Gaps in Access: Representations of Disability in Professional Writing/Communication Textbooks

Lately, I have been thinking about how disability, access, and accommodation are featured in recent textbooks within the field of business and professional communication[1]. Having taught courses in the subjects for the last eight years and reviewing the texts for how disability, whether invisible or visible, is treated within them, I have come to the conclusion that the field itself and the workplace realities presented continue to treat disabled writers, clients, and audiences as unnecessary if not a valuable focus. This should not be seen as a slight upon the many dedicated textbook authors whose work provides the very foundations of my courses; instead, I see this as a gap that needs more attention than the expectation of an occasional supplementary lesson filled in by an instructor.

Within the genre of professional writing (correspondence, document design, reports, letters, presentations, resumes, etc.) the preference for proper attention to format, style, and clarity still weigh heavily in the course designs suggested by textbook companies. Scanning through traditional bound instructor's guides and spiral bound companions only reinforces the notion that every reader is abled bodied as the focus on the structure and design of memos is highlighted for readers' through examples, suggestions on the practical use of Microsoft products, or tips on how to use rhetoric when communicating to international audiences. Lacking, of course, are questions of design needs for blind or low-vision audiences of graphical reports, appropriate suggestions on the creation of accessible webpages or streamed company videos with captioning for the deaf, or ways in which the use of font choice may help dyslexic readers clearly read a resume. As someone who fits into the category of hard-of-hearing, the lack of material on accommodating HOH or d/Deaf audience members or presenters is left for my own creation.

Textbook Analysis

The plethora of textbooks available tend to offer little substance or discussion of disabled individuals inside and outside the workplace other than a cursory node to disability or 'diverse' audiences. Reading through a survey of eight of the most commonly used or marketed textbooks for business writing, I've come to find that they all lack any real discussion of creating accessible documents. Bovée and Thill's *Professional communications* (2017a) does not touch much in terms of accessibility outside of reminding students that handouts are welcome for presentations. Likewise, B&T's *Business communication essentials: a skills-based approach*, 7th ed. (2016) and *Business communication today, 14th ed.*, mentions disability bias with nothing else about how genres perpetuate them. Despite their reach, they do little if anything to adequately cover the needs of students who might to know about or will encounter disabled coworkers, presentation audience members, or job candidates. Cardon's *Business communication: Developing leaders for a networked world, 2nd ed.* (2016) does not address disability whatsoever nor does Kolin's *Successful writing at work, 11th ed.* (2017). One textbook that does address the needs of blind and low-vision users is Oliu, Brusaw, and Alred's *Writing that works: Communicating effectively*

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on the job's eleventh edition (2013) as it spends time on creating webpages specifically for these users. However, their eight edition of *The Business Writer's Companion* (2017) does not make mention disability or strategies for providing accessible material. The text used at Midwestern State University, Paul MacRae's *Business and Professional Writing: A Basic Guide for Americans* (2016), lacks any discussion whatsoever.

While this is not an exhaustive search of textbooks on the market and does not provide an overview of in-house, departmental textbooks, the trend of not acknowledging the needs of disabled audiences and creating accessible material remains firm throughout each text. The majority of the audiences defined by the textbooks are by default seen as able-bodied recipients who can process information with ease. The only divergence from this model of audience member comes in discussion of the design and rhetorical needs of international audiences. In fact, sections on writing and speaking to international audiences tend to be the sole area where writers are suggested to tailor their material to the needs of a specific group.

What about data visualization and textbooks?

Even texts that are not viewed as traditional primary texts for business writing course often overlook disabilities as a topic. Two texts that have been used at Midwestern State University for a Visual Rhetoric and Inforgraphics course, Knaflic's *Storytelling with data: a data visualization guide for business professionals* (2015) and Wong's *The Wall Street Journal Guide to information graphics: the do's & don'ts of presenting data, facts, and figures* (2010), provide an excellent source for students beginning to understand the how's and why's of creating effective presentations and reports. However, both texts assume abled-bodied audiences as a substantive part of whom the material would be created for. Knaflic focuses heavily on narrative as a key to effective data visualization, which ultimately can exclude HOH and d/Deaf audiences from participating in the analysis of material. Similarly, the focus on attention and short- and long-term memory makes use of the idea solely as a tactic while ignoring how cognitive and neural problems complicate the processing of information on a page or PowerPoint. This is not to say that Knaflic is providing bad information, just incomplete information. The second text, *The WSJ* Guide, provides similar advice with a nice section on providing appropriate color to graphs for the color blind.

Within both texts are a kernel of the continued invisible nature of disabled audiences. While disabled audiences are not in the forefront of the minds of these authors, certainly we can and should have students take them into consideration as they begin to embark on careers where trends like data visualization are ubiquitous. The use of visualization tools and their relationship to blind users is a question I wish to explore further, especially with my students from our business college. Focusing on narration to help the blind certainly has value even if it is only a stopgap. Having students write out detailed captions for figures, tables, and images within reports and presentations that are accessible to screen readers provides the simplest solution so far. Likewise, having students understand the value of explaining the patterns they are describing could prove to be just as useful for the d/Deaf.

Filling the gaps

Expecting that textbooks should do the yeoman's work in dealing with disability is, of course, not addressing the available options for instructors. Those, like myself, who try to integrate more venues for accessibility in business writing can and should continue to create

alternative lessons that value the basics of the genres we teach while also informing students on how to create a document for different audiences. Over the past two years I have spent time and effort guiding students through design workshops for reports while also having them reflect and think about whether their choices will be easily read through a screen reader or might present problems for low-vision users. When it comes to presentations, I spend time with them on alternatives they might devise, specifically captioned video, which would help d/Deaf users of websites or as promotional material. I try to impress upon them as they work through assignments within our computer lab that audiences are not just a reflection of their own selves. Be creative and think of alternatives that may arise as you create, explain, or present information for a variety of peers and clients in the future.

The tragic aspect of supplementing these lessons, however, is that it takes adequate and available technological resources. Campuses, such as my current campus in Texas, lack software to test the usability of documents or other necessary resources like cameras to record presentations for later captioning. This should not deter us since most of the work we can do should focus on having students think about adapting their work to meet the needs of diverse audiences.

After meditating on this matter

I realize that many publishers are constrained for space due to the finite nature of paper and that these texts are trying to include the most information possible to create a comprehensive textbook. All of the textbooks I have poked, prodded, evaluated are excellent specimens and reflect the labor of both the authors and editors. My worry is that we will still create an invisible barrier that excludes discussion or accessibility needs that students will need to think about while they are moving through the process of creating, designing, and writing documents in the workplace.

How do we solve this problem? Outside of generating our own materials, it is imperative that we discuss our feelings, needs, and wants with publishers like Bedford/St. Martins, Broadview Press, Pearson, and others so that they can see the value of including material both within textbooks and in web resources for our students benefit. Publishing moves glacially slow even in the era of print-on-demand textbooks but not if we make industry professionals more aware of practices that inform students on the needs of disabled audiences. We may not be able to provide tips and explanations for every type of disability, but instead, we might be able to better begin to process of providing a gateway to access.