
Coming over and an ethics of accessibility: A review of *Rhetorics of Overcoming: Rewriting Narratives of Disability and Accessibility in Writing Studies* by Allison Hitt

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The *New York Times* published four articles on what they termed “the inner pandemic” during May of 2022 (Flanagan, 2022). Each of the four articles examined and discussed the growing mental health crisis among teenagers in America. The articles each touched on increasing mental health hospitalizations among teenagers across the country, growing teenage suicide rates, and a healthcare system ill-equipped to handle such a surge in pediatric mental health crises. While I remember being alarmed and startled by the statistics in the *NYT*’s publication, I can’t say I was surprised. I’ve been a college instructor for about five years, and I’ve frequently listened to other instructors share their struggles over addressing mental health concerns in their classes. Students frequently come to instructors with concerns about their performance in class due to ongoing mental health struggles, and instructors feel ill-equipped to handle these situations. Instructors are correct to acknowledge they are not medical doctors and, therefore, not equipped to process and diagnose mental health conditions and illnesses with students. And yet, writing studies has consistently relied on a medical diagnosis model when it comes to disability. Education models that are dependent on a medical diagnosis emphasize diagnosis, disclosure, and cure to accommodate individual disabled students rather than creating an environment that centers on access in the classroom. Instead of working with students to accommodate their needs, instructors and tutors may take it upon themselves to diagnose students and create accommodations, or they ask students to acquire formal accommodations from the access and disability service on campus before granting a student an accommodation.

All of this aside, my lack of surprise over the *NYT*’s article was more so due to my personal experience with mental health illnesses. Last year, I watched as a family member of mine struggled with mental health illnesses while away at school. When my family member reached out to find psychiatric and psychological services through their university, the university was unable to provide services on-campus beyond three to five appointments. This means that after students have three to five appointments

Abstract

This review grapples with the ongoing mental health crisis in higher education to contextualize Allison Hitt’s *Rhetorics of Overcoming: Narratives of Disability and Accessibility in Writing Studies*. In her text, Hitt acknowledges institutional barriers to access and accommodations while arguing that to meet the crisis, instructors must employ an ethics of accessibility that enables multiple points of engagement with class content. According to Hitt, to create institutional change, instructors must work with students in a process of coming over. Hitt’s process of coming over actively engages the participation of disabled students in facilitating their learning. This review engages with Hitt’s text alongside a consideration of a discussion around mental illness and accessibility in higher education.

Keywords

access, accessibility, disability studies, writing studies, writing pedagogy, composition

with psychiatric and psychological services on campus, they are forced to find another therapist or mental health service that they can utilize. This disrupts mental health care in addition to placing a burden on students to find and transport themselves to counseling appointments. Recognizing these institutional barriers forced me to contend with how higher education is wholly unprepared to deal with the mental health crisis currently facing teenagers across the nation. While I've dealt with mental health illnesses for as long as I can remember, narratives about overcoming my anxiety disorder and other illnesses pushed me to mask and render invisible the ways that I've worked to "overcome" the impact of my mental health disorders on my work in the academy. But watching someone close to me attempt to navigate higher education while experiencing mental health illnesses made me consider how I do and don't center access in my classes.

My reading of Allison Hitt's book, *Rhetorics of Overcoming: Rewriting Narratives of Disability and Accessibility in Writing Studies* (2021), was shadowed by the growing teenage mental health crisis. The epidemic cloaked my reading of Hitt's text, especially because Hitt dates the teenage mental health crisis to 2013. In 2013, I was a teenager experiencing mental health issues. It worries me that as a society, we've continually and consistently used terms like "growing" and "increasing" to define a crisis that has exploded in the last nine years. It's concerning that an assessment from 2013, which demonstrated that "one-third of US college students had difficulty functioning due to depression, and 30 percent reported serious considerations of suicide— up from 24 percent in 2010," has not resulted in massive overhauls to psychological and mental health services on university campuses (Hitt 6). In fact, university mental health services are inundated with students seeking mental health services every year, to the point that students are forced to wait weeks and months for an appointment. In 2019, *Vice* published an article that detailed the impact that university shortages of mental health resources had on students across the country (Jancer). Amid an ongoing global pandemic in 2022, mental health concerns are even more prevalent. While universities seem to be making some advances toward providing additional mental health resources for students, it's important to acknowledge that the catalyst behind many proclamations that announce additional mental health resources are because of student suicides on college campuses (Anderson, 2022). Moreover, universities seem to be turning to unorthodox and potentially dangerous methods to try and meet the demand for mental health resources through programs like peer counseling (Carrasco, 2022). While it's fine to encourage students to talk with their peers about their mental health, students should not be asked to act as therapists for other students, especially without proper training and education.

Hitt's text acknowledges these institutional barriers to access and accommodations while arguing that to meet the crisis, instructors must employ an ethics of accessibility that enables multiple points of engagement with class content. In addition to engaging

in an ethics of accessibility, which centers on access in the classroom, Hitt argues that instructors must also work with students in a process of coming over. Hitt's process of coming over actively engages the participation of disabled students in facilitating their learning. Drawing on disability studies and writing studies, Hitt argues that writing studies is already primed to construct accessible classroom spaces and center an ethics of accessibility. Coming over decenters normative literacy practices in favor of non-normative literacy practices and offers students multiple points of access and ways of engaging with assignments and course material. Through an articulation of coming over, Hitt's text artfully and carefully avoids and dismantles the idea that an instructor needs to diagnose a student before providing an accommodation.

Coming over works in conjunction with an ethics of accessibility, which Hitt argues "accounts for the material needs of both students and instructors, while recognizing the need for writing curricula to be responsible to and respectful of difference. This ethic connects to classroom practices— in the activities we develop and projects we assign— and to disciplinary scholarship and discourses about the literacies that we privilege" (48). Coming over and an ethics of accessibility already assume that disability and non-normative literacy practices exist in the room and accounts for non-normative engagement by offering multiple access points and by decentering normative literacy practices. Importantly, coming over and an ethics of accessibility do not ask instructors to retrofit their classroom spaces— to retroactively attempt to meet a student's accommodation needs once it has been brought to the attention of the instructor or disability services— but instead asks instructors to utilize already existing pedagogical theories and practices to create classroom spaces and practices that inherently center access.

Hitt sets up a process of coming over and an ethics of accessibility in contrast to what she identifies as rhetorics of overcoming expressed in the ways that disability is discussed in writing classrooms. Rhetorics of overcoming propagate the idea that disabled people/students must overcome their disability to participate in a normative culture. She positions rhetorics of overcoming as a neoliberal individualistic approach to disability that expects and pushes inspirational messages about overcoming disability to engage with inaccessible systems over privileging access and inclusive spaces. Think: "if you just try meditation, your anxiety will go away." Importantly for the context of this review, she argues that writing studies has also engaged in rhetorics of overcoming that rely on cure, diagnosis, disclosure, and retrofitting rather than collaborating alongside disabled students to create "pedagogical spaces that privilege— not just accommodate— non-normative literacy practices" (21). Disclosure, diagnosis, and cure all contribute to rhetorics of overcoming through their insistence on medical diagnosis models and neoliberal values around individual approaches to meeting (and many times not meeting) disabled students' needs.

Hitt begins her text by writing and thinking about disclosure, opening with a series of disclosures; disclosures about her family members who live with a disability, disclosures about her own experiences navigating her family members' disabilities, and disclosures about her disability, she is clear that navigating and negotiating disclosure requires nuance. While Hitt chooses to disclose her disabilities in the book and views disclosure in this form as an ethical responsibility to acknowledge her positionality, she is clear that uneven power dynamics frequently mark disclosure. For instance, uneven power dynamics mark disclosure in the classroom where instructors can mandate students to disclose their disability to receive accommodations. In order to receive accommodations, students typically need to demonstrate that they have a disability that impedes their ability to engage in a course through a formal diagnosis obtained by a medical institution. In this case, access through accommodation depends on disclosure and diagnosis, requiring students to navigate and negotiate with medical institutions and the advantages and disadvantages of disclosure. Problems with disability and mental health resources on university campuses extend beyond just the obstacles associated with obtaining accommodations; Hitt also discusses how accommodation offices often do not necessarily offer accommodations that meet a student's needs. This is especially true in writing classrooms where, as Hitt mentions, accommodations like granting students more time on a test do not necessarily apply.

As I read Hitt's discussion of disclosure, the nuances around disclosure, the concept of betweenity and negotiating the space between disclosure, and the issues associated with university disability and mental health services, I thought back to my encounter with disability and mental health services at my university. Disability has touched my life in different ways. Still, it wasn't until I experienced bouts of disabling chronic health conditions that I critically considered what it means to provide access to folks and the difficulties associated with receiving accommodations. Experiencing physically impairing health conditions that drastically undermined my ability to write, teach, read, and live normally forced me to reconsider how I could show up physically in spaces. The accommodations I was offered for my health conditions didn't help my situation or address my access needs. I also was unsure of how to advocate for my access needs or what would be considered "reasonable." In this instance, while I was lucky that it was relatively easy to navigate accessing the disability and mental health services available at my institution, and a formal diagnosis was not required, I still struggled to work with the office to receive what would be considered reasonable accommodations. My experience, and Hitt's critique, emphasize the centrality of her process of coming over because it speaks to the necessity of collaborating with disabled students to craft accommodations and ensure an ethics of accessibility.

Hitt moves beyond critiquing accommodation services for their inability to meet students' needs to examining the medical diagnosis model that many disability and accommodation services on

university campuses utilize. The medical diagnosis model depends on a formal diagnosis to signal an accommodation. Instructors propagate the medical diagnosis model when they require that students file their disability with the access and disability office to receive accommodations in the course. Hitt also mentions specific writing center practices that perpetuate the medical diagnosis model by asking tutors to identify and diagnose disabilities that a student may have prior to tutoring them, arguing that tutors can better aid students when they have an understanding of the disabilities they may have. Identifying two points of concern with the medical diagnosis model, Hitt argues that "accommodations position students as subjects who must be diagnosed and then cured of their deficits in order to succeed within our classrooms." Moreover, Hitt writes that in foisting the responsibility of "seeking and securing the accommodation" on individual students who identify as disabled, universities take an individualized approach to disability that "frame[s] disability as an unexpected failure [on behalf of the student] that does not require systemic change" (Hitt 41). I'll extend Hitt's critique to also consider the systemic ways in which diagnosis is not always possible for some students, such as students who are financially unable to see a doctor to obtain formal medical diagnoses. In effect, the medical diagnosis model relies on neoliberal logic that insists on upholding and lauding the narratives about individuals who pull themselves up by their bootstraps over considering the ways that systems and institutions are built to privilege normative and economically privileged bodies. Hitt asks us to critically reflect on whose needs are left out when instructors and institutions require formal accommodations and attempt to diagnose students before retrofitting accommodations. Disclosure and diagnosis cannot be depended on to ensure that students' access needs are being met in the same way that deficiency narratives and ideas about curing those with disability are ineffective ways of approaching disability and access in the writing studies classroom.

In contrast to rhetorics of overcoming that depends on diagnosis, cure, and disclosure, Hitt offers an ethics of accessibility and process of coming over that actively engages with students and privileges non-normative literacy practices. Engaging with students in a process of coming over requires thoughtful and intentional interaction and collaboration between instructors and students to discuss what access looks like in the writing studies classroom. Moreover, it requires a view of disclosure that acknowledges the ways that it enables the creation of more accessible spaces and "builds accessible support systems" (Hitt 31). For Hitt, a process of coming over "embraces disability, difference, and nonnormative practices— a narrative that informs the crafting of pedagogical practices that welcome a wide range of embodied experiences to *come over* and join the conversation on accessibility" (20). Importantly, as Hitt writes, coming over informs pedagogical practices employed in the classroom and the various modes and ways of accessing assignments and class material. Hitt argues that writing studies already possess ways of creating more accessible classrooms through pedagogical practices and theories such

as multimodal composition and composing practices, universal design practices, and theories and studies on multiliteracy.

While Hitt offers multimodality, universal design, and multiliteracy as indicators that writing studies is already primed to center access in the classroom, she is clear that these practices and theories do not inherently foreground an ethics of accessibility. Rather, she argues that these practices and theories create space for engaging in an ethics of accessibility. Hitt argues that multimodal pedagogies are already designed to incorporate flexible access points for students. By granting students the rhetorical agency to compose their assignments in ways that make sense and work for them, multimodal pedagogies create space to engage non-normative literacy practices. Moreover, multimodal practices specifically engage embodied composing processes that offer ways to make disability visible while offering multiple access points to engage with the course material.

As Hitt argues, multimodal pedagogy and universal design both seek to provide as many avenues to access information as possible. But importantly for engaging in a process of coming over, universal design encourages and “advocates for creation of spaces and channels that invite students to share what they do and don’t need, a feedback loop that can usefully inform curriculum design, pedagogical theories and practices, and academic understandings of disability” (Hitt 50). Created alongside disabled students, these feedback loops encourage instructors to revise their courses to meet students’ access needs. Hitt stresses the importance of universal design and feedback loops that respond to disabled student needs, in particular, to acknowledge critiques of universal design that argue it has become a depoliticized application that encourages access for all without especially considering disabled folks. While universal design’s mission is to encourage flexible access options, it’s important that it maintains its political undertones in crafting and constructing accessible spaces, especially for disabled people. Hitt ends her discussion of multimodal pedagogy and universal design by supplying a few different approaches she takes in her own classes, such as mind mapping and decomposition activities that privilege non-normative literacies and bodies.

After addressing the ways that she envisions multimodal pedagogy within a process of coming over, Hitt moves on to discuss multiliteracy and multimodality in writing centers. She stresses the importance of technology usage and offers a variety of literacy practices to use in the writing center to offer multiple points of access for students to engage during appointments. Moreover, she discusses the material and physical spaces that writing centers inhabit and how the writing center’s construction can greatly impact disabled students’ ability to engage with and receive support from writing center resources. In addition to material and physical spaces in the writing center, Hitt touches on writing center tutor training. Specifically, she considers what universal design offers in contrast to medical diagnosis frameworks often employed in

the writing center. Hitt argues that while it may seem counterintuitive to use universal design principles in individualized writing instruction, universal design offers a framework through which to design a “pedagogy that is flexible, collaborative, and accessible” in the writing center. Hitt is clear that this collaborative environment is dependent on writing center tutors receiving the proper training in addition to writing centers intentionally recruiting diverse students; however, she also notes that when tutors adapt and develop “multimodal toolkits,” or “collections of flexible and adaptable multimodal practices” they can more easily navigate different communicative interactions and provide student writers with agency to make decisions about what works for them” (77).

In the last chapter of her book, Hitt grounds the text and her pedagogical philosophy in an ethics of accessibility, especially as it connects with her classroom practices and assignments. Interestingly, at least to me, Hitt labels this section “accessibility as ethical, rhetorical practice.” In my own research, I’ve been considering the ways that accessibility functions as a form of care in the classroom; centering access and encouraging multiple points of engagement is an active and intentional way to establish an ethic of care that intentionally privileges non-normative literacy practices. Choosing to center access is an ethical consideration that instructors must make. What happens when instructors don’t center access? What students are left out when we don’t center accessibility and instead try to accommodate and retrofit to meet students’ needs? Importantly, while considering accessibility as an ethical and rhetorical practice, Hitt argues that accessibility is not accommodation and that “when accessibility is positioned as accommodation, it becomes merely a functional, institutional requirement rather than an opportunity to critically reflect on systemic practices” (89). Accessibility does not ask disabled students to overcome their disability to engage in normative literacy practices; rather, accessibility offers and privileges access without disclosure, diagnoses, and does not center on cure. But most importantly for Hitt in this section, centering access is an intentional ethical and rhetorical practice that instructors must choose to employ.

Hitt extends her discussion of an ethics of accessibility beyond describing how it influences her pedagogical approach and expands her discussion of access to how she discusses and teaches the importance of access to her students. Importantly, teaching accessibility as an ethical and rhetorical practice encourages instructors to have students critically reflect on power dynamics and ableism while exposing students to non-normative literacies. To demonstrate how instructors can engage in this critical reflection with students, Hitt offers various assignments that instructors can utilize to encourage centering access, such as creating image descriptions and creating transcriptions and closed captioning alongside projects like podcasts. Hitt asks her students to think rhetorically about these assignments to consider the kinds of “creative, critical, and rhetorical choices” they can make (Hitt 92). Hitt argues that when students engage in assignments like transcription, closed

captioning, and image descriptions as part of multimodal composing, it shifts the purpose of the task from an “accommodation to a rhetorical and creative act,” reinforcing an ethics of accessibility for students (94).

As mentioned previously, Hitt’s text and my lived experiences with mental illnesses have shaped how I interrogate and negotiate with disability and access in the writing classroom. While I already try to practice engaging in a process of coming over with disabled students, Hitt’s text has expanded my view on accommodations and how I engage alongside students to construct the classroom space. For instance, I already engage in a practice of reaching out to students for whom I receive an accommodation letter to inquire into their needs and how they’d like to see their accommodations fulfilled. If nothing else, the email lets students know I’m open to suggestions and want to invite them to help shape the classroom space. However, as Hitt points out, there are many institutional barriers to receiving a formal accommodation; thus, I need to be more intentional about reaching out to all students to inquire into their access needs and any course revisions I can make that may make the course more accessible for them. Specifically, this fall, I’d like to work to create spaces where students can provide feedback on how to make the course more accessible. I already create space for students to provide feedback on the lesson that day through exit tickets, but creating a specific question on the form that inquires into access needs would create a space to collaborate and ensure the course is accessible and inclusive for all. Considering I ask students to complete an exit ticket form after every class, exit tickets would also serve to create the feedback loops that Hitt argues are necessary for engaging in a process of coming over. Hitt’s text pushes me to reconsider how I’m intentionally creating spaces for disabled students to influence the construction of the classroom space.

Hitt’s text also challenges me to expand how I approach disability in the classroom beyond considering how I center access in my pedagogical practice to consider how I center access in my pedagogical content as well. Based on Hitt’s suggestions, I’d like to be intentional about crafting multimodal assignments that ask students to design their projects and compositions with non-normative literacy practices in mind. In effect, I’d like to stress to students that access should be baked into the design of projects from the beginning. To do this, I’ll utilize Hitt’s assignment suggestions like asking students to compose a transcription alongside their podcast and reminding them to create captions while designing videos and writing alt text along with their images. However, in working to incorporate access into the construction of assignment prompts, I’ll also need to be intentional about demonstrating to students how to fulfill the genre expectations of texts like transcripts, alt text, and captions. To fully interrogate the rhetoricity of each of these genres, it’s necessary that instructors analyze examples of accessible texts with students to demonstrate how to create these texts effectively.

This book offers important insights into conversations happening between disability studies and writing studies. As external global events and catastrophes like climate change, mental health crises, pandemics, attacks on civil rights and liberties, racism, and gun violence continue to impact students, addressing disability in the classroom is of central importance. She provides accessible and easily understandable assignments that instructors can use to engage in a process of coming over with students in ways that privilege non-normative literacy practices through multimodal pedagogies and universal design. Most importantly, Hitt does not mince her words in addressing how writing studies has actively contributed to neoliberal rhetorics of overcoming that exacerbate accessibility concerns and often don’t help disabled students. In its place, Hitt is right to make the argument that, in many ways, writing studies is already engaging in practices and theories that can easily engage with a disability studies framework. This text should be required reading for students in teacher education programs and graduate writing programs invested in creating equitable and accessible classrooms for students.

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