

Disabled Faculty: Disclosure, Identity, Access
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Abstract

(Note: As our study is ongoing, these findings should be read as “tentative; to date.”)

In our interim report, we stated that our goal for the grant period was to complete 30 interviews. We are pleased to report that as of March 1, 2016, we have exceeded that goal, having interviewed 32 faculty members using a wide range of technologies and modes. Interviews have taken place via email; instant message; telephone with a transcriptionist or interpreter; videoconference; and face-to-face, both signed and orally spoken, and both with and without interpretation / revoicing. An additional interview, with a faculty member in Toronto, is planned for the coming spring, along with two follow-up interviews with participants.

As noted in our interim report, faculty members in our sample represent a wide range of ranks, geographical locations, genders, races, classes, disabilities, and ages. We reviewed our sample at the midpoint of the grant period and determined that we wanted to make a specific effort to recruit disabled faculty of color, faculty outside the humanities disciplines, and faculty who do not use their (oral) voices to communicate. These emphases have guided our choices of interviewees for the past year.

In our interim report, we noted that important themes included *vulnerability*, *cost*, and *use of personal resources to achieve access*. These themes have continued to resonate through interviews from the past year, with many additional themes arising, including *audience*, *accommodation(s)*, *silence*, *repetition* (i.e. having to explain one’s disability or access needs repeatedly), and *perceptibility*. Together, we decided to begin identifying in vivo codes, and also to add some descriptive coding categories (e.g. types of accommodations) to our emerging lists, which we are keeping separately. During an in-person research visit, we discussed developing two codes collaboratively (*audience* and *accommodation*) in order to explore the ways our different methods of coding might intersect and differ.

A new topic that has arisen, and that we have pursued in two submitted articles (see “Dissemination of Findings,” below), is the question of methodology. We have found that implementing an accessible, interdependent methodology is extraordinarily complicated, and has implications not just for studies that directly involve disabled people, but for all qualitative researchers. Our argument is that the new knowledge generated by *centering* disability in the research process reveals insights about qualitative research; this is a form of knowledge production that has been theorized by Tobin Siebers and others, and represents a post-postmodern variation on standpoint theory. Here, we quote from one of our articles, currently under review at *Research in the Teaching of English*:

What does it mean for research to be accessible, and for disability to be centered not as an object of study but as a source of integral, generative, transformational knowledge? Such a perspective on disability is informed by Siebers’s (2008, 2014) work on complex embodiment, which he defined by asserting that disabled people are neither identified by their diagnoses or by “environmental unfitness” (2014). Instead, Siebers suggested that disabled people build knowledge through their embodied interactions in the world. His articulation of complex embodiment draws from both standpoint theory and intersectionality to propose a materialist approach to social construction, emphasizing his claim in Disability Theory that “some bodies ... display the workings of ideology and expose it to critique and the demand for political change” (2008, p. 33). Applying this idea

to qualitative methodology, with particular emphasis on disability, means questioning the ways that our methodologies support an ideology of a normative bodymind (what Garland-Thomson [1997] has called the “normate”). It also means investigating the ways that material conditions, including the specific technologies used to mediate bodyminds in research, participate in this support—and could be used to intervene.

In our writings together about methodology, we have identified a number of areas, including *frame* (for video interviews), *timing*, and *emotion/affect* that require re-consideration from a conventional research point of view.

Summary

Spring 2013

- Received IRB approval from the University of Delaware IRB (IRB of record) and Spelman College (reciprocal approval).
- Distributed recruitment email on numerous listservs as well as to participants from an earlier survey of faculty members with mental health issues who indicated willingness to participate in further interviewing, and posted recruitment materials online at <http://sites.udel.edu/kersch/faculty-with-disabilities-in-higher-education-interview-study/>, inviting interested participants to complete a demographic questionnaire to help us achieve maximum variation sampling.

Summer 2013

- Determined an initial sample of interviewees from a pool of nearly 100 volunteers who responded to the demographic questionnaire.
- Conducted five interviews (two in-person, two via phone relay, and one via Skype).

Fall 2013

- Conducted two interviews (both in person).
- Began initial analysis of interviewing procedures and plans for future interviews.
- Held one in-person research meeting in Newark, DE.
- Applied for grant funding to support travel for interviews, materials/resources for collecting and storing data, and for transcribing audio/spoken data from interviews (CCCC Research Initiative, ACLS Collaborative Fellowship).
- Procured support from the University of Delaware to have transcripts created using CART of initial interviews.

Spring 2014

- Awarded 2013-2014 CCCC Research Initiative Grant.
- Purchased HD video cameras and accessories for video-recording in-person interviews.
- Conducted four interviews (all in person; two spoken and two in sign language).

Summer 2014

- Conducted three interviews (two in person, one via email).
- Held one in-person research meeting in Newark, DE.
- Reviewed transcripts and generated a list of initial codes from transcript data.
- Developed bibliography and procedure for generating transcripts of interviews conducted in sign language.
- Trained a graduate student in transcription methodologies and contracted with her to generate full and detailed transcripts of audio interview data.

Fall 2014

- Conducted three interviews (two via Skype, one in person).
- Continued to work with graduate student to produce detailed transcripts.

- Refined layered procedure for working through transcripts and moving from transcriber to Margaret to Stephanie and of tracking transcripts at each stage of the process. (Note: this is one of the more laborious and time-intensive aspects of the process. If a transcript is not too complicated / hard to see / fast-moving, it takes about an hour to go through and take notes on 10 minutes of interview video.)
- Continued to open-code transcripts and video data for emerging themes.
- Held one in-person work meeting in Ann Arbor, MI.
- Began developing a procedure for transcribing sign language interviews into a written English transcript.

Spring 2015

- Conducted seven interviews (four in person, one via Skype (signed), one via Skype (text-only/IM, one via email).
- Continued to work with graduate student to produce detailed transcripts.
- Continued to open-code transcripts and video data for emerging themes.
- Held one in-person work meeting in Atlanta, GA.
- Continued to transcribe sign language interviews into a written English transcript.

Summer 2015

- Conducted five interviews (two via Skype (oral speech), one in person with both interviewers (also interpreter and personal assistant), one in person with interpreter, one via email).
- Continued to work with graduate student to produce detailed transcripts.
- Continued to open-code transcripts and video data for emerging themes.
- Held one in-person work meeting in Newark, DE.
- Continued to transcribe sign language interviews into a written English transcript.

Fall 2015

- Conducted three interviews (one via Skype (oral speech), one by telephone with interpreter, one via IM).
- Continued to work with graduate student to produce detailed transcripts.
- Continued to transcribe sign language interviews into a written English transcript.

Winter 2016

- Conducted two follow-up interviews (one via IM and one in person (signed)).
- Continued to transcribe sign language interviews into a written English transcript.

A note in response to the request for “issues we found during the study”: After many conversations about our surprise about the slowness with which we are able to finalize transcripts and analyze the data, we have concluded that, given our extremely detailed approach, this is simply going to be a slow process. Our initial assumptions about how quickly we would be able to work through transcripts have been revised. We are certain that our “slow” approach is leading to richer knowledge (for example, the insights that took shape in our article submissions for *Research in the Teaching of English* and the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*). We want to note it here because it is an important feature of our study, and one whose meaning vis-à-vis our procedure and findings we are still unpacking.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The feedback and conversations we have participated in while conducting this study has convinced us that this is a project that will have reverberations far beyond our interview study itself. While we have several projects in progress or emerging out of this study (see Section 5 for more detail), we have also identified a number of future directions for research that we hope other researchers will pick up and engage from our project. Below, we describe some of these future directions.

- *Graduate students and disability disclosure and accommodation.* Our study focused on faculty because we recognized important distinctions between graduate student and faculty populations, and we needed to limit the scope of our project for feasibility. However, graduate students find themselves in a particularly liminal position within academia, sometimes treated as students, and other times treated as employees. More research is needed to understand how this population (differently) experiences disclosure and accommodation around disability.
- *Disability and accommodation for other populations important to writing studies:* Writing Program Administrators (see, e.g., Amy Vidali's "Disabling Writing Program Administration" for some initial work in this area); Writing Center Tutors (see, e.g., Allison Hitt's "The Role of Dis/Ability in Multiliteracy Centers"); contingent faculty.
- *Procedures for accommodation and access for faculty within higher education institutions.* Some of this research has been collected, but it is largely ad hoc and scattered across different disciplinary journals and widely disparate fields of study. The data from our interview study enables cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional attention to dimensions of access and accommodation that have yet to be fully explored, such as where accommodations are provided; how accommodations are negotiated in myriad ways; as well as what range of accommodations faculty have successfully (and unsuccessfully) negotiated. Our study offers an exploratory perspective, cutting across different faculty types, different disciplines, and different disabilities, but we would like to see broader data gathered to fully understand how accommodations and access are—and might be—built into academic structures and environments.
- *Disclosure and disability.* The range of stories interviewees have shared in our study has emphasized to us the complexities of disability disclosure and its intricate entanglements with other identity categories including race, gender, sexuality, religious affiliation, socioeconomic class, and faculty position/department/discipline/employment/institution. Thus, we see our study as offering needed insight and deeper understanding of many of these intersections, but also that much more work is needed to fully explore this complex phenomenon.