Episode 37: Jay Dolmage
Transcript

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

I wanted to take a brief minute to say thanks for listening to the podcast. The purpose of Pedagogue is to promote diverse voices at various institutions and help foster community and collaboration among teachers of writing. Each episode is a conversation with a teacher or multiple teachers about their experiences teaching writing, their work, inspirations, assignments, assessments, successes and challenges. Pedagogue aims to amplify voices.

In this episode, I talk with Jay Dolmage about disability studies, ableism, accessible pedagogies and practices, and future directions for disability studies in rhetoric and composition. Jay Dolmage is committed to disability rights in his scholarship, service, and teaching. His work brings together rhetoric, writing, disability studies and critical pedagogy. His first book entitled Disability Rhetoric, was published with Syracuse University Press in 2014. His second, Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education was published with Michigan University Press in 2017 and is available in an open access version online. And his third, Disabled upon Arrival: Eugenics, Immigration, and the Construction of Race and Disability was published in 2018 with Ohio State University Press. He's the founding editor of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies.

Jay, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I want to start with a question that helps guide the rest of this conversation on disability studies, and I think it's an important one to address from the very beginning. What are some myths about disability?

JD: Okay, well, so I think that there's a lot. I think that disability is like highly mythological. It's really been...so many people their kind of understanding of disability is shaped by these common cultural narratives we have about disability. And those narratives...the main thing, the most important thing to say is those myths and narratives are not written by disabled people, in general. Disabled people's lives are not very well represented unless they conform in a way to the myths that we already have.

And those myths are generally about managing the affect or the emotions or the relationship that able, temporarily-abled bodied people or supposedly able-bodied people have to disability and that's a pretty problematic place to start. Because the myths have to conform to the fear that people have of being disabled, they manage those fears rather than reflecting on reality. I'll try to make this as relevant as I can to what's happening right now because I think we're seeing some really powerful myths about disability circulating right now, and one of the most harmful myths about disability is that it's a life not worth living, that temporarily able-bodied people or normate people assume that if they had a disability, they wouldn't want to be alive anymore.

And that myth, that stereotype, that narrative means that we devalue disabled lives. Calling the myths or stories and tracing them through literature or film is one thing, but seeing how those things condition the actual lived experiences of hundreds of thousands of people is another. And they really do come to be all about who has, who lives and dies, who has access to privilege and who doesn't. The myths and stereotypes, they ensure the reification or the kind of solidification of social structures and choices, life choices for people, they shape people's lives. So they reach into bodies in a rhetorical sense. They reach into bodies. The problem is that they come out of bodies that aren't disabled bodies. So people who have no ability to imagine what a disabled life will be like, are the people who are making these dictates, right?

And on the flip side, the stories, the so called "positive" stories that we have around disability are all about overcoming, triumph over adversity, cure, right? Miraculous cure, the ability to work hard or have a positive attitude and overcome the negatives of a disability. And again, you can see how those are really all about managing the emotions, the fears of temporarily able-bodied people, the idea that if I did have a disability through hard work, I would be able to overcome it. So I think those are the two biggest, unfortunately, negative forces both positive and negative, shaping, so many of the depictions that we have about disability and they're really difficult to escape and like I said, they reach into real bodies and they rearrange bodies in space, right? They determine access to so much.

The other thing I'll say is that they're really overdetermined. Like the roles that we have for disabled people are very, you know, one dimensional and in narrative, in popular cultural depictions of disability, disability is often really like, like not about character, it's about plot. It's the thing that drives the plot. It's not the narrator. It's not the point of view, or perspective. And you know that there's a common overdetermined sense that if there's a disabled character, they'll be dead or cured by the end of a film or narrative. So with that all said, all of this kind of like overdetermination, there's also this story in disability studies that people often tell it's a kind of apocryphal story. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder tell it, I think in one of their books, they're literary scholars, and they study American literature, and they study disability in American literature. They were at a conference in Japan, and met a Japanese literary scholar and the Japanese literary scholar said, "What do you study?" And they said, "Disability in American fiction." And this Japanese scholar said, "Oh, wow, I can't think of any disability in American fiction," and waited like three seconds, and was like, "Oh, wait a minute."

Like Melville, Steinbeck, you know, Hemingway, like all the white men of American fiction, right? Everything, it's everywhere, right? But there was something there keeping him from paying attention. And then the scholar says, "But I study Japanese literature, and there's no disability in Japanese literature," and waited like three seconds, and then said, "Oh, my God, it's everywhere." So many of the things that the field is built on, actually require us to think through and from disability to make sense of them. And at the same time, people will ignore disability as much as they can. There are lots of social structures and systems that say, "There are no disabled students in my class," which is never true.

SW: In Disability Rhetoric, your first book, you write about how communication is embodied, and how the body guides all communication. You intersect disability studies and rhetoric. Can you talk more about how the body guides communication, and how disability studies provides a framework for better understanding rhetoric and writing?

JD: So I think I'll give you a personal story. You know, my brother Matt had disabilities, a range of disabilities, throughout his life. He had some communication disabilities. So, growing up, I did things with my family, like we went to sign language camp in the summers because he used some sign language. He used some technologically mediated communication, back in those days it was pretty rudimentary, and he only had use of one hand. So he was my older brother. I was the youngest in the family. I learned how to communicate with him. We shared a bedroom and he was excluded from school. So he was having to learn at home--my kids are having to do that right now--he had to do that for four years before we went to court and fought for his right to go to school with my sister and I. But I learned so much from him. He was such a teacher to me.

When I got into grad school, it's gonna sound like a weird jump, but when I read people like Bahktin, or you know, Donna Haraway, people who talked about the kind of inter-embodied nature of communication, or the technical epistemically mediated nature of communication, I was like, "That's how I learned," right? Because to use his light writer with one hand, he needed somebody's help to press the spacebar. When you press the spacebar, it would speak, right. So he would set up the whole phrase, and even though he could do it himself, he would ask for help. And a lot of signs he would need to touch his hand to yours because sign language is two handed and he had use of one hand so he needed some help. But to me that was such a perfect metaphor for communication for everybody.

It's not something you can do alone. You have to build relationships of trust, you have to be seeking and actively rhetorically listening in an embodied way to other people. And that we all are in these kind of prostethic loops where we rely on technology and relationships, and all of these other things. And that I think really prepared me well for thinking about teaching, teaching writing, right, not as something that we do in isolation, you know, if that's a rhetorical triangle for me...it's like one hand in one corner, another hand in another in a rudimentary 80s computer, in the other you know, and so I guess that's where I get my sense and have tried to build my definition of rhetoric is in that embodied interface where we need others and communication is a place where that need is made material.

SW: In Academic Ableism, you write, "Disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education." Can you talk about this from a historical perspective, and then how disability continues to be constructed this way? So how disability continues to be constructed as the inverse of higher education?

JD: So I'll give you another personal story. You know, my brother was excluded from education, right? He was being bused to another school in another town where he was learning basically

vocational skills, how to count money, how to clean dishes, instead of being in grade three/four in the regular school with my sister and I. So we fought, and we lost actually in Supreme Court of Appeal in Ontario for his right to go to his neighborhood school. We lost so we moved to another school board where he could go to school. So I really saw even when he was included the ways he wasn't included, and when I went to university, I went very, very far away from the small town where I grew up, and I always felt...it always felt wrong because I had spent my childhood fighting for inclusion. And higher education, every message that was sent was around valorizing ability and acting like you had no weaknesses, acting like you could work an unlimited amount and be successful and everything else needed to be hidden.

Even though nobody was experiencing it that way, right? But the kind of bigger picture was the town that I grew up in...so my mom when she was a child was expecting a baby brother, and this was my uncle Robert, and he never came home. He was born with, most likely, he had Down syndrome. At that time, doctors told parents that if you had a disabled child, they needed to be institutionalized. Lots of time it wasn't even framed as a choice. So he was institutionalized. And he lived his life in an institution and he died there at a very young age basically from the flu. He wasn't given treatment.

This institution which is called Huronia Regional Center, was in the town I grew up in--so it wasn't just that we had this layer of exclusion that we're fighting with my brother--it's that the main industry in town was this exclusive what used to be called a "School for the Feeble Minded," right? It wasn't a school at all. Nobody learned anything there. It was a highly abusive place. It was a warehouse, right. So this is the kind of backdrop of my growing up, right? And I think it is for so many people. So when I began to kind of research the history of higher education, I was also engaged with working with people who had been in this institution, my mom, her first job, this is kind of awesome story about my mom, her first job was at that institution. So after her parents told her that she could not mention her brother's name again, she spent her childhood working to be able to get in there. And she did the work of finding homes in communities for people when they shut those institutions down. So she helped to fix the thing that really caused so much damage in her life, right?

But I was connecting with people, and I'm involved in a big research project right now helping people write their own stories about deinstitutionalization, and their movement of community. So when I first started researching the history of higher education, what I came to understand was, these places were built at the same time. And they look exactly, it's the same architects, right, who built these places, one for the highest order of society and one for supposedly the lowest, right? One place where you're supposed to get the most elite people together to meet one another and marry, and one where people are being sterilized and dying. And eugenic research is being done at these places by the folks in an ivory tower, right? And so there's this shadow relationship, to me, there's something very, very problematic about spaces for the most elite just as problematic as spaces for the least. And so the mission of these universities being shaped around these kind of eugenic ideals relies on the mission of these other places being shaped along with darker kind of eugenic ideals. But for me, it was foundational. This was how I grew

up. So coming to kind of understand how that shaped me, made me think about the ways that that must be shaping educational experiences, and intentionally so, right, for kind of kind of for generations.

SW: So I have a personal question. We're talking about the problematic nature and history of higher education. Do you struggle with being a professor at the university, being in this space that is exclusive and caters historically, and presently, to able-bodied individuals?

JD: I think it's a personal question that everybody should be reflecting on, right? And absolutely I have a huge issue with that, and I think what one of my coping mechanisms, because this is where I work...I mean, part of it is that they're false meritocracies, right? The rigor of higher education is fake, right, which is terrible. Except that then I feel like we do have some responsibility to the students who are being damaged and harmed within that system. Because we're in an era of unbelievably high cultural significance around universities, and they shape culture hugely. So it's not necessarily really an option to say, "I find this ethically compromising, I'm not going to be involved in it," right? You can do that about a hobby in my mind. You can't do that about something that is actively causing so much harm, right, in the name of portioning out so much privilege.

I don't know...but that doesn't mean that I've finished thinking about this, I find myself all the time testing the world in which I work, right? How will the university respond to this test, as though if it fails I'll leave, right. Or it will prove how damaging it actually is, right? But a big test will be how will universities handle the fact that, right now, there's a completely disproportionate access to education. Will they be fine with that? Will they just take whoever they can get? Because if they do, then they're pretty much admitting that they care only about the people who, right now, have the financial means or the health to be able to do this, right. But it's tests like that, like setting up these kind of yardsticks, and I'm tricking myself every time I do it. But I think we all kind of do. I mean, to me, this is about turning this back as well for listeners or for readers: How do you all handle that, right? So I mean, it's such a such a great question.

SW: How can we make our pedagogies and practices more assessable in the writing classroom?

JD: Yeah, and I mean, this is something...this is the major thing I think about. And in terms of like any future work that I want to do, I think I'm more oriented around this idea of how we can make what we do more accessible to more people and extend that to the teaching that we do so that it reaches more people, and then more people have a genuine opportunity to learn, and can contribute to the conversation and shape the future. Because it's not just about us portioning out this privilege, it's that we need more people involved in the conversation that shapes what higher education is going to look like, right? It sounds like just like a magical solution, but universal design. It has a pretty magical name, which is problematic, it's not magical at all. It's a lot of work. We're talking about labor, philosophically, it's the idea that we should be planning for the most diverse group of students that we can. And that while the public paints higher education as this like radical place full of, you know, snowflakes and communists, it's a highly, highly

conservative space. We keep doing the same things over and over and over again. We're like an evidence based, you know, universities claim to be evidence based, but all the good evidence around teaching we ignore for years and years.

And people just keep doing the things that...almost kind of like levels of hazing that they were put through as students, they put their own students through again. So even something like timed tests and exams, there's no data that shows students learn more. We just keep doing it. We structure entire universities, logistically around timed tests and exams. They absolutely dominate the mental health of students for periods of time, and there's no good research. And then, for students to have accommodations, they have to jump through all these medical and legal hoops. I mean, it's a soapbox issue for me, but like, what if instructors had to prove the pedagogical usefulness of giving a timed test or exam before they give one? The only thing that they could say is that they perpetuate discrimination that already existed in society because that's all the data shows that they do, right?

So universal design is this idea...there's three principles. One is that we should teach a variety of ways--the ways that we kind of deliver information and structure conversations we should just do it in a broad number of ways. In terms of the cultural context we bring to the class, in terms of how we deliver it, you know, your podcast, having a transcript and an audio version is positive redundancy, right? That's a concept, the more ways we do it the more access there will be. The other thing is that we structure a variety of forms of assessment or ways for students to show what they know. And then the final piece is just kind of dynamic ways to learn, to actively learn in the classroom. I'll give you some tangible examples. So for me, I will admit this, for like 15 years, I assigned a participation grade in my classes, sometimes like 20-30%. I had no idea what I was assessing in a writing classroom in terms of participation. It was basically how much did you talk. And students would get good participation grades, even if they were kind of like a negative force in the classroom. Because I was basically telling them, put your hand up all the time, interrupt people, like the more you talk, the better you'll do, right? That was really a problem. I was like, assigning that grade, like the day that I assign grades. It's just horrible.

So I started thinking, what is the universal design approach to participation? And I know there are a lot of valuable ways to participate in class without ever saying a word. When we move classes online, we understand that like some students are not going to have something to say in a 50-minute class. They may have a ton to say three hours later, or a day later, right? Universities are run like factories, like that they're really on this kind of timeline as though we only can ever think or produce in these little chunks. And yet nobody comes to your office at like 9 in the morning and says, "I'll be back at 10:30 I need a publishable article." Or in an engineering firm they don't you know...people are working on their plans for a bridge and somebody comes in and says, "Okay, stop. Now whatever bridge you had, is a bridge we're going to build," but that's the way we structure classwork, right, and things like participation. So, I developed this kind of means of saying to students, you tell me some of the valuable ways you're able to participate. And I've been able to build this much, much bigger repertoire of valuable ways to participate. Students taking pictures and doing visual descriptions of things that got written on the board.

And one student one term took minutes of every class, like their parents were really into Robert's Rules or something. I don't know where they got that, or maybe they were in some student society where they were doing that, but it was so valuable to me, right.

And then if a student missed they could read the minutes, and so it was valuable to other people than me as well, right, creating kind of this community of learning, you know. Some students just...they don't, they cannot do peer review very well in class, they need the time and the space to frame things and find the right tone, and all those other things. So opening that participation up to say to students, you tell me some valuable ways to participate has really exploded that for me and made it so much more valuable. I think I've landed on something that's much more equitable, and valuable for everybody. That's a big one, right? And it's almost like a philosophical explosion, right? Like you're changing the authority in the classroom, you're changing how you're assessing a big chunk of what it is you're doing, and you're giving over a lot of control.

So that's a pretty big example. Actually, I'll give you a small example--the idea of describing everything that you do visually, so that when use show slides, when you're showing students how to present research, for example, data and tables and things like that, just describing everything you ever show students...it takes a little bit of extra time, is universal design as well. It's giving another pathway into that text for the student. And the thing about that is it also shows students how we read things, which is really valuable. So that's just one example. But I think you can take little individual pieces of what we do, and if you think, what's the way for me to engage every student in the broadest range of possibles...and doing this, that's the philosophy, the principle behind universal design.

SW: What are some future directions for disability studies and rhetoric and composition?

JD: That's a great question. Well, I think to begin with, there's some natural overlap with rhetoric and composition and disability in terms of their institutional history, you know, rhet/comp has been a sorting space. It's been a place to help students move ahead. But it's also been a place to intentionally hold students behind. So we need disability studies and we need an understanding of how disability is used, is attributed to groups to control access to privilege, there's that kind of disciplinary history that's backwards facing, but it's also never going to go away, right? That is going to continue to be writing studies relationship within the university, it is going to be used as a, you know, sorting gate. But to me, I think the reason I got into into teaching writing was because I sort of...like when I began, it was really deep in the process movement. And the process movement gave us access to thinking about the labor that students put into the work they do. What is their writing situation look like? How do they think? What is the path from an idea, right? And that is illuminating in ways that lots of other disciplines don't have that much access to when you begin to try to understand the process of writing. It's inevitable that you understand it as a process that includes failure, and difficulty even though we romanticize it as something completely opposite, everybody experiences that is it as an embodied act that's very difficult. It requires stops and starts and failures.

And so again, like that apocryphal story I was telling you before when you look around disability is everywhere, and that's not just in disabled students. But it's that communication itself requires us to have some understanding of the incomplete nature of our bodies, right, and our need for other people and our need for techniques and prosthetics and those things that I began the interview sort of talking about. So I don't know. I mean, that's a pretty high level philosophical argument to make. But I think in a very tangible sense...my favorite class to teach, and I keep requesting it, is just first-year writing for students who don't want to take it in their first semester of university. Because that's where we can begin to structure a relationship with university that is not about being the best all the time, but can be about asking for help, can be about accessing and calling for more resources to support student life, student mental health, and understand that we all need accommodations, right, and that some some students are going to need to fight for their legal right to education. Getting back again to the story at the beginning, right. It connects us with the reality in our classrooms rather than the myth or fantasy that all students are going to find university life easy or even familiar, or welcoming.

So I don't know that there's this kind of like position that we have. That's really just a practical tangible one in that we are the person who's going to know each student's name within the first two weeks of their time on campus. So we have a responsibility to understand that 20% of those students are going to have disabilities that they're going to need to have accommodations for, and that everybody is going to experience the university as a disabling space, right, that's putting up barriers that don't need to be there.

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