Considering Collaboration through a Disability Perspective

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Scholarship on collaboration has long extolled its benefits, which include developing student awareness of audience (Howard, 2001; Newkirk, 1984), promoting better writing (Bruffee, 1984; Foote, 1998), promoting increased understanding of the topic (Bruffee, 1984; Wolfe, 2005), and developing crucial social skills (Bruffee, 1984; Foote, 1998; Smith & MacGregor, 1992; Trimbur, 1989). With composition studies' social turn in the 1980s, composition studies embraced the social nature of learning and composing. Bruffee (1984) famously articulated "To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively—that is, we must learn to converse well" (p. 640), emphasizing the importance of collaborative learning in the writing classroom. And yet, our scholarship on collaboration largely assumes that our classrooms are composed of entirely nondisabled students. However, nearly 11% of our national student population reports a disability, indicating that this is not representative of our student population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). By disregarding this population of students, the unspoken assumption is that all students are nondisabled and that collaboration is universally accessible. Consequently, we have under theorized and studied the ways disabled students grapple with collaboration.

This presentation begins to address this gap by reporting my preliminary results on an empirical, qualitative study on neurodivergent students' experiences with collaborative writing. Before going much further, I first want to pause and define a two key terms. First, drawing from the work of Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede (2012), I define collaborative writing as two or more composers working together to create a text where each team member is involved in every (or nearly every) step of the process from brainstorming and drafting to revising and final

editing. Second, I pull from Nick Walker (2014) to define neurodivergence as "having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of 'normal.'" Some common examples of neurodivergence include: depression, anxiety, autism, attention deficit disorder, schizophrenia, and dyslexia.

I chose to narrow my focus on neurodivergence and collaborative writing since disability is a large category that includes a variety of mental and physical conditions and collaboration can encompass a range of activities. This subset of disabled students is important to study for two reasons. First, scholarship on disability tends to focus on apparent disabilities (e.g. blindness, deafness, mobility impairments, etc.) over nonapparent disabilities. Second, the majority of student disabilities are related to neurodivergence (United States Government Accountability Office, 2009), which makes this population of students more pressing to study. By considering disabled students' experiences in our pedagogical approaches, individual instructors can become advocates and activists in their classrooms by creating more inclusive and accessible educational spaces.

To understand disabled students' experiences with collaborative writing, I utilized two methods to collect data: surveys and interviews. The survey collected qualitative and quantitative data on students' perspectives on collaboration and also provided me with a pool of students to interview. I selected three participants who indicated that they self-identify or have been diagnosed with a neurocognitively based disability. During these interviews, I asked the students a series of questions in order to better understand their experiences with collaboration and their disability. I'm currently still in the process of collecting surveys and coding the interviews, which is why the results I will present to you all today are tentative.

The survey participants were recruited from classes that incorporated collaborative writing into their curriculum in the Editing, Writing, and Media

major at Florida State University (FSU). The Editing, Writing, and Media major (also referred to as EWM), "emphasizes the production, analysis, and interpretation of a wide range of historic, contemporary, academic, and everyday texts" ("Editing, Writing, and Media," 2018). In other words, in this major, students develop rhetorical skills to create and respond to a variety of different texts. At the end of this interview, students were able to identify if they'd be interested in doing a follow-up interview. From this pool, I chose three students, who I'll briefly describe.[1] William is a white, male, EWM student who uses he/him pronouns and identifies as having anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Maria is a Hispanic, female, EWM student who uses she/her pronouns and identifies as having anxiety and tinnitus. And, Taylor is a white, transfeminine, EWM student who uses they/them pronouns and identifies as having anxiety and depression.

From the collection of data gathered from these methods, I'd like to highlight three tentative findings.

Reported Disabilities

I asked students to identify as disabled in two different ways: diagnosis and self-identification. I presented a list of common neurocognitive differences and asked students to check yes or no. Of the participants who chose to answer questions related to diagnoses: 3.5% have a learning disability, 33% have anxiety, 27% have depression, 2% have bipolar disorder, 3.5% have PTSD, and 16% have ADHD. Of the participants who chose to answer questions about conditions they identified with: 3.5% have a learning disability, 62.5% have anxiety, 46% have depression, 2% have bipolar disorder, 7% have PTSD, and 21.5% have ADHD. No students reported being diagnosed or identifying as having autism, Tourette syndrome, or schizophrenia. It was not unusual to find that students often

[1] Names of the participants have been changed.

identified as having or had been diagnosed with more than one of listed disabilities. When taken in consideration that approximately 15% of the FSU student population is registered with disability services, these numbers tentatively suggest that there is a number of disabled students who are not registered for services. This could mean that the number of disabled students in FSU classrooms is higher than reported estimates.

Disability Identification

The interviews provide a possible explanation as to why there could be a disparity between the percentage of registered students and the percentage of students reporting a disability in this study. One of my interview questions asked the students whether or not they identified as having a disability. Only one of the three participants, William, strongly identified as having a disability, even though all three have conditions that fit the definition of disability.

William's identification of having a disability is primarily because the term had been placed upon him ever since he was young, which is demonstrated in the following quote:

> I had to deal with a lot of the people […] and you're being prescribed medication, and me being within the foster care system, and the way that works […] So everything that involves me, I have to hear. And so everybody professionally around me is saying that I have disabilities. So, it's always been, in my mind, that it's always been perceived as a disability.

When I asked Maria if she identified with the term disabled, she was very hesitant to apply that term to herself and referenced herself as being in a "gray zone." When she did answer the question, she refrained from talking about her anxiety and instead talked about her experience with tinnitus. For example, Maria began her response with:

> I don't know. […] It's neither yes or no. I'm like in a gray zone right now. I have […] tinnitus in my right ear. And, I mean, I don't have like any hearing

> issues, however, because there is a constant ringing. It is loud. It's very frustrating.

Maria went on to explain that when she's in a large lecture hall filled with students, she has difficulty hearing the professor if they're not using a microphone and there's other ambient noise. She went on to say:

> You know, I'm obviously like a regular person, well not a regular person, but like a person who doesn't have that issue, you know, doesn't have to deal with that […] So yeah, I don't know. I don't know if I could label myself as disabled, but also not disabled. I'm in a grey zone.

The last interview participant, Taylor, was also on the fence as to whether or not they identified as being disabled. When asked whether or not they identified as being disabled, Taylor offered a response that showed they were beginning to grapple with a disabled identity, but still weren't fully ready to self-identify as such.

> I do kind of identify as disabled, but I don't really say that a lot because I just feel weird about how my disability compares to others. […] So the way that I even came to identify with disability at all is actually, are you familiar with the spoon thing? So, that was what I identified with before I started to think of that, and I might be disabled, just because I had a partner at the time who talked about, you know, having spoons and things like that. And I was like, "Man, that does describe me. I don't think I'm disabled. But that's my life." And so that was kind of my way of realizing that I might be disabled. I'm still not sure about that.

Both Taylor and Maria grappled with how their disabilities compared to others and whether or not they are 'disabled enough' to use that term for themselves. Neither Taylor or Maria had registered with student disability services on campus. William, on the other hand, with a strong sense of disability identification, had registered for services. These responses tentatively suggest that

a stronger sense of disability identification may lead to registering for disability services and receiving classroom accommodations. As the on-campus disability services office is called Student Disability Resource Center, students must make the connection that their condition qualifies as a disability in order to register and receive services. The problem with having a lack of identification with the term disability may mean that (1) the number of disabled students is underestimated and (2), more importantly, disabled students are disadvantaged by not having access to services they need for continued academic success.

Disability's Impact on Collaboration

Each of the students interviewed discussed different ways of how their disabilities impacted their experiences with collaboration. William talked about how his disabilities have both helped and hindered him in collaborative assignments. For example, William said that:

> My anxiety encourages me to be more outspoken, to need to be more just out there and assertive and extroverted rather than inside my head all the time. And then my ADHD, I'm so hyper and wound up all the time that you know, that just adds to me being extroverted, and I enjoy it. I enjoy being that person that can always talk and always has something to say, and like be there.

The combination of William's two disabilities led to him having open communication with his most recent team about both his disabilities and the project, which lead to them having a better understanding of him and an overall successful collaboration experience. However, William also talked about a time that he really struggled with working with a team because he ran out of his medication, could not pay attention, and had some interpersonal difficulties in his team. As a result, William had difficulty completing his work and his team mates had to "pick up the slack."

In Maria's interview, she talked about how her "intense anxiety" causes her to "struggle a lot with starting assignments." Maria stated other people might take "like 30 minutes to think of an intro," but for her it could take four hours. At one point, Maria recalls a time when her team was all working together on a Google Doc, "You could see everyone typing and, oh my God. So, again, it was like the fear of like, 'oh, how do I start this in a way that doesn't make me sound dumb?'" However, Maria also suggested that her experience working with a team was a mixed bag because while she was very anxious, it was also helpful because it forced her start her work and be accountable.

Taylor, on the other hand, articulated that they never found collaborative assignments in school to be an enjoyable or beneficial experience, even though they tried to keep an open mind. Taylor related to me that "When people are getting their hands up on everyone else's stuff, that just stresses me out immensely, because it's more variables." They later went on to state that they had difficulty with how communication in groups typically happened and felt that their voice was often forgotten or overshadowed by more powerful voices in the group. They went on to tell me about a time where a collaborative assignment caused them to have a panic attack during a class because they felt their partner was incompetent and they couldn't change their partner's idea for the project. They made it clear to me that they wish teachers would provide them with the opportunity to do their own work without having to work in a team.

Conclusion

As I stated previously, I'm still working on collecting surveys and coding the interviews, so the results and discussion that I presented here today are tentative in nature. To summarize though, my preliminary results show that (1) there may be a higher percentage of disabled students in the EWM major than what national statistics suggest. (2) Disability identification is a complicated process, which may impact the number of disabled students who registered for and receive

services for their disabilities. And (3), while students may have similar disabilities, their experiences with their disabilities and its impact on their collaborative projects seems to vary widely.

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