Ma(r)king a Difference: Challenging Ableist Assumptions in Writing Program Policies

Melissa Nicolas

Abstract

WPAs are tasked with creating and maintaining writing programs' policies and procedures; however, we have paid surprisingly little critical attention to how our program policies function as rhetorical constructs, particularly in terms of disability. Using the commonplace of the mandatory attendance policy, I explore ways that ableism—the privileging of a hypothetical "perfect" body—permeates some of our most basic practices. In this essay, I argue that even in cases where we decide to make exceptions to our mandatory attendance policy, we do nothing to address the fundamental problem with the policy itself: its failure to take into account the embodied, material realties of our students' lives. Indeed, I demonstrate that the mandatory attendance policy creates the very conditions under which we need to make multiple exemptions, creating disabling situations for our students and our instructors. I conclude by calling for an application of the principles of UDL in policy-making.

Introduction

It is week ten of a sixteen-week semester. Three different FYW instructors have scheduled appointments with me (the WPA) to talk about students who have accrued enough absences that their grades should be penalized according to our writing program attendance policy, which allows students to miss a week's worth of classes after which their course grades are penalized (Appendix A). The instructors want to discuss their students with me because something doesn't feel right about penalizing them. Here are the students' stories:[1]

> *Leandra has told her FYW instructor that she hasn't been sleeping or eating well for the past two weeks. Up until week seven, she hadn't*

missed any classes, was an active class participant, and was turning in exemplary work, but over the course of the past few weeks, she has been silent in class, has missed a few minor assignments, and has been absent four times.

Tighe sometimes uses a wheelchair and other times uses crutches to navigate campus. He turns in assignments on time and his papers have all earned passing grades. His class participation is solid. However, because he is often not present by the time his instructor takes roll, Tighe is usually marked "tardy" according to the writing program policy, so by this point in the semester, he has accumulated enough absences (three tardies = one absence) that his course grade is now being affected.[2]

Jasmine is struggling in her writing class. She received a D on her first formal paper and is holding a C- average in the course. Her attendance is spotty at best, and she often falls asleep in class. She has not responded to her instructor's emails about her course grade being affected by her multiple absences.

I doubt any of these scenarios are unfamiliar to WPAs or experienced teachers. Semester after semester, I have conversations about why instructors might want to relax the attendance policy. Instructors who seek me out about situations like the ones I just described say something feels "off" about enforcing the attendance policy. What these instructors are sensing is the fact that our attendance policy is not predicated on the reality of an embodied student; therefore, when students do not perform/present in certain predetermined ways, ways outlined in our attendance policy, there is confusion about how to treat them. We—Leandra's, Tighe's, and Jasmine's teachers and WPA—do not know for sure what is causing their absences; we can and will ask them, but as Jasmine has made clear, some students are just not interested in sharing—or cannot—talk to us. But even if we decide to suspend the attendance policy in these cases, we will have done nothing to address the fundamental problem with the mandatory attendance policy: It fails to take into account the embodied, material realties of our students' lives.

Mandatory attendance policies (and some other writing program policies), as I will demonstrate in this essay, are premised on ableist assumptions of a "normal" student body. These assumptions actually undermine writing programs' attempts to promote equity, diversity, and social justice by reifying normate behaviors. While the spirit of mandatory attendance policies is laudable and keenly in line with some of composition studies' core beliefs—particularly, that community is essential for becoming a better writer so

students need to show up and participate in such a community if they are to get anything out of our classes (also see Prendergast)—the purpose of this article is to challenge WPAs to begin taking a more critical look at what our policies actually force us to practice. By challenging some of our commonplace policies such as mandatory attendance, I hope to provide WPAs with a generative space from which to start rethinking and remodeling not just our classrooms but also the programs that feed, nurture, and support those classrooms.

Biomedical and Social Models of Disability

Western higher education is grounded in a Platonic version of an idealized student body.[3] This body is young, healthy, white, male, and usually straight (Davis 3). This body can sit for anywhere from 50 minutes to 3 hours and listen to a lecture and take perfect notes by hand, aided by a photographic memory. This body is not shy, never experiences anxiety or mental illness, can control all of its bodily functions, has 20/20 vision, excellent hearing, and perfect gross and fine motor skills. Its limbs can easily navigate a campus of any size, moving with speed and ease between buildings in short amounts of time. This body can also read, write, and speak without effort and can process information in a linear fashion; it is just as fluent with text as with speech as with manipulating objects, and it has total and precise recall abilities (Dolmage, "Writing" 110–115). A common term for this mythical body is "normate."

As disability scholars have reminded us, the normate body does not actually exist, but rather, it becomes an impossible standard that we all fail to meet (Davis). The above description of the normate student body is not written anywhere, but the assumption of it is hiding in plain sight in many of our policies.[4] Dolmage and Lewiecki-Wilson tell us, "The normate position occupies a supposedly preordained, unproblematic, transparent, and unexamined centrality. A normate culture, then, continuously reinscribes the centrality, naturality, neutrality, and unquestionability of this normate position" (24).

As WPAs, we have an obligation to our students and our writing programs to start chipping away at these embedded assumptions. As Jay Dolmage suggests:

> 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 inter-

> action. 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. ("Mapping" 16)

WPAs need to participate in this mapping of the spaces—like our program attendance policies—that may be creating impediments in our writing programs in order to reimagine ways to create more access.

Mandatory attendance (and tardiness) standards arguably serve the purpose of getting students to come to class on time, but they are grounded in ableist assumptions about the ease of waking to an alarm clock, getting out of bed, and making it to class in a timely manner (among others). For some students with disabilities, however, some or none of these things are easy assumptions. A student who has just changed medications may be unable to sleep at night, only to crash in the early morning hours and sleep right through her morning alarm. A student with fibromyalgia might be so weakened and sore that it is too painful for him to move. A student who uses a wheelchair might not be able to navigate the campus's icy sidewalks if the ground crew hasn't salted the paths yet. Should these students be penalized for missing class? Are their absences of the same kind as the absences of students who are too hungover to get out of bed or of students who simply don't want to come to class? Furthermore, how do we, teachers and administrators, decide who is worthy of exception to our policies? What makes us qualified to judge the conditions of others' lives, especially given composition studies' very prominent mission of social justice? Honestly, do we really want to continue in this adjudicative role?

An important first step in beginning to answer these questions is an awareness of the critical perspective disability studies scholarship brings to conversations about embodiment and disability. To oversimplify for the sake of explanation, disability scholars speak of two models of disability. The first is a biomedical model that anchors disability in the body via some diagnosable, locatable, medical condition, disease, or malfunction. For example, in the biomedical model of disability, a person who cannot walk is disabled because a spinal cord injury paralyzes her lower body; the paralysis is the disability. On the other hand, in the social model of disability, scholars argue that the built environment, not a medical condition, creates the condition of disability. Using the same example, then, we would say that a person who cannot walk is disabled only because she encounters material circumstances that limit her mobility. If buildings no longer had stairs, if all curbs had curb cuts, if cars had standard hand controls, etc., not being able to walk would not limit her mobility in any way; therefore, walking on two legs would just be one of many equally navigable mobility

options. In the social model, then, disability is constructed by choices society makes about norms.[5]

The tensions between these two models of disability are very much in play in higher education where many institutional (not just writing program) policies are based on a biomedical model of disability. Yet, in colleges and universities, when the topic of disability comes up, the conversation inevitably turns to accessibility and accommodations, features of the constructed environment. Accessibility is usually about the built environment (ramps, stairs, elevators) while accommodation is about practices (timed tests, electronic devices, etc.) and "procedural changes and modifications in teaching and academic evaluation practices" (Jung 269). Both accessibility and accommodation mandates are needed because either the campus physical environment or the classroom (pedagogical) environment have been constructed (social) with the normate student in mind. For example, if all buildings had ramps, there would no need to move a class for a student using a wheelchair. If timed tests weren't used, students with processing disorders wouldn't need extra time. In this way, accessibility and accommodation mandates operate to address the concerns of the social model of disability.

However, the very process by which students activate their legal rights to access and accommodation is steeped in biomedical authorization. Consider the standard operating procedure at many institutions: To get accommodations under the ADA, students need to submit medical documentation to a designated person (usually a disability coordinator of some kind) who then certifies that the student 1) qualifies as disabled under the government sanctioned definitions of disability and 2) is permitted to have a certain set of reasonable accommodations. The determination of eligibility for disability accommodation can only be made if there is supporting, written documentation from some sort of institutional authority (a doctor, a therapist, a testing specialist). As teachers, we are made aware when this process occurs because students hand us official letters from the disability office telling us that they get time and a half on tests, or a distraction-free testing environment, or an in-class note-taker, etc.

The process by which students must obtain their legal rights to accommodations quickly turns the conversation away from what individual students need or want and instead turns the entire process into one about meeting legal standards and medical definitions of disability.[6] Perhaps even more harmfully, when we force students to get the imprimatur of the disability services office before we will offer them tools to allow them to be more successful in class, we are reinforcing the ideal of the normate student body. This reinscription of the ideal student makes accommodation about

seeking favors and advantages. As Karen Jung reminds us, "the process of accommodation—which involves providing special exceptions to the ordinary rules—also contributes to the ableism that singles out disabled people as targets of resentment" (271). Having to be an exception, asking for an exemption, being a special case is not a desirable position to be in, yet, policies (and pedagogies) premised on ableism situate students with disabilities in precisely this position all the time. Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Brenda Brueggeman point out that this positioning can have "dire academic consequences" as many college-aged students with disabilities will not even register with the disability office because of the stigma or simply because of the difficulties inherent in the process itself (2–4).

I believe so many FYW instructors come to me about our attendance policy because, even though they cannot articulate the reasons, they sense the inherent contradictions between compositions' emphasis on student empowerment and the ways that the mandatory attendance policy disempowers them. Our instructors want to help their students, not penalize them, yet the structures our writing program creates around attendance forces our instructors into a Catch-22: per their employment contract, instructors are required to uphold all writing program policies and procedures, yet, the writing program attendance policy simply does not work for all students because it is based on the normate student body. Our attendance policy creates the very conditions under which we need to make multiple exemptions. Our policy rhetorically constructs disabling situations for our students and our instructors.

Marking Difference

Because we have created the conditions under which we now operate, we have the power to change them. As James Porter et al. remind us:

> Though institutions are certainly powerful, they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge-making practices) and so are changeable. In other words, we made 'em, we can fix 'em. (611)

As the WPA, I am tasked with creating and maintaining my writing program's policies and procedures. Indeed, in a 2012 survey of WPAs and department chairs, Shirley Rose et al. discovered that creating, implementing, and maintaining writing program policy is a key component of many WPAs' jobs (57). Despite Porter et al.'s call to harness the rhetorical power of what we have created, however, WPAs have paid surprisingly little critical attention to how our program policies function as rhetorical constructs.[7]

For the remainder of this essay, then, I am going to explore some alternative pathways for re-thinking normate-centric policies. While I do not claim to have this all worked out, I hope to jumpstart critical, productive conversations about how our writing program policies do or do not welcome disability and invite us to brainstorm ways to adjust accordingly.

One way composition scholars are engaging with diversity, especially disability, is moving beyond what Stephanie Kerschbaum calls fixing difference, that is: "treating difference as a stable thing or property that can be identified and fixed in place" (*Toward* 6). Fixing difference maps on to the biomedical model of disability in that fixing difference involves choosing certain qualities or characteristics—race, class, gender, dis/ability—and assigning a person to that category as the sole determinant of their identity and marker of difference. For example, labeling Tighe as disabled would be fixing Tighe in the category of disabled, eliding all the other things about Tighe that make him who he is. Like the biomedical model that always points to identifiable, label-able causes for disability, fixing difference always points to a particular characteristic or quality that makes someone different from someone else in a static way.

Writing program policies, by their very nature, are primed to fix difference precisely because they function to standardize experience across multiple sections of what is supposed to be the same course. Fixing difference in program policy leads to the scenarios that began this essay. Because our attendance policy is written for normate students—students who will not have major depressive episodes as Leandra might be having, students who will not have trouble navigating campus as Tighe might be having, or even students like Jasmine whom we know little about—our teachers are left with three choices, none of them optimal: 1) subject themselves to reprimand for not following writing program rules by not docking Leandra's, Tighe's, and Jasmine's grades; 2) subject their students to lower grades for breaking writing program rules (after three absences. . .) or 3) attempt to find ways to make exceptions for their students who don't seem to fit neatly under the rules as they are written. Our students are left to either ask for an exception to be made, to other themselves from their classmates, or to accept a lower grade for circumstances that may be out of their control.

While it is tempting at this point to say we should just eliminate attendance policies, this solution is not practical. Policies are necessary aids to ensuring all students receive equitable treatment. When I was an associate dean overseeing grade appeals, incomplete requests, and authorizing late withdraws from classes, I frequently turned to college policy for guidance in order to confirm that I was not giving one student a special consideration I was not giving another. This doesn't mean I didn't take individual circum-

stances into account—I considered it my duty to make informed, ethical decisions based on coordination between college policy and the particularities of each student's situation. But I definitely needed and wanted a general statement of the beliefs and desires of the college regarding the issues I was asked to decide on. We need writing program policies for these same reasons. Instead of eschewing policy completely, we need to find a new way—a broader way—to envision what our policies can do.

Kerschbaum suggests just such an approach. Instead of fixing—or fixating—on difference, she asks us to mark difference, a rhetorical move that encourages us not to erase the reality of differences nor elide those differences. Marking difference creates space for constantly shifting identities to be reconstituted and reconstructed *kairotically*. The process of marking difference allows for fluidity and negotiation in every relationship (*Toward* 7; 67). Marking difference easily maps on to the social model of disability because marking difference is about situatedness. Returning to Tighe's situation, then, we might say that Tighe is disabled when it comes to getting across campus, but when he is playing basketball in his wheelchair league, the category of disabled no longer holds any relevance; when he is playing basketball, Tighe most strongly identifies as a forward. When we mark difference, we use a rhetorical lens that "emphasizes the relationship between speaker/writer [writing program policy] and audience [students] as well as the situated nature of all communicative activity" (*Toward* 67). This *kairotic* process of marking difference seems especially apt for the writing classroom as teachers and students often have a chance to build personal relationships because of our relatively small class sizes and the give-and-take of the writing process. If our policies were constructed with the intention of marking instead of fixing difference, our rules might not be so rigid and formulaic, and a wide range of attendance policies could be on the table.

The moment of critical intervention for WPAs comes precisely at this point where the need for policy, a need that strongly pulls us towards fixation, begs for a reality that allows for the fluidity of marking difference. But creating these kinds of policies is no easy task. Kerschbaum herself admits that

> It still sometimes makes me anxious when students ask me to allow or excuse a large number of absences. [. . .]. It is never simple for me to figure out how to fully reconcile my belief that it is valuable for students to engage with me and their classmates during class meetings with the fact that some students are not always able to be physically present for those sessions. ("Anecdotal" n. pag.)

Besides working through our own personal and pedagogical desires for students to be physically present at all time in our classrooms, reimagining our program policies raises two other salient issues: How do WPAs make policy decisions that focus on what individual students and teachers might need, yet, at the same time, have these policies perform the necessary work of structuring common program expectations and requirements? If we are able to create fluid program policies, how do we enforce them in equitable ways?

Universal Design for Policy-Making

In a recent conference paper, subtitled "Throw Away Your Attendance Policy: For the Love of God Do it Now," Catherine Prendergast explains that she has experimented with cripping her attendance policy for students who cannot always make it to class because of some disability they have disclosed to her. "Cripping," in this case, means "throwing it away." For Prendergast, "To 'crip' our attendance policy, we must recognize that there will be no conformity to a norm, whether a norm of disability or a norm of ability. We stop enabling a systemic erasure of [students'] disabilities" (9). As a classroom teacher, I admit that I, too, have thrown away my attendance policy. Some instructors fear that if they don't have a mandatory attendance policy, students will miss more class. Prendergast reports anecdotally, and my own anecdotal evidence echoes hers, that the absence of a mandatory attendance policy does not negatively impact attendance.[8] Cripping our attendance policies might be one way that individual teachers can avoid fixating on difference on their own syllabi; however, I'm not so certain the cripping of attendance policies by throwing them out can be scaled up to the programmatic level.

As I argued above, program policies do serve the important function of ensuring that students are held to similar expectations and receive similar experiences across multiple sections of the same course. Similar, however, does not mean the same, so we do not need to continue with overly prescriptive policies (after three absences. . .). Instead, maybe we can start incorporating the concepts of Universal Design (UD) into our policy-making. UD, or UDL (Universal Design for Learning) is a pedagogical model developed by disability educators.[9] Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann remind us that "the *universal* in UDL means that one should design a class in anticipation of a variety of student learners, not for a single type of universal, idealized, abstract student" (6; emphasis original). While UD is classroom focused, its principles can be easily applied to policy making; we should create policy for a variety of students, not a normate student. This call for universality clearly resonates with Kerschbaum's call to mark dif-

ference. Both UD and marking difference are premised on the interactions among teachers, students, and the environment.

Here is my very modest proposal. Let's flip the script and ground writing program policies in a non-normative perspective. Using our attendance policy as an example, let's say that instead of assuming getting to class every day on time is a simple task, let's start from the assumption that students, like their professors, have complicated lives and bodies that will never reach the Platonic ideal. Based on this common understanding of embodiment, the three-strikes-and-you-are-out versions of attendance policies no longer seem just. Let's stop penalizing students for their bodies not being in the classroom space and instead focus more on ways to make the classroom space more fluid. Let's find ways to make attendance an honest and open negotiation among stakeholders. As Dolmage reminds us, "UD is not a tailoring of the environment to marginal groups; it is a form of hope, a manner of trying" ("Mapping" 24).

If our writing program rewrites our attendance policy to empower instructors to work with their students, to start from a collaborative space instead of a regulatory or punitive space Leandra, Tighe, and Jasmine, as well as their classmates, would have the chance to freely negotiate with their instructors. Their instructors would not have to fear a reprimand for not following writing program policy, and the students would not be made to feel as though they were asking for special treatment, nor would they need to necessarily come out in an official way by registering with the disability services' office. Finally, the idea of exceptions would all but disappear as all attendance matters, for all students, would be open for discussion. I do not yet know how to capture this desire in a program policy; I have not yet found the right words to create an effective non-mandatory writing program attendance policy, but I am hopeful, and I invite other WPAs to join me in trying.

Notes

1. The scenarios presented in this essay are based on actual situations I have encountered as a WPA and Associate Dean overseeing disability services; however, I have taken liberties with the details of each vignette for the sake of brevity and narrative coherence.

2. While not explicitly stated in our policy, lore in our program has made the "three tardies equals one absence" standard a de facto policy.

3. I use "student body" here to refer to both a singular body and the collective.

4. These assumptions are hiding in some of our pedagogical practices, too; however, that discussion is beyond the scope of this essay.

5. Within disability studies, there is debate about how to describe the construction of non-physical, chronic, and/or invisible disabilities like mental illness, fibromyalgia, chronic pain, cancer, etc. For highly nuanced discussions of these topics see Davis; Price, Siebers.

6. I want to pause here and shout out that I concur with Jung who has rightly pointed out that accommodations have allowed many, many students who were previously denied a college education access to the academy. For that reason alone, access and accommodations are worth celebrating. Also see Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggemann.

7. There is evidence that disability scholars in composition are starting to make this turn toward policy discussions. Wood and Madden, for an example, perform a rhetorical analysis of how disability accommodation statements are presented on syllabi and Vidali offers and embodied theory of plagiarism.

8. Obviously the field would benefit from a formal study of what happens to student attendance in the absence of mandatory attendance policies.

9. A special thank you to Catherine Prendergast for pointing out that the vision I was describing for policy-making was in line with the principles of UD.

Appendix A: University XXXX Core Writing Program Handbook

According to XXX policy, there are no excused absences (see "Class Absences" in XXX's course catalog). Attendance is particularly important in Core Writing courses because so much of the learning in these courses happens during in-class writing exercises, peer review, and discussion. Nevertheless, students are allowed [two absences without penalty if course meets two days per week; three days if course meets three days per week]. Every absence thereafter will result in a penalty to your course grade; after [four (for a twice-weekly course) or six (for a thrice-weekly course)] absences, you will be failed from the course for excessive absences.

There are a very few exceptions to this policy. One is if you are representing the university in an official capacity (sports, debate, band, etc.). In this case you *may* qualify for a limited number of additional absences. To qualify for this exemption, you must bring me official notification (on university letterhead, complete with contact information) from a university official by the end of the second week in class. Once I have your letter, you and I will decide if you should remain in the course or should find a section whose schedule better fits yours. The other exception may come in case of serious injury/illness. If you wish to petition for an additional limited number of absences, you or a representative must notify me within a week of the incident. Again, there are no excused absences from XXX courses, so exceptions are at my discretion and must be negotiated by the above conditions.

If you miss a class, it is your duty to determine what you have missed. As for tardiness, you need to be in your seat when class starts and ends. If you are not, I reserve the right to mark you absent.

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Melissa Nicolas is Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education and Director of the Merritt Writing Program at UC Merced.She is also co-chair of the CWPA Mentoring Project. She is editor/co-editor of two collections and the author of numerous articles and book chapters. Continuing the work of this article, she is currently working on a qualitative study of the effect of attendance policies on student attendance.