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Teaching Disability Access in a Teaching of Writing Class

Patricia A. Dunn *Stony Brook University (SUNY)*

What is most important for future English teachers and writing instructors to learn and retain from the one class they take on the teaching of writing? So many answers to that question immediately present themselves as the most critical take-away:

- Creating the conditions for student writers to feel engaged and empowered by their writing (Boardman et al, 2021; Kirkland & Jackson, 2008);
- Helping writers discover the challenges and rewards of authentic (real-world) writing (Wiggins 2009; Lindblom, 2015; Hallman, 2009; Dean, 2000);
- Knowing how to provide balanced, supportive, respectful, and constructive commentary on students' drafts, using various responding tools (Anson et al, 2016; Mack, 2013; Daiker, 1989);
- Designing and scaffolding successful peer responding experiences (Anson & Anson, 2017; Lindblom and Christenbury, 2018);
- Creating fair assessments, preferably with input from students (Inoue, 2019; Andrade, 2000; Kohn, 2006);
- Learning enough about English grammars to see “proper” and “Standard” English as the constructed, unstable, and often oppressive (regarding race, class, gender) institution that it is (Young et al, 2014; Smitherman & Alim, 2012; Bambara, 1974; Lippi-Green, 2012; Dunn & Lindblom, 2011);
- Seeing emergent bilingual or multilingual writers as assets, as able to build on the knowledge and skills they come with and to enrich discussions of language (Lippi-Green, 2012; Garcia et al, 2008; Guerra, 2012);
- Creating anti-racist pedagogies through readings, activities, and projects (Baker-Bell, 2020; Ebarvia, T., Parker, K. N., German, L. & J. E. Torres, 2021);
- Learning to recognize, employ, and teach effective rhetorical strategies used in different rhetorical situations (Crowley & Hawhee, 1999);

- Employing multimodal and visual strategies for invention and arrangement (Dunn, 2001) and to process abstract concepts (Dunn, 2021);
- Designing writing projects that keep assessment labor both helpful to writers and doable (Inoue, 2019; Mack 2013);
- Making sure teaching tools, materials, and practices are accessible to students with disabilities and therefore more usable for everyone (Dolmage, 2017; Kershbaum et al, 2017);

Each of those topics deserves rich background reading and involves complex skills and hands-on practice to implement. For this essay, however, I will focus mostly on the last item: making teaching tools and materials accessible for users with disabilities.

Why should pre-service English teachers in a class on the teaching of writing learn about accessibility? —One, because many students have reached this stage of their college education without learning even simple steps to promote access for disability, and two, because in their future careers they can spread this knowledge far and wide, going a long way toward making our society more accessible for people with current or future disabilities. As disability scholar and activist Simi Linton (1998) has noted, higher education has lagged behind the laws passed to make society less ableist and more inclusive. Therefore, in addition to the items on the bulleted list above, we also cover what inclusion-related practices we can, weaving them into the class throughout the semester, including how students access class readings, create documents, respond to and assess writing, and give presentations.

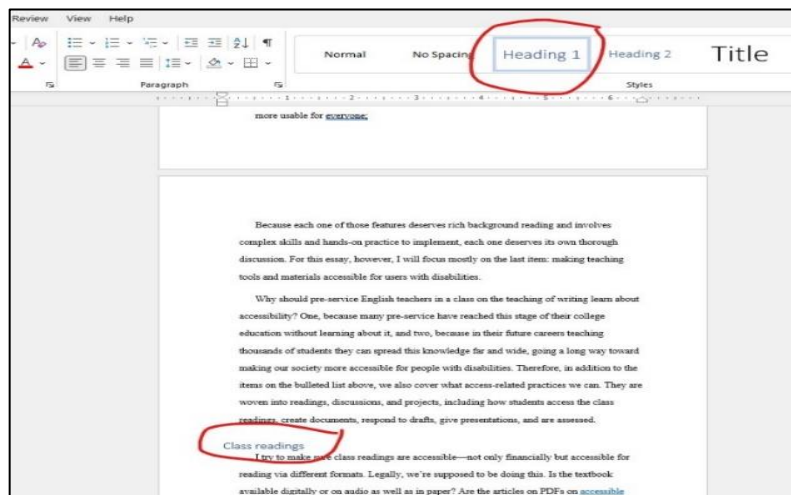
Accessing Course Readings

I try to make sure class readings are not only financially accessible, but also accessible for processing by screen readers used by people who are blind or have low vision. Before I order a text for a class, I check whether it is available digitally or on audio as well as in paper. Are the PDF articles I have downloaded accessible, that is, able to be read by a screen reader or Braille translation software? Making materials accessible has become easier in recent years. Good Learning Management Systems include tools that help instructors determine if posted documents are accessible, and they will often provide tips on making them more so. Planning for access should be done as the course is being designed, not struggling to figure out a retrofit once the semester is underway. Retrofits end up being more time consuming for the instructor and less fair to the students who need materials they can access at the same time as the rest of their classmates.

Creating Accessible Documents and Other Teaching Materials

One of the easiest steps in creating an accessible Word file, which can then be converted to an accessible PDF, is to create structured headings through the “Home” tab and then the “Styles” group in Word (not by simply typing in all caps or bold, which screen readers cannot process as headings). As a bonus, creating headings through the Styles group will also create a table of contents and will enable screen readers to navigate more easily through the document. Google docs have a similar process.

Figure 1: A structured heading in Word using the Styles group.



Space prohibits lengthy explanations of other access-related features such as font choice, spacing, and color but your institution should be able to provide easy to follow directions for creating accessible documents, and a quick Google search will bring you to a variety of tutorials.

Alt Text

Every semester, I take an anonymous poll, asking how many of my students have heard of *alt text* (alternative text), the description of an image in a document that a screen reader would read aloud to users who are blind or have low vision. Alt text, sometimes called *image description* if a longer explanation is needed, must be added to the code of a document so that people using screen readers can have it read aloud to them. Most programs add Alt text automatically, but the AI-added descriptions are notoriously incomplete, even absurd. The results of my poll on alt text? On a good day, one or two people in a class of twenty will have heard of it. When I ask how many regularly add alt

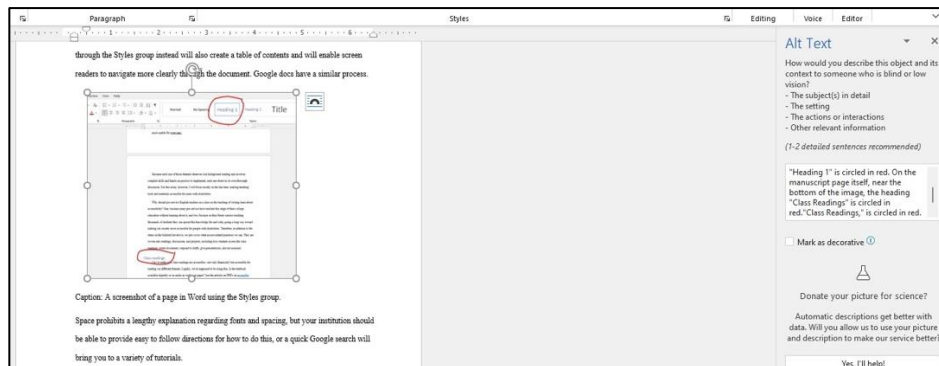
text, that number is even lower. I do not blame students for this lack of awareness. In spite of long-established ADA requirements that documents be accessible for people with disabilities, and in spite of sophisticated technologies that make it easy to put alt text in the code, most of my students—who will soon be teachers themselves—have simply never been taught about alt text.

Here is an example of the alt text I added for the image above:

Screenshot of a partial page in a Word document. At the top of the image, the Home tab is open, and in the Styles group, "Heading 1" is circled in red. On the manuscript page itself, near the bottom of the image, the heading "Class Readings" is circled in red.

Since alt text is meant to be read aloud by screen readers, people reading with their eyes would see the caption on the document, but not the alt text, which is in the code. In Word, google docs, and slide programs, alt text is added with a few easy clicks—slightly different clicks for different programs, unfortunately—but still easy to do, with no html skills needed.

Figure 2: Screenshot of what alt text looks like when added.



Here is how the AI-generated alt text described the above image: “Graphical user interface, application, Teams.” Not very helpful. Unless the image is merely decorative, it is going to require the document creator to provide a description for readers who cannot see it.

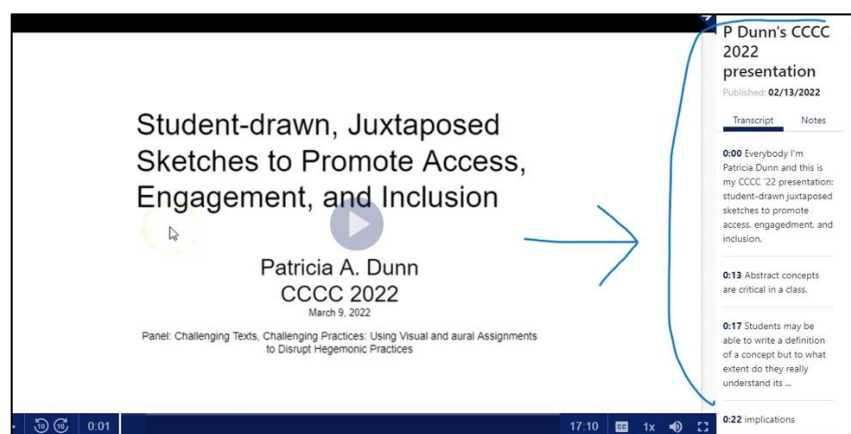
Having pre-service English teachers compose accurate alt text also contributes to their developing analysis of different readers’ needs, a higher-order skill they will be teaching to their future students. Writing alt text or a more involved image description (say, for a chart, graph, or cartoon) gives these writing instructors practice writing descriptions that are detailed, clear, and

accurate, something they will no doubt require of their own students. At first, some people simply write caption-like phrases as alt text, not fully grasping that people who use screen readers are not seeing the image and therefore need it described more fully. Other students worry that they cannot see the alt text on their finished document. But most students immediately get the need for this specific description tucked away in the code, and they think the technology for adding it is easy, much needed, and cool. Many ask why they have never heard of this feature, which has been around for a long time. Our periodic demonstrations of alt text in the documents students produce for class inevitably lead to further discussions of adding alt text to images posted in social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, blogs, etc.), another habit too many people still have not developed.

Closed Captioning and Transcripts

Most people know they should have a transcript available for an audio file (for deaf or hard of hearing users) and closed captioning for a video project. Recorded Zoom sessions and other screencast programs have a feature that allows for the recording to be automatically transcribed, though you may have to click a button before saving a file in order for it to be added. Automated transcription can be quite hilarious, however, if not checked over and at least lightly edited, but it is still a time-saving, impressive tool.

Figure 3: Screenshot of a screencast with transcript



As I discovered the hard way, in Zoom and Screencast-O-Matic, the transcript appears only on the video posted to the cloud, not to the file saved on one's computer. YouTube can also add closed captioning to an uploaded video, and its transcribing abilities have improved greatly over the years.

Why make transcripts or add closed captioning if no one in your class has identified as deaf or hard of hearing? First, legally, all materials should be accessible from day one. Second, as pointed out in Kerschbaum et al's collection on disclosure (2017), there may well be students who do not wish to go through what might be an involved process at the disability office or identify themselves to their instructors as disabled. Third, students who are learning English as another language may find that the written words, coupled with the spoken ones, boost their understanding. Finally, in a class on the teaching of writing, it is good modeling practice to show future educators how and why they should take these simple steps to communicate with a wide range of readers and to make the media files they create accessible through the advanced technologies at their fingertips.

Responding to and Assessing Writing

Readers of this journal will already be familiar with different ways teachers and peers can respond to students' writing: marginal comments in Word or Google doc files, end comments, memos, audio comments, screencasts, live Zoom sessions or one-on-one, face-to-face chats. As the class reads and discusses a wide range of responding approaches and assessment philosophies, our ongoing weaving in of disability-related issues gives these future writing instructors some important issues to consider as they develop their own courses, assignments, responding tools, and criteria for assessment. At the very least, they now know to pay attention to the ways in which different people process peer or teacher commentary or even have access to that commentary. What they are already learning about fair and transparent assessment strategies can be strengthened by anti-ableist pedagogies. Class readings and discussions of anti-racist and TESOL-related practices often support this ongoing awareness of how people learn best.

Giving Accessible Presentations

Throughout their lives, students, teachers, and other professionals give presentations in classes, at meetings, and at conferences. Many features can make a talk accessible or inaccessible—too many to list here—but when students make presentations in this class, I insist on some basic steps they can take to make their talk as accessible as possible. For in-person presentations, speakers should use a microphone and/or do access check-ins (“Please raise your hand if you can hear me in the back row.”) The font on slides should be large (24pt.) and there should be high contrast between the background and the print. If possible, have e-copies of the talk available ahead of time, or at least an outline of the main points. Images should be described. During the Q & A, audience questions should be repeated by the speaker with the mic. For Zoom presentations, live captioning should be

available. Someone should monitor the chat comments and read them aloud periodically, as needed. Participants should be asked to identify themselves before commenting or asking questions. The Access Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication has developed an excellent list of practices in their guide for making conference presentations accessible.

Overwhelmed?

It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the many recommendations on making course materials and teaching practices accessible. Simply asking students what they need and letting them know you are open to suggestions can go a long way. Students who require accessible materials have learned some strategies in the years before they appear in your class. A small change they suggest may end up helping others. Jay Dolmage, aware of the sometimes staggering lists of steps needed to achieve accessible pedagogies, talks instead about "ways to move," or places where instructors can begin to make their teaching more accessible. In an Appendix to his 2015 article in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, he includes a helpful list of suggestions. In his 2017, open access monograph, *Academic Ableism*, Dolmage also writes about ways to make higher education more accessible. His publisher, the University of Michigan Press, includes on its website Dolmage's rich list of suggestions regarding access. It's better to plan ahead than to solve access issues on the fly once the talk or the class is underway.

Students in a teaching of writing class are learning ways to help their future students communicate successfully with many audiences. Anticipating individual readers' needs, including those involving literal access to words and images in texts or media, should be included in what they learn.

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