



Two Comments on "Neurodiversity"

Author(s): Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Jay Dolmage, Paul Heilker and Ann Jurecic

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COMMENT & RESPONSE: Two Comments on “Neurodiversity”

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We would like to respond to and extend the important conversation that Ann Jurecic’s May 2007 *CE* article “Neurodiversity” initiates about autism and the teaching of writing, placing the issues raised more fully within a disability studies framework. A disability studies approach to neurodiversity fundamentally alters assumptions about the mainstream norm. This approach can also alter the ways we view student learning differences and respond to student writing. We argue that this approach must finally also alter *us*: challenging teachers to change pedagogy, rather than simply assisting students to conform.

There is much that we agree with in “Neurodiversity,” from the likely increase in the numbers of students with autism or Asperger’s in college writing classrooms, to the stigma such students often encounter, to the importance of “individualizing instruction” (435). Jurecic describes the proautism movement, revisits Mike Rose on the dangers of medical labels, and cites Lennard Davis on the fact that a disability studies epistemology will reveal the biases of “a

normative body and normative communication” (434, quoting Davis 899). Despite these moves, however, she remains rooted in a normative stance—from invoking a single monolithic form of the academic essay to assuming the central (invisible and normal) position that enables “us” to diagnose others and make judgments about “them” (e.g., “writing will be a particular challenge for some students on the spectrum”—423; speaking about her student: “there were ways that his brain processed information, sensation, and ideas that seemed fixed and atypical”—427).

Disability studies holds that mainstream culture often behaves in an *ableist* way: assuming that disability is inherently bad, that a disability is a deficit justifying intolerance and stigma, that it should be cured or overcome; assuming that people with disabilities can be spoken and acted for; and allowing individuals to make these assumptions by claiming a position as ultimately *not-disabled* and therefore unmarked and entitled to diagnose and stigmatize others. Ableist positioning is thus *normative*. Those with normative

power—all of us at some times, in some situations, but some much more than others because of the cultural and corporeal capital they hold—can impose their order and will on those they deem deviant, delimiting the world of the “other,” sometimes bodily, sometimes most powerfully through discourse.

Reading Jurecic’s essay shows us how such positioning works. The author takes a middle stance (between constructionist and determinist), which at first may seem reasonable enough, until we see how this stance maps power dynamics in the classroom. We recognize that she aims to present the two worlds—ableist and neurodiverse—responsibly and carefully, and we aim to continue this spirit of self-critique, holding that an anti-ableist rhetoric always engages in such dialogism. Although we can’t cure normativity (just as we don’t want to cure autism), we are hopeful that a reader might leave this exchange with less surety about normalcy, the wisdom of diagnosing others, or the desire to limit the spectrum of cognitive difference in any classroom.

As examples of Jurecic’s own reflexivity, she writes at great length about autistic activists, cites autism autobiographies and websites, and generally seeks a first-person account of “writing from the spectrum” (428). Yet these examples are used largely as diagnostic fodder—as material for a critique of autistic prose, to show us what is wrong with this writing, and thus with those who created it.¹ Curiously, the *content* of the writing she cites conveys a very strong message

against this kind of interpretation. For instance, many proautist blogs and websites playfully decenter the ableist population by labeling them “neurotypical” and listing their “symptoms” (see Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical).² Disability studies, likewise, decenters ableist and normative assumptions: it examines the history and subjugating power of “the norm,” critiques the medicalization and objectification of bodies with differences, makes visible the invisible structuring power of ableism, and resists the standardization of learning that fits only a narrow range of people.

We recognize that a disability studies approach may feel too radical to some and too stigmatizing for those who don’t want to claim disability.³ Disability studies *is* radical because it argues that disability is a social construction. This does not mean that disabilities are not real and embodied; it does mean that the meanings and values attributed to the disabled are enacted by cultures, not nature. Although all students, all people, have innate differences, some differences become a rationale for disqualification and for predicting determined outcomes. The history of education is full of such examples—having in the past excluded women and ethnic and racial groups for perceived innate inadequacies. Teachers, because of the power they wield, discursively enact and reinforce such attitudes, and, as part of a larger cultural discussion, the voice of the teacher, doctor, or social worker is too often overamplified.

Jurecic both medicalizes and fiction-

alizes autism. Most readers likely accept this stance perhaps because we have all internalized similar diagnostic tendencies. And a very engaging writing style, weaving an eminently recognizable story about autism, makes acceptance easy. She moves quickly between the fictional story of Christopher Boone from Mark Haddon's incredibly popular novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* to the stories of her own student Gregory. Although the stories that Jurecic tells are interesting and provide a narrative arc for her own academic essay, they are supported by investigative work that fails to respect the rights of the student as a nonfictional entity. We suggest that college writing instructors should not contact high school teachers to learn more about a student, no matter how "inscrutable" their "behavior" may seem. Not only is a student's legal right to privacy violated, but such impulses also lay bare an essentially ableist desire: A teacher, faced with a student who doesn't quite "fit" assumptions about "normality" and doesn't thrive on "teaching-as-usual" practices, seeks to explain or diagnose the students' "deficiency" or "deviation" rather than or before reflecting on and perhaps revising his or her own assumptions and teaching practices.

The more frustrated Jurecic reveals herself to be in her quest for the precision of this diagnosis, the less comfortable we can be with the balance between her better pedagogical goals and her more dangerous medicalizing tendencies. These tendencies serve to inflate her authority and infantilize the student. Like a parent, she wonders aloud about his

ability to make friends or to "stand at a socially acceptable distance" (427). These inappropriate worries and medicalized framings of Gregory inflect the ways that Jurecic writes about his work. By calling into question his "lack of social perceptiveness" (427), she constructs the opposite position of authority for herself, showcasing her own heightened perception of his problems, forming assumptions about his family life and background, and discussing these speculations with his teachers and with us.⁴

Furthermore, in exerting so much energy to chase down a diagnosis for her student and to develop a steady theory of what autistic writing looks like (to facilitate ease of diagnosis in the future and to point toward a cure for such writing, or at least a comprehensive catalogue of its errors), Jurecic fails to recognize, assess, or develop strategies to change her own pedagogical practice. She oddly nuances a reference to Mina Shaughnessy to support her claims of an autistic essence of mind and writing, invoking Shaughnessy's message that writing teachers should learn more about the "intelligence of [student's] mistakes" and be less "ignorant" of how students think (439), but neglecting to remember that Shaughnessy also asked teachers to remediate themselves. Shaughnessy believed that our pedagogy had to change drastically and continually to accommodate the diverse range of experiences, goals, and proclivities of students in our classrooms. Instead of the usual paradigm of the teacher worrying about the disabled student, we might instead focus on the disabling impact of some teaching.

We acknowledge that we may seem overly diagnostic and corrective, enumerating “errors” produced by our disability-centered expectations. Although this is not our aim, we do want to mobilize fully the concept of neurodiversity. This requires some contrariness, particularly to trouble the stories told about disability that seek to eradicate it.

In the spirit of this troubling, we see two confluences that charge Jurecic’s essay with energy: First, there is a curious overlap between the fictional world of the novel and the constructed world of her classroom and her student. Looked at closely, this overlap reveals the implausibility that one student’s story can stand in for all. Second, Haddon’s plot powerfully blends the genres of the detective murder mystery, the bildungsroman, and the quest, and it provides a model for Jurecic’s own detective work, which drives her essay’s tension between understanding autism and curing it. Ultimately, however, she refuses the tension between a “metaphorically autistic world” and an autistic individual and opts for the medical and therapeutic model (424). Jurecic urges compositionists to consider “medical frameworks” (434) and cognitive theories of inherent differences when creating a pedagogy for autistic students. This move essentially leaves behind the critical approaches of disability studies, in fact, flying against the very ethos of disability rights, pushing for an even more comprehensive labeling and deficit-based compartmentalization of autistic writing and writers and the assumption of a determinist view of difference.

Because autism is not a single impairment, but a diagnostic label based on behaviors, with a wide range (a spectrum) of characteristics, and because the autism category includes so many variations, it makes sense to consider autism with other disabilities—whether physical, behavioral, emotional, or cognitive. But, more important, because much of the stigma and oppression people with disabilities experience can be culturally reconsidered and reduced, it makes the *most* sense to develop writing curriculum and pedagogies that are inclusive and supple enough to accommodate many kinds of differently embodied learners.

The new disability studies has much to offer teachers and students as our classrooms become more inclusive and diverse. Just as inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities and a larger socioeconomic “spectrum” in higher education required a change of perspective and curriculum to represent experiences and epistemologies of new populations—so too will the inclusion of students with disabilities challenge us to transform our curriculum and pedagogy. Compositionists and other educators have begun to address the learning differences of students with disabilities by developing flexible, multimodal, and inclusive pedagogies (see Bibliography for a list of resources in composition and Universal Design for Learning).

It is tremendously heartening to see that *College English* and its readers have a chance to explore the issues that Ann Jurecic raises. The thoroughness, liveliness, and honesty of her research and writing provide an entrée into the world

of autism. But we assert that engaging students with autism or other disabilities does *not* mean a blastoff into an alien world. When faced with a wide range of diverse students, we shouldn't see ourselves as compositionists on Mars. The world of autism is everyone's world; neurological "difference" is constructed against a normative interestedness, and the maintenance of the norm, at all costs, is what we hope can be challenged by and with individuals from all the long way across the spectrum of neurodiversity—for the benefit of all.

NOTES

1. Autism can be written quite differently, just as "autistic writing" can be read quite differently.

2. The word *autist* is used to confront ableism directly, valuing autism as the center and seat of epistemological power.

3. For example, the culturally Deaf argue that their differences are not impairments, just a variation on the human continuum. We agree that human variation is an expected part of human existence, but note that denying the disability label does nothing to reduce stigma against people with disabilities; in fact, it reinforces the general stigma by seeking a reprieve for a particular group.

4. Despite her apparent regard for medical models, she demonstrates a lack of scientific rigor, labeling a student as autistic without any evidence (except for an "autistic" style, which she also locates in Temple Grandin's writing) and basing her recommendations for teachers on her experience with only one student.

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Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson,
Miami University of Ohio

Jay Dolmage,
West Virginia University

Cards on the table: In March 2007, at the Conference on College Composition and Communication Convention in New York, I organized two sessions on autism, representation, and identity and spoke on one of these panels with Prof. Jurecic; I also attended my first meeting as a member of the CCC Committee on Disability Issues. My “expertise” on autism, such as it is, comes primarily from living with my son, Eli, a high school sophomore in the fall; the urgency of my personal and professional investment in these issues stems from the fact that Eli will be in someone’s first-year composition course in the very near future.

Although the authors invoke autism as, among other things, a disease, a disorder, a disability, and a diversity issue (and it is all of these things and more, I submit, which is precisely the difficulty), schematically, the discussion seems in danger of falling into an either/or argument—either neuroscience or disability studies will ultimately be of more help in responding to the growing number of college composition students on the autism spectrum. I am sure this is not the intention of anyone involved, and I write here in the spirit of bringing more voices and more perspectives into the conversation.

We are still very early in the game, and we know very little, really, about autism. It is therefore too easy, perhaps, to find fault in the positions others take on the issues involved. But the location of these discontinuities and aporia are generative and point the way forward—and backward—to work we could and should

collectively take up. While we can, for instance, point out how a disability studies perspective is a powerful lens by which to critique the ableist assumptions at work in cultural constructions of autism and those people on the spectrum, autism seems to defy a central concept in much of disability studies: the idea of a continuum linking the temporarily able-bodied with people with disabilities. If we live long enough, the argument goes, we will all eventually become physically, behaviorally, emotionally, or cognitively disabled because of the normal aging process or through some accident. But this does not seem to apply to autism. While I can easily imagine and indeed expect that I will someday become disabled, I cannot imagine or expect that I will someday become autistic. There is work to be done here to articulate more fully the extent to which autism is and is not a disability issue. To put it another way, autism is a disability issue, no doubt, but it is not *only* a disability issue.

Similarly, Jurecic’s call for a renewed attention to neuroscience is predicated on her finding little of value in our literature to help in working with students on the autism spectrum, on her assumption that we need new theories, practices, and policies to work effectively with these students—this despite her acknowledgments that Gregory’s difficulties in writing were not different in kind from those of the other students and that common pedagogical practices in our field, carefully individualized, allowed him to perform successfully in the classroom. Before *we* commit ourselves too much

to “forward-looking” generation of new theories, practices, and policies, I contend that there is considerable “backward-looking” work we could and should do to mine our own collective wisdom more thoroughly, revising it and re-deploying it for this new (but, perhaps, not all that different) population. Jurecic herself invokes Flower’s notion of writer-based versus reader-based prose, for example, while I found myself thinking of Ong’s and Lunsford and Ede’s work on audience. To what extent can we productively understand and respond to Gregory’s and Eli’s issues with writing as, simply put, fundamental difficulties in invoking and addressing their audiences? In other words, in addition to insights afforded by neuroscience and disability studies, what would a truly, specifically *rhetorical* perspective on autism and the discourses of those on the autism spectrum reveal?

In like manner, what would happen if we truly and aggressively embraced the idea of autism as a diversity issue, first and foremost? Doing so would require a perhaps difficult reassessment and revision of what diversity and culture and community might mean, but it would allow us to understand the discourses of those on the autism spectrum as a matter of “The Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” Doing so would force us to wrestle with the concomitant obligations to both “affirm the students’ right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style” (710) and to help

them learn to use the languages of wider communication. Doing so would allow us to take advantage of our long, although sometimes tortured, history of working with marginalized populations and the discourses of power. Understanding autism as a diversity issue would also reveal “Autism,” “Asperger’s Syndrome,” “Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS),” and any other reifying “diagnosis” to be as helpful or as debilitating as any other monolithic categorization in working with students, such as age, race, gender, disability, national origin, class, sexual orientation, religion, or political affiliation. It would help us understand that we stereotype students on the spectrum at our peril and that we can only understand students—any student, every student—as they embody and enact their unique, terribly complex, dynamic intersections of all of these factors.

Finally, however, the most important voices and perspectives that we need to bring into this conversation are those of people themselves on the autism spectrum. We are all guilty here of speaking for, about, and through the people on the spectrum rather than with them. Surely, as we work to build a more copious dialogue on these issues, we should and can create space for those on the spectrum, researchers, teachers, and students, both within and beyond English Studies.

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Paul Heilker,
Virginia Technical Institute

To speak or write about autism in public forums is to tread on treacherous ground. In the week before I sat down to write this response, *The New York Times* published five pieces about controversies related to autism: two news articles, one op-ed piece, and two dissenting letters. The main news story of the week concerned opening statements in a federal hearing about claims made by about 4,800 parents that childhood vaccinations caused their children to develop autism. The article reports that, although studies in the United States and abroad have found no link between vaccination and autism, some parents remain suspicious; a few have even physically threatened government scientists (Harris). In a related op-ed piece, two scientists tried to calm fears about an autism epidemic by explaining that much of the apparent increase in the prevalence of autism is caused by new and more precise classifications (Shattuck and Durkin). The letters to the editor, however, firmly rejected this argument. One writer asserted that the scientists' argument against the existence of an epidemic is "immoral" (Weinburger). The other writer, the mother of a three-year-old son who was recently diagnosed, did not care about the numbers or about what qualifies as an

epidemic: she just wanted to know where to locate the federal money that will finance the schools' mandate to educate these children (Bommentre).

Perhaps arguments between parents, scientists, schools, and the government are to be expected because each party has different priorities. An article on this morning's front page, however, reveals a fissure not just between parents and others, "us" and "them," but rather within a family. The article recounts the struggles between Bob and Suzanne Wright, who founded the charity Autism Speaks, and their daughter Katie, who has a son with autism. This charity began as an effort to end "the internecine warfare in the world of autism" by funding a full range of research projects, from those that explore the genetic basis of autism to those that study whether diets and supplements cleanse environmental impurities, such as mercury, that some believe cause autism. Despite the charity's "big tent" approach, it is now riven by factions. Katie Wright, who believes vaccines cause autism, has spoken out against the "old guard"—including her parents—and their "failed strategies." Donors, volunteers, and scientists have expressed concern that the daughter's views are shaping the charity's agenda and the parents have therefore distanced themselves from her position. Now, a public disagreement between parents and child is playing itself out in accusatory Web postings (Gross and Strom).

My purpose in recounting these recent arguments and in drawing attention to divisions within organizations and

families is to demonstrate that disagreements about autism are inevitable because our knowledge is limited. Although writing teachers have no choice about entering the autism debates—as this exchange demonstrates, we are there—we have choices about how we do so. As in other contexts, there is always the potential for discussions to devolve into misunderstandings, escalated rhetoric, and the demonization of different positions. I remain convinced, however, that, even with a question as charged and complicated as how to respond to the increasing number of students on the autism spectrum in the composition classroom, reasonable people can disagree and still work toward creating conditions that improve the lives of individuals with autism.

Thus, I would like to reassess where Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Jay Dolmage, and I disagree and also where I believe we are in accord. To begin, I quickly summarize the core of my argument, which is not represented accurately in their letter. In “Neurodiversity,” I explore how students with autism spectrum disorders raise issues of neurological difference not yet addressed in *Composition*. These students bring to the surface questions about why we teach the academic essay, about the limits and possibilities of teaching students who think differently (not better, not worse) than the norm, and about the discourse on diversity in the academy. When I encountered a student with Asperger’s who did not respond to the approaches that worked with other students, I found little to assist me in schol-

arship about marginalized students or basic writing. As I searched for strategies, I gathered the most new insights from articles in cognitive psychology and neuroscience. I learned, for instance, that many individuals with autism and Asperger’s cannot make sense of or predict the behavior or thoughts of others because they cannot attribute mental states to themselves or others. Such social difficulties can affect their ability to write for an audience because they may not anticipate a reader’s thoughts, feelings, or expectations. As I delved into the unfamiliar scientific literature about autism, language, and “theory of mind,” my goal at every moment was to figure out how best to teach academic writing to students on the spectrum—not to erase their differences, to “cure” their writing, or to limit neurological difference in the classroom, as Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage assert. I sought to find ways to provide Gregory and students like him—who have chosen to enter college and want to succeed there—with the same opportunities as other students.

Perhaps this account of my argument clarifies why I believe that Lewiecki-Wilson, Dolmage, and I actually agree on a number of points. We concur that students on the autistic spectrum who are now appearing in our composition classes require our attention and that these students call for a reassessment of pedagogical practices. We agree that these students reveal to us how particular ways of writing, such as the academic essay, are linked to neurotypical ways of thinking. Thus, we share the belief that

these students raise questions not only about how we teach, but what we teach in composition courses, especially those courses intended to teach students to develop as college writers. We are also in accord that the differences of people with autism, like other differences, should not be used as a rationale for exclusion. Finally, we agree that people on the autism spectrum possess a wide range of abilities and that educational institutions should not make broad assumptions about individuals on the basis of a diagnosis.

Although we share these principles, our thinking about how best to serve these students has obviously led us in quite different directions. Fundamentally, we disagree about the curricular goals of our writing classes. The primary goal of my first-year composition class, in accord with the curriculum at my university, is for students to learn to write college essays—that is, to learn how to define interesting projects or problems, to develop thoughts by engaging with a range of sources, and to present arguments and ideas with clarity and coherence. This goal has been labeled “normative” by Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage. It is true that I teach composition within the constraints of a particular course with specific outcomes. My approach is therefore normative to the extent that all education is normative, but not normative in that I do not seek to eliminate difference. In fact, when I arrived at the final page of the letter and encountered a sentence praising “compositionists and other educators

[who] have begun to address the learning differences of students with disabilities by developing flexible, multimodal, and inclusive pedagogies,” I could only think that—barring the term “multimodal”—this is precisely what I had described in my article. How is it that learning versatile writing practices has been rewritten as “conforming”? How had I given the impression that the first-person texts I quoted were “wrong”? Why is a description of difference necessarily read as a denigration of difference?

Another factor at the root of our different understanding of what it might mean to teach college students with autism is that we hold different attitudes toward science. As I discuss in my article, since the social turn in composition, the field has largely turned away from cognitive science. While we have been looking the other way, cognitive and neurosciences have entered a period of enormous growth. Rarely does a week go by that we are not informed of new insights into the workings of our brains. Recently, for instance, I have read that pure altruism, unmotivated by personal gain, has been identified in brain scans of students at the University of Oregon (Tierney), that many cognitive scientists remain doubtful of claims that fMRI technology can scan the brain for evidence of lying (Talbot), and that the brain continues to astound neuroscientists with its plasticity, its ability to develop new synaptic connections, and thus to adjust to radical changes such as a stroke (Walker; Zuger). I do not believe that

these daily reports are all valid, enduring, or significant. Nor do I believe that science (or any branch of knowledge) is exempt from bias. Nevertheless, with limited skepticism intact, I do believe that much of the information I reported about autism spectrum disorders in my article has stood the tests of time and replication. I am inclined to conclude, therefore, that, if studies by Uta Frith, Franscesca Happé, and others are seen as contributing to the oppression of people with autism, the problem may be less with the information about patterns gleaned from quantitative and qualitative data than with how this information is used. Descriptions of the range of social differences and atypical language use of people with autism can certainly be used to denigrate and exclude; language can be transformed into destructive labels; biology can be mistaken for destiny. But if cognitive analyses of autism are handled with sensitivity and intelligence and if we also keep in mind the history of educational exclusion and the insights of disability studies, they can be used instead to inform effective instruction of students who would otherwise struggle to learn in college classrooms.

In a related vein, Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage express concern that I overzealously sought a label for Gregory's difference. My necessary omission of detail about Gregory may have allowed them to assume the conclusion that he had Asperger's was without sufficient evidence, but this is not so. While I acknowledge that labels—any labels—can constrain thinking, understanding that

Gregory was on the autism spectrum gave me access to valuable information as I made decisions about how best to teach him. It is important to emphasize, as well, that Gregory's story is exceptional, not exemplary. We should expect that most students on the autistic spectrum will identify themselves as such; they will come to us and say "I have Asperger's" or "I have autism," and they will expect us not only to know what that means, but what to do.

As I consider the limited information presently available to writing instructors about teaching college-age students on the autism spectrum, it is clear that we do not yet know enough to draw firm conclusions about the most effective approaches. Paul Heilker wisely reminds us that, in addition to turning to scholarship in disability studies, we should consider a rhetorical perspective. Indeed, I support his implicit argument that we should explore all possible resources as we address the question of how to teach college writing to students on the autism spectrum. The question at this point is not whether to initiate further inquiry at the college level, but where to go from here. One task before us is to examine the diverse ways in which our colleagues in elementary and secondary schools have, in dialogue with researchers, addressed the challenges of neurologically diverse classes for the past two decades. After all, it is thanks to their work and the extraordinary effort and dedication of parents that more students on the autism spectrum are now choosing to go to college. We must also, with-

out a doubt, find ways to foster open discussion about autism in the writing classroom, a conversation that includes the students themselves.

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Ann Jurecic,
Rutgers University