

## Episode 114: Allison Hitt

Pedagogue podcast

*Transcript*

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this episode, Allison Hitt talks about disability studies, universal design for learning, technology, accessibility, multimodality, *Rhetorics of Overcoming*, and disability justice in first-year writing.

Allison Hitt is assistant professor of English at Ball State University where she teaches classes in the Professional Writing major and Rhetoric and Composition graduate programs. Her research focuses on how disability is constructed, mediated, and contested within institutional systems. More specifically, she's interested in whose stories and bodies are valued within cultural and disciplinary histories and how instructors can collaborate with students to theorize and enact more socially-just pedagogical practices. Hitt's book, *Rhetorics of Overcoming: Rewriting Narratives of Disability and Accessibility in Writing Studies*, was published by the CCCC Studies in Writing and Rhetoric Series (SWR) in 2021. Her work has also been published in *Rhetoric Review*, *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Writing and Rhetoric*, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, *Composition Forum*, and *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research*.

Allison, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: Your teaching and research focus on how disability is constructed and mediated and contested within institutional systems. And I know your approach to teaching focuses on multimodality and universal design for learning as well as technology and how these can help inform critical and accessible pedagogical practices. Can you talk more about your research on disability studies and how it connects to multimodality and technology?*

AH: When I first became interested in researching disability, I was in my master's program and I was dealing with the trauma of my mom's very recent death. I became really interested in digital representations of disability, thinking about how disabled individuals were using digital spaces and platforms to assert their agencies, represent their identities and build community with others. I didn't realize it at the time, but this research was absolutely informed by my own experiences, trying to navigate mental illness in higher education as an undergraduate student, and then later as a graduate student, and I'm still interested in how folks build community in online spaces, which took me to Twitter and analyzing different discussions like #AcademicAbleism or #EverydayAcademicAbleism. I was really interested in finding spaces where disabled students and faculty felt safe and had agency to discuss their experiences because I saw that as a lack and I still see it as a lack in scholarship about disability.

So for me, these spaces are invaluable for highlighting students' needs as defined in their own terms, and I think conversations like that are important for giving us perspective about our own local contexts and institutions because obviously I talk to my own students about their access needs and I encourage other folks to do that too, but there's a huge difference between my classroom, where I exist as an authority figure asking students about inaccessibility and then this digital environment where folks have more space and agency to share what they want to share on their own terms. I've found that sharing conversations like this, that I've kind of looked at in my research can be really useful for talking with other folks about accessibility because honestly, what I see a lot is that folks are really well intentioned yet still reinforcing ableist norms and practices. So it can be a lot easier to point someone to examples of inaccessibility in a hashtag conversation that aren't personal to them to alleviate some of that defensive nature.

I wrote this piece for *The Routledge Handbook of Digital Writing and Rhetoric* about how adopting a multimodal approach to writing can make space for students to embody madness and engage with non-normative expressions of rhetoricity, and I think that chapter says a lot about both my kind of scholarly and pedagogical values and interests because accessibility is a collaborative effort. I believe it has to be an interdisciplinary one. I draw on theories from mad studies, digital rhetoric and multimodal composition, and weaving together narratives from scholars, my students and myself, and I'm incorporating theoretical ideas and visual images of student work to support that discussion.

Actually, it was kind of interesting when I was thinking about this question, I was like, "Do I still do work about technology?" I'm interested in the ways that instructors and students can use technologies in pedagogical spaces like classrooms and writing centers to affirm disabled embodiment in ways of knowing, but I also very much believe that multimodal doesn't need to be digital.

*SW: Allison, do you mind talking more about your approach to teaching, specifically how you embrace universal design for learning and use multimodal pedagogies and assignments?*

AH: I think about this in terms of access points. How can I create spaces where folks have as many kind of points of access as they need? So for, for me, in many ways, a multimodal pedagogy supports accessible practices through its attention to multiplicity in various modes in media and in its focus on flexibility in processes and in products. And I like to think about multimodality and universal design for learning together because they have such great intersecting values. Universal design for learning is adapted from obviously universal design, which is the idea that all spaces must be physically accessible to all people, but it's focusing on curricular accessibility. And specifically, the kind of three principles, multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement are working toward creating equitable and flexible pedagogies for all learners. Making concrete connections between UDL and multimodality can help instructors identify inaccessible multimodal practices while offering a framework for accessible multimodal pedagogies that move beyond just kind of accommodating difference.

So in my classes, I use these two frameworks for thinking about learning practices, teaching practices and composing practices. So kind of thinking through the three principles, the first principle, multiple means of engagement connects to students' different approaches to learning and processing information, instructor's concerns about social media and technology in the classroom. But I think with, especially our current pandemic factors at play like burnout at an all-time high, engagement and thinking about engagement is super important.

The one that I love to talk about, and I talk about it any chance that I can, is collaborative note taking. I do it in my first-year classes. I do it in my grad classes. I just do it through Google Docs because I'm kind of a Google person and I realize that Google's an evil corporation, but it's pretty easy to use. We have a Google Doc and I've got a note at the top that says we all take in information differently. Even just depending on how your day is going, you might sit down in class and have a completely different interpretation of what happened. It becomes this space where I encourage folks to take notes as folks are talking or to reflect on the discussion afterwards. It becomes this kind of unruly almost, but great gigantic document by the end of the semester that just kind of has a reference for all of our conversations. And it just becomes like this great way for folks to engage with the content in ways that they might not be comfortable doing so just verbally talking in class. I always say that it's so surprising that I became a teacher because I never spoke in any of my undergrad classes. So for me, even just thinking about something like note taking can be a really interesting way to get students to think about engaging in multiple ways.

I think especially the second principle of multiple means of our representation just has so many kind of aligned values with multimodal composition. So if we're thinking about teaching and how we share information with students, even if you're not actively taking a multimodal approach, you're probably already engaging in some of that multimodal work, especially with the shift in COVID and folks having to post their resources online if they hadn't been doing that before. But I think what becomes really important there is really acknowledging that the information needs to be more than just accessible, so it's important that we have a kind of redundancy of information across multiple channels or multiple modes. But the ultimate goal isn't just to make the information accessible. The ultimate goal is to teach students how to transform accessible information into knowledge. And that's where I think universal design really becomes an interesting lens for thinking about that. So making sure that you're providing time to supply background knowledge and demonstrate or model new modes is really important for ensuring that all students have equal opportunities to create knowledge with the information that we share.

And that's something that we see in universal design conversations, but it's definitely something that you see in multimodal conversations too. You can't just say like, "All right, y'all. Create an infographic," and then that's it. We really have to model these forms and these different modes in order to give students an understanding of, "How can I actually use this information?" I think the second principle is also really important for me in thinking about multimodality is not just

simply shifting from one mode to the other. And then I guess the final piece of that, thinking about multiple means of action and expression more so maybe even than the other principles I feel like is what most folks think of when they think of multimodal composition, like the actual texts that students are creating.

That specific principle and emphasizing action and expression, I think, especially in my class, what I try to emphasize there is what we were just kind of talking about with there's more room to kind of talk about how multimodal pedagogies don't just necessitate digital means. I'm trying to adopt multimodality and UDL to push beyond an accommodations approach to teaching. And by that, I mean an accommodations approach to accessibility forces individual students to take responsibility for getting help, which emphasizes individual deficit, whereas a multimodal universally designed approach to accessibility offers some student-centered responsibility as a way for all students to engage with practices that are most suitable for them and actually acknowledging the rhetorical abilities of each student. It also emphasizes the ethical imperative of accessibility.

*SW: Your book, *Rhetorics of Overcoming: Rewriting Narratives of Disability and Accessibility in Writing Studies*, addresses the inaccessibility of writing classes and writing center practices for disabled and non-disabled student writers. I was hoping to give you some space to talk more about this book, how it resists ableist assumptions and practices and composition and the teaching of writing, and how teachers and students might go about rewriting rhetorics of overcoming.*

AH: Yeah, this book has been a long time in the making. I came to this issue of overcoming in very personal ways. For many years, I just kind of absorbed strangers and even family members discourses about my brother overcoming his autism if only he just didn't watch as much TV or immersed himself into a chamber of oxygen, which truly was one of the actual suggestions someone posed. And years of how I could overcome my depression, if only I exercised more or I did more yoga. My entire college experience was through the lens of my mom's struggle with ovarian cancer. I watched for four years as people told her to just channel good energy and adopt a positive attitude. And it was just so incredibly damaging both for her and for all of us, this idea that you're just not trying enough.

When I came to disability studies and was more formally introduced the trope of the overcoming narrative, that just really resonated with me. I became interested in thinking about the ways this overcoming narrative manifests in writing study, scholarship and practices, especially when I was working in writing centers throughout graduate school. I was really overwhelmed by the scholarly and just kind of everyday narratives about disabled student writers. So the focus of rhetorics of overcoming is twofold. First, I'm trying to identify and analyze rhetorics of overcoming within the field of writing studies. And then second, I'm trying to develop some strategies for, like you said, overcoming ableist pedagogical expectations that are informed by theories of multimodality and disability studies and very importantly, for me, the embodied needs of students.

So in this book, I'm exploring how rhetorics of overcoming manifest in writing study scholarship and practices. That term, "rhetorics of overcoming," I think about that as the idea that disabled students must overcome their disabilities in order to be successful in some way. So I argue that rewriting rhetorics of overcoming as narratives of coming over is one way to kind of move past these ableist pedagogical standards. Kind of, it's a play on words, but more importantly, whereas rhetorics of overcoming rely on medical model processes of diagnosis, disclosure, cure for individual students, coming over involves valuing disability in difference and really challenging systemic issues of physical and pedagogical inaccessibility. I call for developing understandings of disability and difference that move beyond accommodation models in which students are diagnosed and remediated, instead working collaboratively with instructors, administrators, consultants, students themselves, everyone who is involved to craft multimodal writing pedagogies that truly meet students' access needs.

Higher education is rife with ableism and overcoming narratives and this phenomenon isn't unique to writing studies. And in fact, I try to argue that writing studies, despite being a relatively new discipline, has established itself as a space to question and analyze and rewrite narratives about what academic writing should be and who has access to certain spaces and pedagogical practices. From my perspective with its attention to social justice, identity, and different forms of knowing and composing, writing studies may not be uniquely ableist, but it is a unique space for counteracting these ableist narratives and resisting rhetorics of overcoming. So while more writing teachers and scholars have really recognized that disability and difference can't be ignored, the task of responding to disability and building accessible infrastructures is just so much far more complex than advocating for any single practice or pedagogy for all students.

So ultimately, I'm arguing that accessible pedagogies require collective action and a radical shift in how we understand disability and disabled student writers. For me, this process really begins with a lot of critical self-reflection, both personally and programmatically. It requires asking questions about how and why we privilege the knowledges, the modes of communication, rhetorical expressions and embodiments that we do. And to truly build accessible anti-ableist futures. We have to ensure that disability and embodiment are central to conversations about programmatic and curricular design, teacher and tutor, training assessment, and diversity. And I try to share some strategies, both on best practices, based on things I've heard from students, based on my own experiences for folks who are interested. You can access a PDF of the first chapter of, *Rhetorics of Overcoming*, through the Studies in Writing and Rhetoric (SWR) series website, which I appreciate.

*SW: My last question is on disability justice as an ethical responsibility. You mentioned ethics earlier in our conversation. So this moves beyond "accommodations." Can you talk more about what disability justice is, what it does, and what this might look like in the first-year writing classroom?*

AH: This is tricky for a few reasons, partially because folks who do disability justice work are really wary of academics adopting the approach uncritically, taking some pieces and disregarding others, and then reentering dominant bodies and perspectives and knowledges, which I think can always be something that we have to attend to when we're looking at activist frameworks and trying to put them into these kind of academic contexts. But disability justice really comes from disabled activists of color. Generally, it's a framework for understanding how ableism is linked to other systems of oppression, white supremacy, colonialism, and for engaging in intersectional movement building and self-advocacy efforts.

So when I think of disability justice, I really look to the work of the folks at Sins Invalid and their 10 principles of disability justice. Sins Invalid is a disability justice performance project that centers people of color, queers, non-binary and trans folks with disabilities. I was actually very fortunate to come across their work in maybe 2011 or 2012 when Leroy Moore came to the Syracuse University Campus as part of Krip-Hop nation, which is a cool group of disabled artists. And after that, I was, I was pretty much hooked on everything that the organization put out.

So they map, a fair number of folks have mapped kind of disability justice, but Sins Invalid identified these 10 principles, which include things like intersectionality, leadership of those most impacted, cross movement, solidarity, sustainability, collective access and liberation. And I think there are a number of these that could easily kind of apply to kind of pedagogy in general. But kind of thinking about writing studies specifically, I'm really drawn to, especially the principles of intersectionality, sustainability, and then collective access and liberation. So maybe to put this into some more recognizable terms, universities are highly invested in DEI efforts right now: diversity, equity, inclusion.

An equity or accommodations-based approach to accessibility recognizes that the issue isn't within the student, but within the physical and social environments. But this approach still operates at the individual level. As faculty, we are only required to attend to accessibility issues if an individual student presents an accommodations notice. The accessibility is taking place at that micro level wherein faculty and staff are adapting specific practices for specific students. Or at the administrative level human resources is making individual accommodations for specific faculty and staff. Accommodations are important of course, but a reliance on accommodation in higher education as the sole means of providing accessibility ignores more critical discussions and understandings of disability and this accessibility. I truly believe we can imagine something more radical than accommodation: A version of accessibility that's rooted in students, material experiences, that's collaborative and reflective, accessibility driven by social justice and student agency, rather than accessibility driven by obligation.

And in her work on transformative justice, educator and organizer, Mia Mingus, talks about how you not only have to attend to the harm and the immediate needs of folks that this harm has created, but you also have to make sure that the harm doesn't happen again, and that you're working to transform the conditions that created it in the first place. So I say that because

ensuring accessibility is important, but just as important as transforming those systems, and I think that's really what your question is about. How do we transform these systems that create an accessibility? So for several years, I taught a disability themed first year writing class, and I think it's pretty easy to think about how to incorporate principles of disability justice into a course like that. But more broadly, I think there's a lot of crossover in any sort of writing classroom where we're asking students to incorporate multiple and opposing perspectives, to synthesize ideas and especially to work with each other. Most first year writing classes are workshop based classes. They're not, they're not lecture classes.

I think it becomes really critical in thinking about that collective action, are there ways that we can kind of bring that into the collaborative aspects that we already so highly value in writing classes? I participated in the Cs workshop creating cultures of access. Brenna Swift, who's doing her PhD at University of Wisconsin-Madison, she and Ada Hubrig actually has an interesting piece about disability justice and community literacy studies. I think there are folks who are trying to think of, what does this look like in a writing context? But like I mentioned, at the beginning, it's tricky to think about because taking a disability justice approach inevitably means attending to the needs of your local context and situation. So it's hard to kind of prescribe what might kind of work in your context.

I think really shifting focus to disability justice means actively working to show disabled student writers that we support them, that we value a wide range of embodied rhetorical practices, and absolutely prioritizing accessibility through course design and everyday practices. I think it necessarily involves collaboratively working with disabled students and faculty too, rather than making decisions about accessibility that are based on isolated interactions with students or scholarship that generalizes disabled experiences. A simple, yet important step in engaging disability justice work could be just to have direct and honest conversations with each other and our students, creating spaces for disabled student writers to share their experiences and access needs. One of the questions I get most frequently is, "Access work takes a lot of time." I used to really try to be like, "Well, it's not that much time," but now, I'm just like, "Yeah, it takes time." And to do it well, it does take time.

*SW: Thanks, Allison. And thank you, Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.*