

## Episode 121: Millie Hizer

### *Transcript*

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

In this episode, Millie Hizer talks about disability studies and disability rhetorics, academic ableism, rhetorical tactics of resistance, storytelling, and accessibility.

Millie Hizer is a PhD Candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at Indiana University, Bloomington. Her dissertation examines how disabled students and faculty in higher education navigate academic ableism through embodied, rhetorical tactics of resistance. She is also a co-chair of the Graduate Student Standing Group for the 2023 Conference on College Composition and Communication. Her writing has been published in *enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture* and is forthcoming in *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* and *Spark: A 4C4Equality Journal*. You can follow her on Twitter: [@millieh27](https://twitter.com/millieh27).

Millie, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: I'm interested in what encouraged or who inspired you to get a PhD in rhetoric and composition?*

MH: So this really kind of starts when I was in high school and I was a high school debater. I did Lincoln-Douglas debate, and I was really, really interested in public discourse and the ways in which discourse can shape policy and change...meaningful social action. This sort of carried into my undergraduate degree at the University of Florida where I studied English and I minored in Russian. I really became kind of even more interested in the way language and writing shapes the world around us. So, when I was kind of trying to decide what I wanted to do after my undergraduate, rhet/comp...I had some awesome mentors that sort of directed me in that direction. It really kind of allowed me to reconcile my sort of different interests in contemporary issues and policy change and public discourse with my love of writing and my love of seeing how writing can shape the world around us. Add in my current focus and interest in disability, disability rhetoric, and disability studies at the intersection of com/rhet. I just really kind of feel like I found something that I love. I'm so excited to just be able to talk and research and think about all of these things.

*SW: Millie, how did you get interested in disability studies or what made you take that direction in grad school?*

MH: Yeah, so I am multiply disabled. And when I was in my secondary education., when I was a teenager, I experienced really, really blatant ableism and discrimination based on...a lot of people didn't think that there was, sometimes there's this misconception that people who are "smart" or "high achieving" can't have disabilities. This is something that has always been sort of working against my whole entire life. And so when I came into graduate school, I was like,

“Well, I need to write a dissertation on something that's going to interest me and that I can become passionate about.” I started reading works like, this is probably the end of my first year of my combined master's PhD program at Indiana University, Bloomington. I sort of started reading like Jay Dolmage and Stephanie Kerschbaum, Margaret Price. I was like, “Wow, this is the type of work that I want to do.” And then it evolved from there. I was able to sort of write my own story into that work. And so here I am. This is what I research and study and do. And I really enjoy it.

*SW: So your teaching and research focus on academic ableism, and I was hoping you could give some examples of academic ableism, and some ways teachers and students might navigate academic ableism?*

MH: Academic ableism is built around this idea that, if we're talking about higher education specifically, you know, higher education or education in general was not built for neurodivergent, disabled body minds. So essentially education just by its nature, excludes people with disabilities. And so again, I kind of give credit to scholars, Jay Dolmage, Margaret Price, as well as Christina Cedillo, Ada Hubrig, some of these amazing scholars have really helped shape how I see this. Academic ableism can take a variety of forms personally. One thing that I mentioned before are kind of misconceptions that teachers or even graduate students and certain faculty can have about graduate students with disabilities, you know. For instance, saying, “Well, they don't look disabled, so therefore they shouldn't have accommodations,” but kind of like at a larger scale. Academic ableism can take place at a really, really systemic institutional scale.

Getting academic accommodations is incredibly difficult. I personally had to go to three different specialists in order to get the documentation, to get the accommodations that I have. And that is not accessible for a lot of people, especially with healthcare being the way it is in the United States. And it is incredibly difficult to prove that you need accommodations. So academic ableism works first at this kind of institutional level where people who need accommodations can't get accommodations, and then you really get to like a pedagogical level where academic ableism can take place. So this can be something as simple as a teacher on a Zoom class refusing to put closed captioning on the lecture, especially after a student...because we all make, I make mistakes with accessibility as a teacher, we're all human.

But you know, if someone points that out and just blatantly refuses to do that...another sort of thing that can oftentimes take place are blatant refusals to accommodate. There have been instances where I have had to drop a class because I've talked with an instructor and told them my access needs and they've been like, “We can't do that in this class.” I've had to rearrange my schedule for that. So there's also kind of that tension. There's also this idea, kind of moving into the part – ways teachers and students can kind of navigate this – I think it's important that especially within our field, as teachers of writing and rhetoric, that we really recognize that there are going to be students in our classes who need accommodations, but are not able to get accommodations.

What this really means is in my classes even if a student doesn't have official documentation, I listen and if someone says, "I need an extension, or could you offer this in a different modality? I want to do my final project as a multimedia project because that's more accessible to me." I listen. And so that's, you know...then of course, as students and disabled faculty, being aware of your rights under the ADA because you are entitled to access this space of higher education.

*SW: Your dissertation examines embodied, rhetorical tactics of resistance. Can you explain this concept or term? And I'm wondering how your research confronts or accounts for power in academia. For example, I'm thinking about the costs of resistance for someone like a graduate student and positionalities like adjunct versus tenure track faculty.*

MH: This idea – embodied rhetorical tactics of resistance – and it's continually evolving throughout my dissertation writing, but how I really see this...I see this as situated within the idea that existing is resisting in higher education. Simply by you being in higher education as disabled, students and faculty are resisting this system that wasn't originally built for them. So especially in terms of embodiment I'm working in conversation with you know, scholars like Jay Dolmage, who really characterized rhetoric as embodied, something that is not divorced from our body minds and our situatedness within the academy.

So really what embodied rhetorical tactics are, they're the everyday ways that we move in the academy. This might come in the form of adapting what we disclose within certain rhetorical situations. This is a very embodied experience. You go to a certain class, and you don't feel comfortable within this particular instructor, disclosing you know, like Tara Wood says disclosures are fraught with risk. It's really navigating this through our own embodied senses how we're existing and surviving within higher education. It also is inspired by de Certeau's tactics versus strategies. You know, strategies are of course more institutionally driven, whereas tactics are more every day sort of acts of acts of resistance. So you know, this can really just be like even tying in Margaret Price's idea of kairotic space is...these interactions don't have to be huge or anything. Maybe we wouldn't really think of it as a tactic, something like saying, "You know what, this is the best kairotic moment to talk to my instructor about my disability," or "I want to construct myself in this space or present myself as a disabled student in this space within this manner."

So how this sort of ties into thinking about the cost of resistance for someone like graduate students or adjunct, the more contingent your position is within the academy, the riskier it is to openly be disabled. I really see this kind of tied with the identity that you are allowed to present depending on your positionality within the academy. People who I think about, you know, as you grow as a scholar, you can become more comfortable sharing certain things in your scholarship and growing. I think it's a really interesting kind of tension even just as a graduate student now. You know, technically it is risky to be so open as I am about my disabilities. But I also think it's important to cultivate a culture of openness because there's so many people who are struggling and who don't fit that mold of a tenure track or tenured faculty member. I think we need to open up this space.

*SW: Millie, you said this so nicely, that “existing is resisting,” which is really profound. You write about storytelling, you write about anti-ableist activism and how disabled graduate student narratives can help reimagine accessibility in higher education. Can you talk more about this writing?*

MH: I currently have a forthcoming project with two other absolutely amazing scholars Meredith Parson and Megan Bronson, and we connected originally through Twitter, which was a really, it's really interesting...we talk about this in our forthcoming piece a little bit, but really what we do in this piece is we share our lived experiences with ableism in higher education. And we sort of posit that lived experiences are the best way to learn what needs to change in higher education. Storytelling can be...Alice Wong talks about this in their edited collection, *Disability Visibility*, storytelling can be an entry point for really understanding accessibility. Disabled people are experts on accessibility...we're experts on our own accessibility. That's why I think we always have things to learn. I'm continually learning about how to be a more empathetic and accessible teacher-scholar.

But coming back to storytelling, stories really are an entry point for better understanding the sort of system and what kind of cracks are within the system. There's also a beautiful piece in the *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics* that we cite – Jessie Rice-Evans and Andrea Stella on the invisible labor of traumatized doctoral students. And we kind of draw on that and scholars like Christina Cedillo and Ada Hubrig, who really are open about their stories of disability. Kind of recognizing that stories, lived experience are...that's important to better understanding this system, especially in our positionality as graduate students who are in a really liminal position between student and faculty. We're not quite students, especially once you start the dissertation phase. But we don't have the same privileges as faculty do. So it's a really, really complex tension that also goes back to the system of power and hierarchy within higher education.

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