

ACADEMIC PERFECTIONISM AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

NEURODIVERSITY IN ACADEMIA

A Thesis

Presented to the faculty of the Department of English

California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Composition, Rhetoric, and Professional Writing

by

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PREVIEW

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Department of English

Abstract
of
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Neurodiversity is an expanding conversation in writing studies—I add to the conversation documenting the positive attributes and the obstacles of my lived experiences. I describe the obstacles I faced outside and within the classroom. My process involved keeping reflexive journals, artifact collection, and recursive reflection. I arrived at a theory, Pentacle Writing—which evolved as a neurodiverse approach to writing that is intentionally disruptive to match the format with the content. There are future implications for invisible barriers within pedagogy, academic institutions, and the classroom. Writing studies would benefit from more autoethnographies of neurodiversity. My autoethnography shows my relationship to the culture of disability studies by living the writing, identifying obstacles, and describing contributions.

_____, Committee Chair
Dr. Samuel Dunn

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My dad is the first person I want to thank for his love, support, and always believing in me—I love you, dad! I have deep gratitude for my therapist, Dmitri, for helping me along a difficult, and often, humorous journey—believing in my academic success and healing. Memories of our therapy sessions together will stay with me forever; few people in this world have as much compassion for social justice in mental health care as you. I want to thank my siblings, Luke, Cam, and Levi—I’m so proud of us for overcoming trauma together. Thank you, Professor Dunn, for introducing me to disability rhetoric. Thank you, Professor Josephson, for expanding my knowledge of queer studies. Thank you, Professor Toise, for your mentorship and support. Thank you, President Nelsen, for fostering social justice on our campus. Thank you to the donors that made my master’s degree possible including Laurie McBride, Patrick Michael Ewing, Theresa Mary McCourt, Faculty for Student Success Endowment, Phi Mu Mary Tilley Bessemer, Services to Students with Disabilities, Phi Mu, and Feria de Educación.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1: REFLECTIVE COVER LETTER

I entered the Composition, Rhetoric, and Professional Writing concentration after studying English from my bachelor's degree with a certification in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) with an emphasis in Linguistics. Reading research in linguistics helped me hone my social justice constructive worldview, which informs this thesis, especially chapter 4. Reading about race, gender, sexuality, and systems of power drove my desire to pursue academia as a career. My committee member Dr. Clark-Oates helped me merge my passion for linguistics, ethnography, and diversity with work on racism in academia by Baker-Bell (2020) and queer identity by McCullers (2020). Coming out as queer my first semester in graduate school gave me both an understanding of my passion for queer studies in undergraduate literature coursework and a desire to courses in Women's Studies focused on queer studies alongside of English graduate coursework. My thesis advisor and internship advisor, Dr. Dunn, introduced me to disability rhetoric. This thesis represents the culmination of all the work I have done across my graduate studies. Below I will introduce the chapters of this thesis and how they reflect what I learned in the master's program.

Chapter two is a personal professional philosophy I originally developed in courses focused on teaching and researching college composition. In this chapter, I demonstrate a working knowledge of praxis—the ways rhetoric and composition theory and practice inform one another—in my connections between disability rhetoric and the writing classroom. I connect specific course outcomes and assignments to my overall philosophy. I demonstrate an ability to engage, evaluate, and critique a variety of pedagogies, research, and professional writing methods

by engaging with conversations about disability rhetoric. I engage with Jackson & McKinney's (2021) support of the validity and rigor of autoethnography. All of this has allowed me to reflect and act.

Throughout this thesis, I demonstrate an ability to articulate the sociopolitical and sociocultural implications of researching rhetoric, teaching composition, and professional writing. I evaluate—and question—the ways I experienced academia from a perspective of neurodiversity throughout my narrative. In doing this, I discuss my relationship to the culture of disability in a study of self. Then, I discuss the intersectionality of my identity, hinting at future implications for pedagogy and at the large presence of neurodiversity that goes unseen—as I lived it. My research has significant implications for both the writing process and the academic mentorship as both could benefit from being informed by autoethnographies about neurodiversity.

The annotated bibliography in chapter three was developed during my internship during which I worked with disabled students. This bibliography gave me opportunities to continue to address sociopolitical and sociocultural implication and teaching. As a paraeducator, I worked with students in a high school setting with severe autism and medically fragile conditions. These students faced challenges medically with seizures, wheelchair accessibility, feeding tubes, toileting assistance, and medications. Given my experiences in this internship, I decided to include research that demonstrated the intersection of queer theory and disability rhetoric (Rosenberg & Kerschbaum, 2021). I also added annotations from my Women's Studies Queer History course and annotations from my psychological literature about the role of self-compassion in therapy (Brach & Neff, 2021; Quinlan, 2021), OCD treatment and Internal Family

Systems therapy for the thesis in chapter 4. Doing this research gave me an ability to join an ongoing scholarly and professional conversation and contextualize an original contribution through primary and secondary research.

In my article in chapter four, I continue to demonstrate an ability to join an on-going scholarly and professional conversation. This article was written for intended submission to *Disability Studies Quarterly*. In this article, I analyze disability rhetoric and compile relevant source including writing studies autoethnographies focused on queer identity (Shapland, 2020), neurodiversity (Rainey, 2021), and racism (Sanchez, 2021; Maraj 2021) in relation to the classroom.

I contextualize an original contribution through primary and secondary research. I read and referenced landmark and current work in disability studies and Writing Studies autoethnographies. I situated my study of self in the on-going conversation about exploring the role of neurodiversity in the writing and composition classroom (Rainey, 2021). My original contribution is the theory of Pentacle Writing I discovered through meta-analysis of my writing process. My original contribution came from primary research—artifact collection and reflexive journals.

I demonstrate an ability to write clearly, effectively, and multimodally combining artifacts, screenshots, photographs, figures, tables, and pull-out text boxes in the multimodal genre of autoethnography. I collected artifacts such as notebook entries, handouts, resources, and reflexive journal entries as a multimodal approach to my thesis. I use pull-out text boxes as figures when I

am referencing an entire journal entry. I use block quotes when I am referring to an excerpt from a specific journal entry. My references to my personal autoethnography are placed in italics when they are a composite of the 16 reflexive journals. These journals are available by email to anyone interested in validating, replicating, or reviewing the findings.

I use rhetorical knowledge to inform writing process; to locate, evaluate, organize, and incorporate evidence effectively using an intentionally jarring approach. I analyzed how I wrote my autoethnography with jarring, recursive memories and narrative methods to effectively explain the rigor and value of neurodiversity—even when it normally goes unseen. I specifically chose reflexive journal entries to include as pull-out text boxes to incorporate data effectively. I approached organization through a lens of neurodiversity by using intentional disruption inspired by Dolmage (2014). The formatting, style, and organization of my thesis is key to reading my article. I use paragraph breaks instead of headings. I signpost new topics in the introductory and conclusion sentences for my methodology, methods, and formatting sections. Otherwise, I weave my references to literature into my autoethnography instead of placing it in a literature review section. I read psychology literature and reviewed psychology literature I was given in handouts during my Intensive Outpatient Program (IOP) at The Anxiety Treatment Center of Sacramento.

I examine explicitly writing and thinking processes in a neurodiverse approach through a meta-analysis of my writing which evolved in a theory of neurodiverse writing: Pentacle Writing. I explicitly examine my writing using a theory called Pentacle Writing to see the tangential points that diverge and converge across different points but form a completed thought in the end. I had to first model (write) the autoethnography as a student with neurodiversity. Then I theorized. This

reverse research process allowed me to look at neurodiverse writing through a neuro-“typical” lens—traditionally seen in rhetoric and composition. I evaluated my evidence and continued to review the artifacts I wanted to select based on the implications of my research—suggesting mentoring is a crucial component alongside the writing process.

I demonstrated an ability to conduct research in rhetoric, composition, and professional writing using appropriate methods and methodological frameworks. I read Jackson & McKinney’s (2021) use of autoethnography as the methodology to approach my research. Jackson & McKinney (2021) demonstrate the rigor and validity behind autoethnography in Writing Studies. I referenced Creswell & Creswell (2018) in my discussion of the philosophical worldview. I used narrative methods by keeping 18 reflexive journals over two semesters. I used artifact collection as another form of research methods. I drew on multidisciplinary theory to connect Clinical Psychology with the composition and writing classroom. Disability rhetoric guided my understanding of methodology. My thesis is multidisciplinary and draws on the approach I learned in my Multidisciplinary Studies English course. I took the course, Queer History, in Women’s Studies and learned how to connect queer studies to writing studies using multidisciplinary theory. I draw heavily on psychology.

My journey to this Culminating Experience Project has been a convergence of intersectional identities and exploration of academic interests, and I hope to continue to do future research across my academic career expanding on ideas across systems of power, addressing classicism and institutional access, exploring the pedagogical implications of therapeutic

modalities and diagnoses, and further developing methodologies that focus on the (autoethnographic) journey of self.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 2: PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHY

“...there is a negotiation within the writer of his or her ways of seeing the world and a negotiation within the reader between his or her own worldviews and the perceived worldviews of the writer.” — Victor Villanueva, *Naming What We Know*

My personal teaching philosophy is feminist-centered focusing on identity. Language impacts and reflects beliefs and identity. I teach composition through a feminist lens to help students see their role in (re)inscribing and (re)producing ableist, racist, homophobic, and transphobic ideas through the social construction of language (Wardle & Adler-Kassner, 2016). To help students challenge past beliefs and integrate new concepts connecting writing to identity, I emphasize the social construction of language in my teaching philosophy. I create space for students to form and situate their identity within the sphere of the writing classroom, the university, and the community to apply the concepts of writing and enact the craft itself (Wardle & Adler-Kassner).

In fleshing out this philosophy, I draw from *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* by Asao Inoue (2015), *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies* by Elizabeth Wardle and Linda Adler-Kassner (2016), and *Re/Orienting Writing Studies: Queer Methods, Queer*

Projects by Banks, Cox, and Dadas (2019)—including “How (and Why) to Write Queer: A Failing, Impossible, Contradictory Instruction Manual for Scholars of Writing Studies” by Stacey Waite (2019). Professors enact systemic, structural racism in the classroom when they create failure in students of color and gaslight students of color into believing these failures represent personal, instead of systemic, failure (Inoue). I resist systemic racism with the grading system I use. I follow Inoue’s intentional construction of writing pedagogy bringing attention to

racism as it is institutionally embedded in writing courses. A clearly articulated grading contract creates a fair opportunity for students to succeed and excel while minimizing the potential for students of color to walk away feeling belittled, unseen, or unintelligent (Inoue, 2015). Inoue explains how “Standard” Edited American English (SEAE) privileges white students because it is the dominant discourse in the writing classroom and the dominant discourse of white students. SEAE is completely racist because the white-washed grammar and language is accessible primarily to white students. I foster social justice in my teaching philosophy with the specific, concrete feedback, clear instruction, and measurable outcomes in course contracts. With the style of delivering comments from peers first, myself second, and the writer themselves third, the contract allows for the work to be a progression, a process of the self as a writer. My teaching is grounded in evidence-based practices. My syllabus, major unit lesson plans, and assignments center around writing as a process with clear expectations that foster diverse writing in comparison to Inoue’s description of the hegemonic discourse of SEAE (Inoue, 2015).

My teaching philosophy mirrors Inoue’s discussion of racism in the classroom and emphasizes the role of queer and neurodiverse identities. Inoue discusses the ways in which diversity has similar dynamics to social phenomena like ableism. The histories are different but the attention to philosophies guiding the pedagogy is similar. I challenge institutionally dominant narratives by “teaching queer” (Banks, Cox, & Dadas). Waite lists ways to write queer: “don’t stay ‘on topic,’” “get academic; get theoretical; get narrative; get personal,” “talk about your feelings,” and “don’t outline your argument” (pp. 44 – 45). My teaching philosophy brings diverse discourse into the writing classroom to queer pedagogy and challenges the perpetuation of

ableism and racism by using language and writing to articulate identity, intersectionality, and positionality.

Adler-Kassner and Wardle's idea of threshold concepts forms my perspective of what it means to be an instructor of composition. There are conceptual steps students' progress through as they develop the craft of writing. Waite identifies four stages students' progress through to achieve mastery of a step: troublesome, liminal, integrative, and transformative, and probably irreversible. Troublesome concepts challenge pre-existing beliefs. Liminal concepts describe the academic labor students go through to challenge transformative concepts. Integrative and Transformative concepts reconcile the concept that was once troublesome. Probably irreversible concepts form a lens to see writing and identity in the concept; it will likely be a perspective of viewing writing and identity that will not change.

I see my role as that of a guide to apprentice learners as they progress through these conceptual steps using scaffolded assignments. To build on previous coursework, I scaffold assignments to guide students. I apprentice students to become fluent writers across genres and disciplines for success in future college coursework.

To demonstrate this teaching philosophy, I discuss a first-year writing course I designed in my Teaching College Composition course. The course includes my syllabus, major assignments, and grading system. The pedagogy informing my course comes from the feminist theory I discussed previously.

My syllabus begins with an invitation in the form of a welcome statement. I invite students into the academic dialogue and start the process of developing an apprenticeship of learning. I acknowledge the antiracist framework of the course to make visible the impact white,

hegemonic language has had on the standard of assessment in writing courses (Inoue). I write, specifically, that the course analyzes diverse communities as we explore what it means to engage in the politics of language. After describing the learning outcomes in antiracist language, I particularly write my learning objectives to encourage discussion around race and racism in the classroom. For instance, one of my learning outcomes is to “maintain an analytical discussion on and situate the self within diverse communities across multiple genres of literature.” Next, I provide information about contract grading before presenting students with the assignment sequence. The grading contract works as an antiracist writing assessment ecology because everyone can earn a B, or an A based on the clear expectations. It is both a fair system (ecology) and antiracist because it is rooted in assessment over response, evaluation, or grading (Inoue). Contract-based grading allows for ample feedback and gives students the time to draft, revise, and edit knowing this assessment strategy rewards their growth as a writer. I conclude my syllabus with clear course policies and resources for professionalism, inclusivity, and respect for diversity. Then I upload the course calendar, which is not visible to students initially to better promote the learning objectives and course outcomes.

I design my course assignments for quality over quantity to increase engagement, critical thinking, and deep learning. My assignment sequence consists of three major projects, one major self-reflection along with minor self-reflections, peer review, and discussion board posts. First, students engage in a literacy narrative. My second major assignment is a problem-centered, exploratory essay. The researched critical analysis essay is my third major assignment. Using literary scholarship, students expand on the exploratory essay to develop an opinion about the problem to defend. The research component in the course gives students experience with genre

conventions, rhetoric, evidence, referencing, methodology, context, and audience. I choose to incorporate a Works Cited assignment near the end of the course for students to practice the genre conventions used in their major's discipline. Students submit drafts of the major assignments on the due dates for professor feedback and then resubmit in the final portfolio. The peer review provides frequent feedback to teach collaboration in small groups and reflective processes through active participation.

I focus my major unit lesson plan on big ideas, also known as the course learning outcomes. I use a backward design to derive my assignments from the outcomes. The backward design allows me to start with the questions I want students to answer and then arrive at assignments that align with big ideas from the course. In backward designing the course, my unit design increases students' critical thinking and awareness of academic problems because the learning outcomes inform the assignments. My assignments are outcome-oriented and scaffolded in this course design. Part of the purpose of my first-year writing course is to provide students with tools that they can use to solve problems of both a professional and personal nature. Problem-centered assignments, like my exploratory essay assignment, develop the ability to work through cognitive dissonance, which is a state of trying to understand two seemingly competing ideas until an "ah-ha" moment of clarity is reached (Adler-Kassner and Wardle).

CHAPTER 3: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexander, J. and D. Wallace. "The Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship." *College Composition and Communication* (2009): n. page 61.

Professor of English and writing coordinator Jonathan Alexander has extensive publications on queer research. Similarly Professor of English and Department Chair David Wallace researches intersectionality in composition. Both Alexander and Wallace wrote an article about the role of LGBTQ identity in composition titled "The Queer Turn in Composition Studies: Reviewing and Assessing an Emerging Scholarship" (2009). Although outdated, this article is a foundational piece of literature that analyzes the field of composition and queer studies—or a lack thereof—with a review of historical to contemporary (up to 2009) literature.

The most useful aspect of reading an annotated bibliography is the framing the author(s) create in presenting a cohesive analysis of the publications which are constantly engaging in scholarly conversation. Alexander and Wallace define terminology and then present three main ideas supported in the literature by citing scholarly evidence. First, heteronormativity is defined as the othering of queer identity by attributing abnormality to LGBTQ identity. Second, homophobia is purposeful and direct threats to the LGBTQ community and individuals with the intent of silencing and harming queer voices. Third, heterosexism is the unintentional dismissal of LGBTQ identity; in my research introduction I will include heterosexism as an important intersection between disability studies and queer studies because of the well-established research on the importance of inclusivity and direct pedagogical implications for diversifying composition

studies and because it can be educational and informative for individuals, institutions, and communities both heterosexual and queer.

There is well-established research in queer studies on the importance of inclusivity and direct pedagogical implications for diversifying composition studies. I argue that this is a lacking area of pedagogical focus in disability studies. A turn in disability pedagogy could be shaped by previous discussions of inclusive queer pedagogy. Alexander and Wallace identified three aspects of queer scholarship: confront homophobia, create inclusive spaces for LGBTQ students, and address the homo/hetero binary (305). Part of confronting homophobia is finding ways for teachers to be out in the classroom and still be seen as more than only their sexuality. The fear in being out is that students will modify their speech and not express ideas as well as dispute every thought a teacher has out of bigoted beliefs. Confronting homophobia also relates to creating spaces for students to have discussions around sexual identity to challenge the idea that sexuality is solely an intimate and private idea. Alexander and Wallace argue that scholarship needs to become more inclusive and stimulate discussions that are LGBTQ inclusive. Classrooms, students, and institutions collectively benefit from inclusive discussions; more than individual students benefit from queer inclusivity. Since 2009 when the article was first published, the queer turn in composition studies has been producing more publications that are queer inclusive. Part of the importance of this article was to solidify the current state of composition research and identify a new direction that the field would benefit from pursuing. Third, it is important that the homo/hetero binary be challenged so that there is not a specific divide between what is heterosexual and what is queer. This binary leads to misrepresentation, unacknowledged the performativity and fluidity of sexuality, and creates stereotypical typification. Alexander and

Wallace found these three ideas within the scholarship they reviewed and also addressed the areas that needed to be readdressed.

Brach, Tara (2021, June) “Fierce Self-Compassion – A conversation – Tara Brach & Kristen Neff.”

Tara Brach is a psychologist, author, and Buddhist practitioner who combines meditation with self-compassion. I am listening to her podcast called Tara Brach, the episode titled “Fierce Self-Compassion – A conversation – Tara Brach & Kristen Neff” (2021). Brach is known for the self-compassion acronym called R.A.I.N. RAIN is “a practice of radical compassion” (Brach 2020). RAIN is a way to engage in mindfulness when facing difficult emotions. It stands for “Recognizing what’s going on, Allow the experience to be there, just as it is, Investigate with interest and care, and Nurture with self-compassion” (Brach 2020). I was introduced to RAIN by an amazing psychiatrist at an IOP at Sutter in Summer 2022.

In the episode I listened to, Brach and Neff discussed self-compassion. I was introduced to Neff during my IOP at The ATC in the summer of 2020. Neff is also a psychologist who focuses on self-compassion instead of self-esteem. She argues in support of self-compassion over self-esteem because focusing on a common humanity brings awareness and hope. Self-esteem, in contrast, brings comparison, envy, and low self-worth. Neff is known for fierce self-compassion shown in the image below from self-compassion.org. Fierce self-compassion involves the yin and yang of tender self-compassion and fierce self-compassion. The goal is to balance inner healing with outer change to thrive. Neff focuses on the effect the socialization of gender roles has on how people respond to self-compassion. Neff addresses gender in the podcast episode “Fierce

Self-Compassion – A conversation – Tara Brach & Kristen Neff (2021).” Yin energy is usually described as a masculine fierce energy. Yang, in traditional Buddhist philosophy is known as feminine tender energy. Neff researches Buddhist practices of yin and yang and compares this to gender socialization in her theory about combining tender and fierce self-compassion to thrive.

Davis, L. J. (2017). Disability, Normality, and Power. In *The disability studies reader* (5th ed., pp. 1–14). introduction, Routledge.

Lennard J. Davis, editor of *The Disability Studies Reader* (2017), introduces the text with a discussion of the role normality has in disability studies. Davis explores the linguistic root of the word norm and then proceeds to trace the history of the concept across key moments and movements including the development of the study of eugenics, Darwin’s concept of survival of the fittest, the invention of the bell curve in statistics, World War II sterilization decrees, and the rise of capitalism in the Industrial Revolution. As Davis lays out this history, he explains the connection between each of the previous developments in defining an ideal norm of the body and mind that creates the category of abnormal. Positioning disability studies as a study of the concept of normalcy interrogates the notion of normality. Emphasizing the study of normativity places disability out of the center and problematizes what is normal. Similarly Critical Race Theory has sought to name race as a factor in discrimination; therefore, naming and interrogating whiteness was an important shift from studying only people of color. Davis introduces this fifth edition of *The Disability Studies Reader* by naming the focus on interrogating normality and situating disability away from abnormality.

Davis, L. J., Erevelles, N., & Minear, A. (2017). *Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality*. In *The Disability Studies Reader* (5th ed., pp. 381–395). essay, Routledge.

Professor Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear (2017) wrote “Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality” to discuss the intersectionality of disability across social categories of difference according to Critical Race Feminist Theory (CRT). Intersectionality is defined as “mediating multiple differences” (p. 383). They argue disability is not simply another layer of oppression but a tightly interwoven factor intersecting with age, gender and class based on history and social structures. They present three frameworks for CRT: anticategorical, intracategorical, and intercategorical. The anticategorical framework discards social categories as social constructions, invalidating the social existence of factors like race for its biological baselessness. The intracategorical framework “validates the reality of racism as it intersects with social categories of difference” (p. 384). The intercategorical framework focuses on “the historical contexts and structural conditions” of intersectionality. Through CRT, Erevelles and Minear compare two stories spanning decades to demonstrate the structural, historical, and social factors in oppression. Junius was a young, black child whose deafness resulted in being imprisoned on a false charge of rape. Smith, a black girl with mental disability, was tracked in school for “retardation.” Both instances reveal the residual effects of eugenics, perpetrating the “hegemonic ideology of disability” (p. 308).