing classes, my brain buzzed with questions: how would other people who think like this survive a college writing class that privileges linear top down thinking? How does someone who thinks in images translate that to the standard form of the essay? Does the dominant paradigm used in most

writing classes accommodate or alienate someone like Temple? Would Temple have failed simply because of a neurotypical bias?

At this same time, I was the Director of Written Communication for our two- or three-course composition sequence (depending on placement scores) that served approximately 1,500 in-coming students each year. In typical WPA fashion, I was the point person for all instructors of these writing classes, which included both tenure-line and adjunct instructors, and as the only person formally trained in Composition and Rhetoric in the department, I quickly learned that I was expected to be the answer person and the problem-solver for all things related to our writing sequence. In hallway or drop-in meetings with the writing instructors, I answered a plethora of questions, but as I thought more about what Temple said, my brain honed in on some of the most recent questions raised by our instructors: Why am I responsible for accommodating students with disabilities? Why is asking a student to be a note-taker my job? What do I do with a student with Tourette's who shouts out in class? If students can't control their anxiety, should they even be in college? How do I get the kid in the back of the room to stop rocking back and forth and tracing the map of Egypt as I lecture? Some instructors asking the questions seemed annoyed that they had to find ways to accommodate all students, but more of the instructors were sincerely interested in providing a classroom experience that would help all students succeed.

In true serendipitous fashion, after hearing Temple speak and completing a sabbatical exploring the connections of Ability Studies and Composition, I was asked to be the inaugural chair of the CWPA Disabilities Committee, and in our first year, we created our Position Statement on Accessibility. We disseminated this statement at the Savannah, Georgia meeting of the CWPA. The audience was very interested in what we wrote, offered helpful feedback, and agreed that we all should commit to being more aware of issues of ability and accessibility as they pertain to our roles as WPAs. By the end of the conference, we were all committed to raising awareness of these issues, which included future CWPA conferences having an Ability and Accessibility Information table as well as more presentations about these issues. Happily, from this experience came the invitation to compile this special issue of our journal, which is what you will read today. Only being able to select a few articles to include was difficult since there are a multitude of perspectives to explore when addressing issues of ability and accessibility in our programs, so I selected pieces that discuss some key aspects of our jobs.

First, Melissa Nicolas invites us to think holistically about these issues by examining if some of our program policies are problematic in her arti-

cle “Ma(r)king a Difference: Challenging Ablest Assumptions in Writing Program Policies.” Following this, Steven J. Corbett explores the issue of assessment in his piece “Toward Inclusive and Multi-Modal Writing Assessment for College Students with Learning Disabilities: The (Universal) Story of Max.” Casie Fedukovich and Tracy Morse then address an issue pertinent to many WPAs jobs—GTA preparation—in their piece “Failures to Accommodate: GTA Preparation as a Site for a Transformative Culture of Access.” Because online writing classes and teacher preparation are a concern of WPAs, Sushil K. Oswal and Lisa Meloncon’s piece “Saying No to the Checklist: Shifting From an Ideology of Normalcy to an Ideology of Inclusion in Online Writing Instruction” raises key issues about online writing design. The final essay, Kelly A. Shea’s “Kindness in the Writing Classroom: ‘Accommodations’ for All Students,” asks us to step back and consider that some of the accommodations we enact for people with ability and accessibility challenges may be beneficial to all students. “As a whole, I believe this issue—along with perceptive reviews by Brenta Blevins, Ella R. Browning, Annika Konrad, Elisabeth L. Miller, and Kelly A. Whitney—will open our minds to new ideas, challenge us to re-think some of our practices and pedagogies, and will, most importantly, get our community talking so that we can all serve our students in the best way possible. Enjoy!

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