Arguing for Access: Everyday Rhetorical Labor of Disability

By

Annika Konrad

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This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:
Morris Young, Professor, English
Christa Olson, Associate Professor, English
Kate Vieira, Associate Professor, English
Jenell Johnson, Associate Professor, Communication Arts
Stephanie Kerschbaum, Associate Professor, English, University of Delaware

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Abstract

Arguing for Access: Everyday Rhetorical Labor of Disability theorizes rhetoric of public engagement from the lived communicative experiences of people who are blind and visually impaired. Through semi-structured rhetorical life history interviews with nineteen people who are blind and visually impaired and rhetorical analysis of first-person narratives produced for a community-writing project, I investigate how people learn and use literate and rhetorical practices for public engagement with disability. The daily, public work of access involves developing and deploying complex verbal and embodied strategies for countering deficit discourses and reconfiguring normative relations to motivate and teach interdependence. I call this daily demand for rhetorical activity *everyday rhetorical labor of disability*, and I explore how it manifests in three contexts: professional, informational, and social.

In professional contexts, my analysis demonstrates how what I call *normative workplace commonplaces* shape arguments about work and working bodies and construct barriers to access for workers with disabilities. In informational contexts, I show how what I call *technological commonplaces* shape claims about who uses which technologies, for what purposes, where, when, and how, creating the need for rhetorical labor from users of adaptive tools of information access. In social life, my analysis demonstrates how participants must deploy *a rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence* to teach non-normative ways of moving and thinking about humanness, responsibility, agency, and community. Taken together, my analysis of participant rhetorical experience in these three contexts reveals real social, emotional, and material consequences of everyday rhetorical labor of disability. *Access fatigue*, a phenomenon observed in the data, points to the lived consequences of such demands, demonstrating how the constant demand for rhetorical self-invention and pedagogy affects individuals’ sense of self and depletes

their energy for the rhetorical pursuit of access and inclusion. Ultimately, *Arguing for Access* provides empirical evidence of the lived consequences of a logic of individual rhetorical responsibility for justice and offers conceptual frameworks for examining other lived rhetorical experiences of difference.

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Chapter 1: Disability as Lived Rhetorical Experience

"Looking back, there have been only a handful of relationships in my life where access intimacy has existed. And in most of them access intimacy was not instant, but built and cultivated, with me bearing the brunt of the work."

–Mia Mingus

"…what if the people calling for this change were not only those marked 'deaf,' but all participants in the rhetorical situation?"

–Margaret Price (Yergeau et al.)

For nearly a decade, I told no one that at age fourteen I was diagnosed with a blinding disease. My parents knew about it because they were in the exam room when it happened, but otherwise only my two siblings knew. The doctor did not use the words "blinding disease." He told us that my vision is not correctable because I have "rod-cone dystrophy" and proceeded to tell me in a jovial manner that I would be "fine" because I had a boyfriend and I got good grades in school. I agreed that getting good grades is helpful, but I wasn't sure why having a boyfriend mattered. In subsequent years, the doctor jokingly encouraged my dad to buy me a convertible as he authorized my application for a driver's license, bypassing the legal requirement for a vision test.

The doctor's positivity confused me because a quick search on even a pre-millennium version of the Internet revealed that rod-cone dystrophy results in varying degrees of blindness for people at different stages in their lives. I periodically typed the words "rod-cone dystrophy" into my search engine for years to come but found little certainty about my future. We visited more and more specialists who would not say for sure if I would continue to lose vision. Because it felt so uncertain, for the most part my family and I did not talk about it, and I couldn't conceptualize how to tell people that I might lose my vision. I figured if I didn’t talk about it, I could make myself forget about it.

In college, I found that I couldn’t always forget about it. I found myself in large lecture halls where I would be forced to take a seat far from the front of the room and would struggle to see the slides. As a new sophomore with seasoned confidence, I walked up to a professor after the first day of lecture to ask if she could send me the slides so that I could see them. She gave me a quick and firm “no,” saying that I would need documentation from the disability resource center on campus. I found her response jarring, and I had no idea what she was talking about. I did not like the word “disability,” and a quick visit to their website made it clear to me that I would not be able to secure documentation from my doctor in time to receive the slides for the next lecture. Instead, I dropped the class and began enrolling in smaller classes that included less visual information displayed from a distance. I became an English major because I loved to write, but I wonder if I would’ve chosen a different major if I’d had appropriate resources for accessing visual information.

That same semester, I met someone I felt comfortable talking to. He told me that his anxiety disorder makes it so that he sometimes needs to quickly leave lecture halls, and the disability resource center made sure that he has priority seating near exits. When I told him about my “vision problem,” as I called it at the time, he told me that I can get help and that I should go to the disability resource center. That person is now my husband.

I did eventually go to the disability resource center, but it took me another seven years or so to become comfortable speaking about my disability. Slowly, I began to realize that there are situations in which it might be helpful if other people knew about my disability. I had countless awkward interactions in which I attempted to disclose or explain my vision impairment, and people’s reactions rattled me. Most people didn’t seem to understand or couldn’t understand because I don’t look disabled (“Why don’t you just get glasses?”). Other times people reacted with sadness and pity (“I am so sorry” or “That is a tragedy”). I couldn’t rationalize why I would communicate with people about it if they left me feeling sorry for myself or confused by their inability to understand. Every time I tried to talk about it, rather than progressing, it felt more like I was regressing further away from acceptance. The longer I remained silent, however, the more I felt like I was hiding a significant part of myself from even some of my closest friends.

When I moved back to Madison to pursue my Ph.D. in 2011, I saw a new ophthalmologist who for the first time in my life referred me to a low vision specialist named Marshall Flax. Marshall treated me unlike anyone in the field of vision services had before—he asked me about my life, restructured the exam to emphasize what I can see rather than what I cannot see, and respected my preferences and choices about assistive tools. And in what is always a stressful moment, he made me laugh and made me feel good about myself despite my vision loss. As part of his services, he told me about a local support group that he facilitates for people who are blind and visually impaired. Initially I brushed off the idea; I had never thought of myself as someone who needed a support group. Like my vision impairment, I made myself forget about the support group for a couple months, but then I went.

The idea for this dissertation was born while I was sitting in that first support group meeting. I was captivated by people’s stories. They told stories about disability I had never heard before, and I knew I would never hear them outside those walls. They told stories about communication challenges like the ones I had faced and more: How do I deal with the guilt I feel about having to ask friends for rides? How do I get my employer to buy me a phone that is more accessible? How do I work up the courage to begin using a white cane in public? How do I handle my mother who breaks down crying every time she remembers I'm losing my vision? What do I do when my friends ask me to come over to watch the Packers game and I can't see the television?

I quickly recognized that these are not stories that people typically hear about disabled people. Mainstream media representations of disability often perpetuate stereotypes that have little to do with the realities of disabled people's lives. For example, it is common to hear about a blind man who climbed a mountain or biked across the country or a woman who regained her hearing. Too often, disability is only interesting when it is overcome or cured. I had long felt the dehumanizing pain of discourses of disability that emphasize nothing but cure. I would accept a cure if it became available but understanding disability as nothing more than an experience to be fixed does not make living with an incurable disability a positive experience. The stories I heard during the support group meetings were not about curing or overcoming; they were about learning how to interact with the world as a person with a disability. Listening to people tell stories about their everyday experiences with blindness made me wonder what effects those stories might have on public perceptions of disability. I already knew from my own experience that audience reactions to disability are important. Time and again I had encountered people's reactions to my own disclosures and my own seeming able-bodiedness, and too often, their reactions stifled my communication.

My instinct as a teacher and scholar of Composition and Rhetoric was to start a writing group. The connections I now see between writing, public rhetoric, audience, and advocacy were not clear to me at the time, but I knew that a writing group would be a way for me to learn more and to contribute to a community. It is true that part of my reason for starting the writing group was selfish—I realized that one way I could begin to better understand my own disability was to bring a familiar lens to it. I felt comfortable helping people with their writing and storytelling, but I felt uncomfortable with the idea of my own disability and how to communicate about it. A writing group, I thought, might help me learn about what it means to interact with the world as a person with a disability.

When I first planned the community writing project, I had little idea of what people might want to write about, for what purposes, and for whom, or even if they would want to write. Staff members of a statewide nonprofit organization that I partnered with assured me that people in Wisconsin who are blind and visually impaired have lots of stories to tell, but many of them have no outlet for sharing them. Early in our writing group conference calls, we agreed that we believe stories have the power to effect change, and we decided that we would like to use our stories about our experiences to expose public audiences to the daily realities of living with a disability. We decided that publishing on a Wordpress blog is an accessible way to reach both sighted and unsighted audiences and we named our blog “The Outlook From Here” after a long conversation about the pitfalls of words like “view” and “perspective” that assume vision. I guided the group by providing a structure for sharing drafts and feedback, and they guided me as individuals with a wealth of experience communicating about disability. It quickly became clear to me as I listened to our brainstorming sessions that individuals had encountered and continue to encounter countless situations in which they communicate with the world about their disability.

Communicating with the world about disability is something I knew only a little about. I knew from my personal experience that it is hard. I knew that the words do not always come easily for me and I knew that no one had ever taught me how to do it. I knew that everyday stories about disability like the ones I had heard inside the walls of the support group were not commonly found in mainstream media. And I sensed from our group conversations that people seem to use rhetoric in their daily lives. But I did not know the range of rhetorical strategies that individuals might use, why they might use them, where, or when. I wanted to know how people learned these rhetorical strategies, how they determine their effectiveness, how they revise them over time, and how different people develop different rhetorical approaches. It was clear to me from my involvement with the community writing project that living with a disability requires a lot of public rhetorical activity, but I had a suspicion that individuals were given little or no guidance in how to do it.

After four years of facilitating the community writing project, I have come to see our written work as a response to the rhetorical situations that individuals find themselves in. While the focus of this dissertation is not on the community writing project itself, my involvement with the project has informed my research questions and study design and continues to influence my thinking about public rhetoric of disability (I have explored what the community writing project has taught me about writing and rhetoric in an article called "Why Study Disability? Lessons Learned from a Community Writing Project" that was first published in *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning* in December 2014 and then was reprinted in *Best of the Journals in Rhetoric and Composition 2015-2016*, Parlor Press). My involvement with the community writing project led me to my original research questions, which broadly focused on what it means to communicate about disability and how people learn to communicate about it.

Over time, I realized that the purpose of this project is not to place more responsibility on individuals to communicate better about their disabilities; instead, the purpose is to listen to individuals' experiences to identify and trace how normative, ableist, and deficit ideas create and constrain rhetorical situations surrounding disability and access. My analysis shifted my focus from questions about individuals' learning to questions about the normative and deficit ideas that impinge on individuals' rhetorical lives. By identifying those ideas that create and constrain rhetorical situations around disability and access, I aim to expose the commonplaces, assumptions, and discourses that are concealed by everyday rhetoric of normalcy. Understanding the rhetorical experiences of people with disabilities helps to expose the unnoticed everyday rhetoric of normalcy that participants in this study labor against. I hope that readers will recognize their own ideas about disability in participant narratives about their interactions with the sighted world, realizing how their thoughts and actions impinge on the lives of people with disabilities. Above all, I hope that readers will take away a greater awareness of how they think about disability and interact with disabled people, and that even small changes in behavior can make a large difference.

As such, each of the chapters addresses the following questions:

- How and why is disability experienced as a rhetorical phenomenon?
- How do discourses about disability and access create and constrain rhetorical situations for individuals with disabilities?
- What are the lived consequences of being a disabled rhetor?

In the chapters that follow, I analyze participant accounts of their rhetorical experiences in three different contexts (workplaces, literacy contexts, and social life) to identify and trace the contours of normative and deficit discourses that create and constrain rhetorical situations around disability and access and to document the lived rhetorical realities of people with disabilities.

Literature Review

Scholars who work at the intersections of Disability Studies and Rhetorical Studies have established that disability is an experience that has many rhetorical dimensions, but the rhetorical labor that disabled individuals must perform on a daily basis to gain access has not yet been theorized. They have explored rhetorical moves common to disability experience like disclosure (Kerschbaum, "On Rhetorical Agency"; Price et al.), accommodations requests (Price et al.), passing (Brueggemann), as well as narratives (Couser) and myths (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*) of disability that shape rhetorical situations. These scholars have argued that rhetorical acts of access deserve to be understood as fraught processes, rather than mere expectations of disabled people. I contribute to the field's understanding of disability, embodied rhetoric and public engagement by theorizing the rhetorical act of access from the lived rhetorical experiences of people who are blind and visually impaired. I examine how expectations for rhetorical activity have real material, social, and emotional consequences in the lives of people with disabilities. My qualitative rhetorical approach provides empirical evidence of the lived consequences of normative and deficit ideas that create and constrain rhetorical situations around disability and access, as well as the lived consequences of a logic of individual responsibility for access. By investigating rhetorical activity broadly conceived across individuals' lifespans, this study provides empirical evidence for the lived consequences of the demands for rhetorical activity placed on the shoulders of disabled people. While I focus on only one population (people who are blind and visually impaired), I offer a qualitative rhetorical life history method that can be used to understand the nature and consequences of expectations for rhetorical activity in the lives of other marginalized people.

Cultural and Linguistic Landscape of Blindness

My rhetorical analysis draws upon work humanities scholars have done to understand the cultural and linguistic landscape of blindness. While humanities scholars have studied the linguistic and cultural significance of blindness by analyzing texts, films, artwork and autobiographical experience, fully understanding what it means to live with a disability, I argue, requires understanding how discourse structures, not merely represents, disability experience. The prior work of humanities scholars on linguistic and cultural representation of blindness, however, provides important context for understanding the discursive landscape surrounding blind and visually impaired rhetors.

The metaphorical meanings of blindness play a role is the rhetorical work of access for people who are blind and visually impaired. The World Health Organization estimates that 253 million people worldwide are visually impaired, thirty-six million are blind, and 217 million have low vision (World Health Organization). While medical professionals define “visually impaired,” “low vision,” and “blind” differently across the globe, how these terms are used in public discourse reveals a wealth of meaning. English scholars (Bolt; Kleege; Kuusisto; Rodas) have catalogued the countless ways the word “blind” is used in the English language and how those metaphors speak volumes about the ways people think about what it means to be blind. Rodas lists some of the most common uses of the word in the English language: blind rage; blind trust; blind faith; blinded by the light; love is blind; the blind leading the blind; what’re you, blind?; blind as a bat; blind spot; etc. Rodas concludes that the most significant thing about blindness is that it “is ultimately about language and, for this reason, it exists as a reflection of the culture that describes it, rather than as a representation of the condition and identity it ostensibly names” (116). Each one of these metaphors reveals perceptions of blind people and what it means to be blind. For example, Rodas explains that the phrase “Blind leading the blind” implies that no one will get anywhere, no one will learn anything, nothing will happen. It implies that the blind cannot lead and cannot know, when in reality blind people can be excellent navigators and teachers, using tactile and audio cues in ways that sighted people are not trained to do:

> Even if we know that the blind can be excellent guides of themselves and others, our language bespeaks our unconscious belief that blindness is automatically agnostic, unknowing. Whether we speak of blind trust or of trusting blindly, the symbolic foundation is the same. Our language depends on the common understanding that not seeing equals not knowing. (122)

David Bolt argues that this assumption stems from "ocularcentrism," which "denotes a perspective—and, by extension, a subject position—that is dominated by vision" (17). Bolt offers the concept of ocularnormativism, or the experienced effects of ocularcentrism: "the perpetuation of the conclusion that the supreme means of perception is necessarily visual" (14) or "the mass or institutionalized endorsement of visual necessity" (5). Bolt explains that ocularnormativism stems from "the notion that seeing is synonymous with knowing, that a visual perception is necessarily the normal way of gathering knowledge" (18). If sight is considered the primary or normal way of understanding and gathering information, how do people who are blind and visually impaired practice rhetoric? If the word "blind" is already saturated with so much meaning, and in many cases meaning that implies that blindness equals not knowing, how do people who are blind and visually impaired navigate this discursive landscape? And if language constructs blind people as unknowing, then how do they become reliable rhetors?

Blindness is also a concept that tends to immediately elicit fear, so much that some people who are blind and visually impaired avoid using the label altogether. Georgina Kleege explains that many people who are visually impaired spend a great deal of time pretending to be sighted to avoid eliciting fear and hopelessness. Kleege argues that the most common uses of the word "blind" reflect that, "Americans' fear of blindness is second only to their fear of cancer, and as ancient as the fear of darkness" (27). In a study published in 2016 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Ophthalmology*, Scott et al reported that most respondents to their survey about public attitudes about eye and vision health rated losing vision as the worst possible health outcome (1113). Kleege claims that the word "blind" no longer has the potential for neutral, descriptive meaning: "*Blind* means darkness, dependence, destitution, despair. *Blind* means the beggar in the subway station" (19, emphasis original). If "blind" is a word that is so heavily determined—by notions of fear, incompetence, deficit, and some would say, equivalent to death (Bolt), then how do people who are blind and visually impaired communicate about their experiences? How does one construct an identity and communicate about their self when their very existence is feared? How do people who are blind and visually impaired use rhetoric to navigate this complex of preconceived notions and narratives about their experience? And what can an understanding of the rhetorical practices of people who are blind and visually impaired tell us about what it means to seek access in our current society?

As outlined above, scholars in humanities have theorized about how language constructs perceptions of blindness and blind people, drawing conclusions based on analysis of literary texts, films, and autobiographical experience. What has not been attended to is how people who are blind and visually impaired navigate and respond to these metaphors and discourses in their daily lives. My purpose is to theorize the rhetorical act of access by analyzing personal accounts of experiences navigating and responding to discourses of blindness and disability in everyday life.

Rhetorical Nature of Disability and Access

Researchers working at the intersections of Disability Studies and Rhetorical Studies have begun to establish the rhetorical nature of disability and access. While many have commented on the laborious, unjust burden of individual responsibility for access, none have labeled, defined, or theorized the extent and consequences of the burden of rhetorical labor that disabled individuals bear in their everyday lives. Numerous scholars have begun locating access in relational and interactional space (Kerschbaum, *Toward a New* Rhetoric; Titchkosky), moving away from less dynamic approaches to access like checklists (Wood et al.) and bureaucratic approaches (Titchkosky). Jay Dolmage has described access as a "way to move," locating access in interactional space and time (24). Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Brenda Jo Brueggemann have argued that access always needs to treated as a site of interaction: "The disciplinary and the institutional, the discursive and the physical, must be considered always in interaction" (15). Similarly, Brenda Jo Brueggemann and Stephanie Kerschbaum invoke a Disability Studies imperative to demonstrate that disability is social by paying attention to interactions around disability: "how it [disability] exists in relational and situational contexts and in the environment and not just in the medical diagnosis and 'treatment' of it" (184).

Scholars have explored communicative events common to disability experiences like disclosure (Kerschbaum, "On Rhetorical Agency"; Price et al.), accommodations requests (Price et al.), and passing (Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear*). Through these communicative events, disability and access deserve to be understood as rhetorical processes, rather than uncontested responsibilities of disabled people. Price et al. point out that while Disability Studies scholars have long theorized disclosure and access as dimensions of disability experience that require collective, interactive, and dynamic negotiations among disabled and non-disabled people across space and time, it is uncommon to encounter such a dynamic approach to access in daily life. As such, I build upon the work of Margaret Price, Stephanie Kerschbaum, Jay Dolmage, Brenda Brueggemann, and others who have applied rhetorical theories to disability in interactional spaces to name and theorize the phenomenon of everyday rhetorical labor of access and its lived consequences. By naming and theorizing access in interaction through the lens of rhetorical labor, I aim to inspire everyday interactions around disability that deploy tenets of Disability Studies like interdependence, valuing a diversity of bodies, creativity, and openness.

Scholars in Disability Studies have commented on the rhetorical labor required for seeking access, using their own personal anecdotes to demonstrate its lived reality. Both Brenda Brueggemann's and Stephanie Kerschbaum's narratives of their experiences as deaf students and faculty members in "Disability Representation: Disclosure, Access, and Interdependence" point to the "behind-the-scenes access work" that they must do to be able to do their jobs (186). For example, Brueggemann explains that she has strategically archived for over a decade every email she has sent related to access, and in that time, she collected "just over 2,000 emails that were exchanged just in order to make it possible for me to do my job as a faculty member" (Brueggemann and Kerschbaum 185). Kerschbaum describes that "advocating for access has always been part of my unofficial job description—part of the work I have to do in order to be able to do the work I need to do to be successful" (Brueggemann and Kerschbaum, 186–87). Both Brueggemann and Kerschbaum stress the importance of involving others, including supervisors, colleagues, staff members, and administrators, in "access work." Brueggemann and Kerschbaum conclude: "Indeed, life with a disability in higher education is as much about ourselves and our disabilities as it is about the others who are moving along with us and the ways that we can support and cultivate interdependence within different pockets of the humanities" (192). Brueggemann and Kerschbaum also point out that their 'access work' has time and again been deterred by stigma. For example, Brueggemann describes that when she went on the job market for the first time, right after the passing of the ADA, she declined to disclose her disability and her interviewees chose not to ask, which in retrospect she attributes to the stifling forces of stigma. Kerschbaum describes that in her second year in her tenure-track position, she arrived at a presentation to find out that no interpreter was present and so she decided to leave to use her time otherwise, but she continued to worry about how her decision to leave would be perceived by other faculty. Kerschbaum also describes how sometimes her students write in their evaluations of her teaching that their only problems had to do with the teacher's deafness. Brueggemann and Kerschbaum use their personal experiences to suggest that interdependence is a goal we need to achieve in academic professional life, but it remains elusive how to foster such interdependence in social and professional life.

Deepening our understanding of access as "a way to move," scholars have also applied several key rhetorical theories, including *kairos*, agency, and *métis*, to help explain the interactional nature of disability. Margaret Price has drawn attention to the ways power relationships shape the interactional spaces around disability and access. Price theorizes interactions around mental disability in higher education using rhetorical theory of *kairos*, arguing that we need to pay attention to how access is negotiated in kairotic spaces, which she defines as "the less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged" (*Mad at School* 74). Price argues that kairotic spaces are important to pay attention to because they combine "spontaneity with high levels of professional/academic impact" and examining power relationships is inherent to understanding how they work (Yergeau et al.). Price adds that people do not perceive or experience these spaces in the same ways:

> …their impact tends to be underestimated by those who move through them with relative ease. The importance of kairotic space will be more obvious to a person who—for

> example—can hear only scraps of a conversation held among a group sitting at a table, or who needs more than few seconds to process a question asked of her in a classroom discussion. (*Mad at School* 77)

Price's attention to how power relationships in "less formal, often unnoticed" spaces shape access provides a useful framework for tracing how power circulates through everyday interactions around disability and creates a daunting demand for individual rhetorical labor.

Sushil K. Oswal uses Price's theory of kairotic spaces to explain how exclusionary institutional practices manifest on interactional levels, highlighting the burden of rhetorical labor that remains on the shoulders of people with disabilities:

> How often do faculty using wheelchairs need to remind their colleagues that a meeting in a less distant part of the campus would enable them to participate without losing precious time maneuvering through circuitous paths and barely accessible buildings? How many times do visually impaired faculty members have to hear that the presenter forgot to email them the handouts in advance, but that they will make sure to email them as soon as possible? How often does it occur to the presenter that a disabled faculty member cannot fully participate in the meeting without the resources everyone else can readily access in real time? (Yergeau et al.)

Oswal gestures toward a question of how the rhetorical labor of repeating and reminding audiences about access manifests in the lives of people with disabilities. Oswal points out how power relationships shape these kairotic spaces and can prevent disabled individuals from disrupting them to gain access: "disrupting the flow of a kairotic space is incredibly risky and dangerous for a junior member of the department in as elite an institution as the American university" (Yergeau et al.). In the pages that follow, I examine similar situations across contexts of social and professional life in which individuals need to repeatedly disrupt a norm that is structured by commonplaces, discourses, and ideologies.

Others have theorized the fraught nature rhetorical event of disability disclosure. Based on their survey of disclosure of mental disability among college and university faculty, Price et al. conclude that “Instead of being a single occurrence that leads to subsequent understanding, disability disclosure is better understood as an ongoing rhetorical process in which faculty members repeatedly need to address their disability for various audiences, across many different contexts. Price et al.’s survey results demonstrate that most faculty with mental disabilities are unaware of the accommodations available to them; they tend not to request accommodations; those who have disclosed their mental disabilities have received a range of positive and negative reactions; and the most important supports reported were significant others, family members, and friends but not supervisors, professional organizations, or on-campus mental health services. Stigma and fear of repercussions were cited as common reasons for why faculty choose not to disclose their mental disabilities. Kerschbaum takes disability disclosure as a rhetorical performance in which agency is negotiated in interaction and both speaker and audience need to understand disability as identity (“On Rhetorical Agency”). Kerschbaum puts it well when she says, “Deciding to openly talk about disability is not always an easy decision to make” ("On Rhetorical Agency," 56–7). By looking at her own personal experiences of disclosure in academic writing, as well as those of disability memoir writers like John Hockenberry and Georgina Kleege, Kerschbaum shows that disability disclosure is a “contested” rhetorical performance that reveals the ways “disability is such a contested site for identity performance” ("On Rhetorical Agency," 57). Kerschbaum argues that disability disclosure is complex because it requires that both the speaker and audience understand disability as an identity, not as a deficiency, and interactions between narratives, interlocutors, and contexts shape people's rhetorical agency. Kerschbaum calls for research that can "account for the vicissitudes of performance of disclosure," and it is these vicissitudes, and the resources available for navigating them that I uncover in this project ("On Rhetorical Agency" 69).

Given that disclosure has been theorized as an expectation that is in reality a fraught rhetorical process for disabled people, "passing" has been theorized as a strategic and subversive act (Brueggemann; Samuels). Although Brueggemann did not intend to study passing, in the study of deaf students she conducted for *Lend Me Your Ear* it was the one concept, more than anything else, that her deaf subjects talked about. Brueggemann calls passing "the art and act of rhetoric" (*Lend Me Your Ear* 82) and reports that passing is a personal goal for many deaf students (*Lend Me Your Ear* 40). Like disclosure, passing is not a straightforward rhetorical move—not everyone who has a disability can pass and there are many different choices involved in trying to pass. For example, Brueggemann explains that she has often attempted to pass as hearing by telling people that she is German, so that they attribute her speech to ethnicity rather than deafness. While passing is not always possible for people with visible disabilities, like others, I have found that people with vision loss often spend a great deal of time (sometimes decades) trying to pass as sighted. Some people put off using a white cane for as long as possible, and others strategically reveal and conceal their white cane or sunglasses, or they blame their clumsiness on being "spacey" or having had too much to drink (Alexander and Alper; Kear; Kuusisto; Knighton). While my project does not focus specifically on passing as a rhetorical act, by examining disabled individuals' rhetorical experiences broadly conceived, I demonstrate how passing is one choice among many that participants must make in order to gain access.

Disability Studies scholars have long been critical of the ways medical discourses construct disability as deficit, and rhetoric scholars have argued that medical discourses also constrain rhetorical interactions around disability. By examining authority and audience in the context of diagnosing deafness. Brueggemmn explains that because the field of audiology is predicated on the idea that deafness is a problem that can be ameliorated by assistive technologies, the person who is hard of hearing is stripped of authority even before they arrive at the audiology appointment (*Lend Me Your Ear* 123). The logic of science and classification prevail as the dominant modes of understanding deafness: "Science, as our master-myth, our cultural logos, does its fair share in also constructing the *ethos* and *pathos* of the audiological moment. Science solidifies, fixes the memory" (*Lend Me Your Ear* 127). Brueggemann describes that classification and measurement have immense influence in a disabled person's life, from educational services and employment possibilities to self and social perception:

> The scientific stone of classification is heavy indeed, and tossed in the cultural waters the circle widens, the ripple continues outward, as such labels also apparently paint profiles of one's cognitive, social, employment, relationship, and 'adjustment' capabilities. Classification speaks volumes. (*Lend Me Your Ear* 134)

Diagnostics and classification, while not the focus of this project, comprise part of the discursive backdrop of participants' rhetorical experiences of disability. For those participants who experienced vision loss later in life, the moment of diagnosis marked the beginning of a lifelong internal and external rhetorical battle with deficit models of disability.

While the field of Disability Studies has long been concerned with separating a social model of disability from a medical one, my project demonstrates how medical discourses of disability, which lodge the problem of disability within individual bodies, manifest in the rhetorical lives of people with disabilities. Alison Kafer, feminist studies scholar, explains that a medical model that perpetuates disability as deficit

> isn't limited to doctors and other service providers; what characterizes the medical model isn't the position of the person (or institution) using it, but the positioning of disability as an exclusively medical problem and, especially, the conceptualization of such positioning as both objective fact and common sense. (5)

Like Kafer, my goal is to demonstrate how a medical model of disability that constructs blindness as individual flaw/individual responsibility can be found in the deficit discourses that structure the rhetorical lives of people with disabilities.

Scholars who work at the intersections of Disability Studies, Rhetorical Studies, and Rhetoric of Health and Medicine have explored how medical discourses construct physical and mental disability as rhetorical deficit (Brueggemann; Price, *Mad at School*; Prendergast; Johnson, *American Lobotomy*). The lived consequences of discourses that construct disability and illness as individual flaw and individual responsibility, however, have not been accounted for. This study builds upon research at the intersections of Disability Studies and Rhetoric of Health and Medicine by providing empirical evidence of the lived consequences of logics of disability as individual flaw and individual responsibility. I argue that Rhetoric of Health and Medicine and Disability Studies need to be engaged in tandem because, together, they help us understand how medical and social understandings of disability inter-animate the rhetorical spaces surrounding health, disability, and wellness. I demonstrate how Disability Studies and Rhetoric of Health and Medicine, when engaged in tandem, reveal how our collective interpretive relations are responsible for ableist and exclusionary practices in everyday life. My study contributes empirical evidence of the ways deficit discourses manifest in and impinge on the rhetorical lives of people with disabilities.

Rather than focusing on a specific rhetorical act like disclosure or passing, I investigate rhetorical activity broadly conceived to provide evidence for disability "as an ongoing rhetorical process" (Price et al.) that involves individuals repeatedly encountering and countering normative and deficit ideas across multiple audiences and contexts over the course of a lifespan. To do so, I respond to Jay Dolmage's call for detailed studies that look at people with disabilities as "makers-of-meaning" (*Disability Rhetoric*, 95). Dolmage argues that the ways rhetoric shapes the idea of disability has prevented us from seeing people with disabilities as "makers-of-meaning":

> From antiquity to the very present, disability has been seen as something simple to trope and frame. In this way, rhetoric has been used to mark out and stigmatize disability, thus providing us with limited means of interpreting and understanding the role of people with disabilities in rhetoric and in society (*Disability Rhetoric* 83).

By analyzing participant accounts of their rhetorical practices, I identify how and when people become "makers-of-meaning." Dolmage uses *métis*, or "the rhetorical concept of cunning and adaptive intelligence" as a methodology for how to see people with disabilities as makers-of-meaning (5). He defines *métis* as "the rhetorical art of cunning, the use of embodied strategies, what Certeau calls 'everyday arts,' to transform rhetorical situations" (5). *Métis* is further described as cunning, embodied, and sideways moving rhetoric that is used to counter dominant narratives and myths about disability (*Disability Rhetoric)*. I use Dolmage's *métis* methodology as a lens through which to understand the rhetorical practices of people who are blind and visually impaired. Through rhetorical analysis of participant accounts of rhetorical experiences, I trace the contours of their cunning, embodied, sideways moving rhetoric and reveal the lived consequences of individual responsibility for access.

Ultimately, this study provides empirical evidence for an interdependent model of access for which the disability rights community has long been advocating. Price et al.'s survey results substantiate the argument that individuals with disabilities should not be solely responsible for the rhetorical work of disability access:

> In other words, the "visibility" metaphor implies accountability: it assumes that the disabled person who is "invisible" is responsible for making himself visible, or discernible. When we make this assumption, responsibility for alleviating injustice is placed upon the person suffering the injustice in the first place. Oppressed persons should not bear the burden of educating and reforming their oppressors, and yet, that is what the visible/invisible metaphor asks of disabled people.

By labeling, defining, and theorizing participant experiences with rhetoric across their lifespan in various contexts, I contribute two theories (*everyday rhetorical labor of disability* and *access fatigue*) that describe the lived consequences of a logic of individual responsibility for access and demonstrate the dire need for collective responsibility.

Qualitative Studies of Disability Self-Advocacy

While two qualitative studies of disability self-advocacy (Engel and Munger; Malhotra and Rowe) have been conducted, no qualitative rhetorical studies of disabled self-advocacy broadly conceived have been conducted. Findings from these two studies also gesture toward the burden of individual responsibility for access. In their study of how disabled people develop "advocate identities," Malhotra and Rowe share participant narratives that point to an emotional labor of disabled self-advocacy. One of their participants, Andrea, described the weight of managing social perceptions of her disability in the workplace in addition to managing the physical manifestations of her disability: "My body is my second job" (106). As Malhotra and Rowe put it, "This underscores that for many disabled people with significant impairments, managing both the disabilities and the impairment effects that may result can be an exhausting task that constitutes another job in itself" (106). Conducted from a rhetorical perspective, my study labels, defines, and theorizes the interactive and communicative labor that Malhotra and Rowe find at the center of self-advocate identity work.

Through a "sociolegal" lens, in *Rights of Inclusion: Law and Identity in the Life Stories of Americans with Disabilities* David Engel and Frank Munger highlight the discursive work that disabled people perform in everyday interactions to construct identities as rights-deserving people. One of their study participants, Jill, points to how the rhetorical work of access happens in even seemingly low-stakes, everyday space: "…rights can become active even in casual encounters around the coffee pot at work" (Engel and Munger 1). Engel and Munger propose that rights and identities exist in recursive relationships in which rights influence identity formation, but they are exercised by projecting a self that is perceived as excluded. By locating identity formation at the center of sociolegal experiences, Engel and Munger, while they do not linger on it, point to what I describe as the burden of rhetorical responsibility on the shoulders of disabled people. Engel and Munger found that while many of the people they interviewed were reluctant to make formal civil rights complaints against their employers (244-5), individuals are constructing identities as rights-deserving individuals in everyday spaces:

> For all of these reasons, individuals are reluctant to assert adversarial rights claims in the workplace, and our interviewees depended almost exclusively on rights becoming active in some other way—through the support of coworkers, through the unilateral actions of

> their supervisors, through corporate decisions to alter workplace environments or practices, or through more diffuse attitudinal changes or cultural and discursive shifts. (244-5)

Engel and Munger conclude that while various aspects of ADA law make many disabled people unlikely to take legal action, the availability of ADA rights allows individuals to perceive themselves as righteous, project their identities as such, and influence discourses around disability. In other words, the individual's perception of self is determined by the presence of ADA, which in turn allows them to educate others about their rights, without ever taking legal action. While not a rhetorical study, Engel and Munger's findings point to the need to understand the on-the-ground self-advocacy work that individuals with disabilities are doing to gain access in everyday interactions. By understanding access through the lens of everyday rhetorical labor of disability, I aim to offer an alternative for rhetorical responsibility for access.

Theorizing Rhetorical Labor of Disability

I theorize disability as an everyday rhetorical labor that is constructed by deficit discourses and normative relationality. Disability justice activist Mia Mingus has described the individual burden of access with what she calls "access intimacy," or a rare intimacy around access that happens between people unexpectedly or spontaneously without much effort. In contrast to "access intimacy," the majority of Mingus's relationships around access have required effort over time: "Looking back, there have been only a handful of relationships in my life where access intimacy has existed. And in most of them access intimacy was not instant, but built and cultivated, with me bearing the brunt of the work" (Mingus). This is exactly the kind of work that I theorize in this study. Rather than an intimacy, I examine access work as a "labor" because it is a work that involves a value exchange, and that value exchange can either be helpful or harmful. In explaining what is not ‘access intimacy,’ Mingus points to the kinds of harmful value exchanges that result from some experiences of access: “We have all experienced access that has left us feeling like a burden, violated or just plain shitty. Many of us have experienced obligatory access where there is no intimacy, just a stoic counting down of the seconds until it is over. This is not access intimacy.” In these cases, access may be created, but as Mingus describes, the disabled person, who has likely put in the effort to gain access, leaves the situation feeling no more empowered, invited, or welcomed as an equal member of the situation. Gaining access is extremely important, but the process of getting there is consequential too, and the lifelong rhetorical process of gaining access is a significant focus of this study.

My objective is to label, define, and theorize the burden of rhetorical labor that is placed on the shoulders of people with disabilities. By building theories from the ground-up, I aim to give readers the opportunity to experience interactions from the perspectives of people with disabilities. While this study calls attention to the demands placed on disabled people to be rhetorically responsible and the lived consequences of those responsibilities, at the same time my rhetorical analysis demonstrates how specific normative ideas create barriers to disabled individuals’ rhetorical effectiveness and therefore their access. I contribute two original theoretical frameworks to the study of disability rhetoric and public engagement: *everyday rhetorical labor of disability* and *access fatigue*. First, my analysis of participant accounts demonstrates how normative, ableist, and deficit ideas about disability and access create the demand for everyday rhetorical labor of disability. Second, my analysis of participant accounts demonstrates how a logic of individual responsibility for access has lived material, emotional, and social consequences for people with disabilities. In the following section I elaborate on how I arrived at these theoretical frameworks and how they are applied throughout this project.

Theoretical Framework

My project builds upon scholars' attention to the interactional nature of disability by showing how access depends on disabled individuals' own persuasive efforts of managing normative ideas and expectations about disability in interaction. By bringing a rhetorical lens to disabled individuals' firsthand accounts of their self-advocacy experiences, I make two main theoretical contributions at the intersections of Disability Studies and Rhetorical Studies: 1) while access is something that requires interactive participation, responsibility for advocating for access remains on the shoulders of disabled people, a phenomenon I call *everyday rhetorical labor of disability* and 2) the logic of individual responsibility for seeking access has material, social, and emotional consequences for disabled individuals, a phenomenon I call *access fatigue*. Together, *everyday rhetorical labor of disability* and *access fatigue*, bolstered by my rhetorical analysis of firsthand accounts from people who are blind and visually impaired, provide conceptual frameworks through which to see the dire need for collective responsibility for access.

Everyday Rhetorical Labor of Disability

I explore how certain bodies—those often marked by an exterior feature like a white cane, a guide dog, or sunglasses or by physical differences like rapid eye movement or lack of eye contact—are constantly called to persuade audiences to participate in access. I call this daily communicative work *everyday rhetorical labor of disability*, or the daily rhetorical work of mobilizing verbal and embodied persuasive strategies to move people into access. Moving audiences into access, I argue, involves encountering and countering deficit discourses and normative relationalities that create barriers to participatory access.

I consider the communicative labor of access rhetorical because it involves negotiating with an audience and reorienting relationships among people, resources, and ideologies in space and time. In *Toward a New Rhetoric of Difference*, Kerschbaum theorizes "markers of difference" as a rhetorical lens "because it emphasizes the relationship between speaker/writer and audience as well as the situated nature of all communicative activity—that acknowledge the important role identity categories play in interactions at the same time that it attends to difference as it is performed during the moment-to-moment vicissitudes of communication" (67). Much like "markers of difference," I define the labor of access as rhetorical because it involves a negotiation between speaker and audience. I argue that access is a rhetorical activity that involves dynamic negotiation of commonplaces, discourses, and normative modes of relationality that structure our thinking about ability and disability. The rhetorical act of access, however, is not simply a matter of semantics—the rhetoric of access structures how we distribute and allocate goods and resources in ways that have real material consequences for people with disabilities and people with other access needs.

I use the word "everyday" to call attention to the constant, daily demand for rhetorical labor that occurs in both informal spaces like copy rooms, street corners, and on busses as well as more formal spaces like workplaces, classrooms, and restaurants. I borrow the word "everyday" from Ralph Cintron's "rhetoric of everyday life" to describe how marginalized people use rhetoric to "create respect in condition of little or no respect" (x). Like Cintron, I use the term "everyday" to signal that participant rhetorical labor occurs on a regular, even daily basis because structures of normativity and ableism construct their beings as deficient.

I use the word "labor" to signal that this rhetorical work often involves a value exchange. I found that the majority of the rhetorical work that participants described is performed with the purpose of gaining access to something—either a material thing like a document or physical space or an immaterial thing like a sense of belonging or inclusion. And I call this everyday labor "rhetorical" because it is often persuasive—it is verbal and embodied communication that is used to persuade audiences to participate in the process of co-constructing access. If access is "a way to move," as Dolmage has posited, then it is inherently a persuasive act that involves moving beliefs, orientations, and normative ways of being in the world ("Mapping Composition," 24). Everyday rhetorical labor of disability, which describes how these persuasive acts of access are lived, is a phenomenon that has internal and external dimensions, both of which are important for understanding the consequences of a logic of individual responsibility for access.

External Rhetorical Labor

I use "external rhetorical labor" to refer to the outward-facing verbal and embodied strategies that participants use in rhetorical situations. My rhetorical analysis primarily focuses on participant accounts of the verbal and embodied persuasive strategies they deploy to gain access and acceptance. I follow in the tradition of Ralph Cintron, Vershawn Ashanti-Young, Victor Villanueva and Krista Ratcliffe who use rhetorical lenses to understand how marginalized people strategically speak back to structures that disempower them. More specifically, I use Jay Dolmage's *métis* methodology to document the sideways, cunning rhetoric that participants use to speak back to normative and deficit ideas that prevent their access and acceptance (*Disability Rhetoric,* 5). I perform rhetorical analysis on participant accounts of their rhetorical situations to identify the normative and deficit ideas specific to each context that demand and constrain rhetorical possibilities for individuals with disabilities. In part, my purpose in analyzing participant accounts of their external rhetorical labor is to showcase the range and depth of rhetorical skill that is required of people with disabilities. My focus on the development of rhetorical strategies over the lifespan adds to these conversations by calling attention to the normative discourses that place demands on marginalized bodies to learn rhetorical skill on the fly, on the ground, and spend a lifetime revising their self-presentations in response to audience reactions. This study reveals that despite a lack of support in self-advocacy, the economic, social, and educational success of people who are blind and visually impaired often hinges on their own persuasive efforts.

Internal Rhetorical Labor

While my analysis was designed to understand the rhetorical nature of participant interactions with other people, it unexpectedly revealed that there are internal dimensions of everyday rhetorical labor of disability, which I call "internal rhetorical labor." Internal rhetorical labor reveals the mental and emotional dimensions of communicating about disability. I argue that internal rhetorical labor of disability is particularly mentally and emotionally exhausting because it involves both rhetorical invention and invention of the self. This study reveals that every time a disabled person speaks, they must invent a self. Not only do participants think about rhetorical strategy—for example, what, when, where, and how to disclose or request access—but also how audiences will perceive them and their abilities. For people with visible disabilities, their physical embodiment often demands explanation or persuasive appeal, and for people with invisible disabilities, there are many situations in which they need to make decisions about their rhetorical activity. In both cases, participants must devote mental and emotional energy to both rhetorical invention and invention of a self that they hope will shape others' perceptions of them, all the while working against normative and deficit ideas that shape many audience opinions of them. Internal rhetorical labor is especially exhausting because it can be difficult to separate one's own sense of self from audience reactions, which are often influencing individuals' own senses of self. Narratives shared in this dissertation demonstrate how external and internal rhetorical labor operate like a "dynamic loop," as one participant, Lisa, put it, in which audience reactions and participants' external rhetorical labor are constantly re-informing one another, which can lead to a phenomenon I call *access fatigue*.

Access Fatigue

Access fatigue describes the lived consequences of a logic of individual responsibility for disability self-advocacy, or in other words, access fatigue is a consequence of the internal and external rhetorical burden that disabled individuals bear to constantly move people into the co-construction of access and inclusion. Findings from this study showcase the exhaustion that results from the constant, repetitive, recursive, and intensely personal experiences of having to argue for access. In the pages that follow I document how everyday rhetorical labor of disability is uniquely fatiguing because it often involves making one's self vulnerable, exercising agency in an unsupported rhetorical situation, tiresome repetition, and invention of self in response to normative and deficit ideas. Alarmingly, sometimes access fatigue causes people to not argue for their own access. Access fatigue demonstrates the dire need for collective responsibility for initiating and co-creating accessible spaces, opportunities, materials, and experiences.

Collective Responsibility for Co-Creating Access

I contribute to conversations about access by emphasizing collective responsibility, a move I accomplish by exposing the lived consequences of the logic of individual responsibility for access. Scholars in Disability Studies have long argued that access should not be approached as accommodating "problemed bodies," as Melanie Yergeau puts it (Yergeau et al.); instead access should be approached as an interdependent effort that requires and benefits all parties (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*; Jung, "Interdependency"; Price, *Mad at School*). Similarly, universal design frames access as adaptability that benefits everyone, not just people with disabilities. Others have warned that arguments for access that rely on mutual benefit, however, elide the disabled bodies who depend on access to participate (Hamraie; Dolmage, “Universal Design”). I center disabled bodies and reframe theoretical conversations about access by shifting focus to the lived consequence of individual responsibility for access. Together, *everyday rhetorical labor of disability* and *access fatigue* demonstrate how everyone is responsible for accessibility/inaccessibility, inclusion/exclusion, and respect/discrimination. This theoretical framework has also consequences for embodied rhetoric more broadly as people who are perceived to have non-normative bodies (because of gender, sex, race, class, religion, etc.) perform rhetorical work to enter normative spaces. *Everyday rhetorical labor of disability* and *access fatigue* provides frameworks through which to understand the nature of and demands on lived rhetorical experiences of embodied difference.

Methods

While qualitative studies of context-specific rhetorical experiences of people with disabilities are now beginning to surface, at the time of my study design, I found no models for qualitative studies of disabled individuals’ broad rhetorical experiences. Given the observations I had made about individuals’ constant revision of rhetorical strategies over their lifetime, I designed a method that would not only investigate individuals’ rhetorical experiences but also would allow access to the development of their rhetorical strategies over a lifetime. As such, I developed a disability rhetorical life history interview tool. While my method of analysis does not rely on life history, my method of collecting data by conducting rhetorical life history interviews uncovers the development of rhetorical strategy over a lifetime, which is necessary for understanding the relationship between rhetoric and lived experience. These rhetorical life histories reveal how demands for rhetorical activity are constant and change over time, and this constant demand for rhetorical activity occurs concurrently with bodies that also change over time.

Interview Tool

I used Deborah Brandt's literacy life history interview protocol as a guide for how to structure an interview that investigates the development of rhetorical strategy over the course of a lifespan (208-210). While Brandt's interview protocol investigates literacy, I used its organization as a model for designing a life history interview protocol that investigates rhetorical experience. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participant narratives about the development of rhetorical strategies over a lifespan and the various contexts in which individuals might communicate about their disability (see Appendix A). I designed the protocol by dividing it into four life stages (early childhood through teenage years, mid-life, middle adulthood through later adulthood) and seven contexts in which I hypothesized individuals might communicate about disability (school, work, family life, community, social life/leisure, medical contexts and social/political advocacy). I also asked participants questions about their "general relationship to disability" at each of their life stages in order to understand the relationship between the development of their disability experience and their communication experiences. My hypotheses about the life stages and possible rhetorical contexts were informed by the informal observations I did during the early stages of the community writing project. My interview protocol also included questions about participant experiences with the community writing project, but in most interviews, we did not get to discussing those questions. The interviews generally followed a life history format, beginning from the moment of diagnosis to present and they were semi-structured, allowing participants to describe the rhetorical events most memorable to them.

Participant Population

Participants were recruited from the statewide community writing project and my own involvement in local blind and visually impaired community events. Groups that were recruited included: people who identify as blind or visually impaired, family members or close friends of someone who identifies as blind or visually impaired, or professionals who work with people who identify as blind and visually impaired. I conducted interviews with nineteen blind and visually impaired individuals, one parent of a blind child, and two blindness professionals, one of whom is also visually impaired. Participant ages at the time of interview ranged from twenty-one to seventy-two, and they represent people who identify as blind, visually impaired, and low vision, though many of them use the terms interchangeably. Participants included those who have been blind since birth and those who began experiencing vision loss or blindness during childhood, adolescence and adulthood. All but one participant had earned or was pursuing a bachelor's degree or higher at the time of interview. Four blind or visually impaired participants were retired, two blind or visually impaired participants were students, two blind or visually impaired participants were unemployed, and eleven were at least partially employed at the time of interview.

Accessible Study Design

Given that people with disabilities have historically been viewed as incapable of making meaning (Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*; Price, "Disability Studies Methodology"), I designed my methods to allow people with disabilities to drive the knowledge-making process on both procedural and theoretical levels. I offered interviews in multiple formats: in person, over telephone, via Skype or via written exchanges over email. Given that access to technology and transportation are significant barriers for people who are blind and visually impaired, the large majority of participants elected to participate via telephone. Two local participants elected to conduct an in-person interview. Participants were also given several options for how to participate in the consent process: via online web form, as an email attachment, printed copy via mail, or orally over the telephone. All consent forms were shared in large print. I chose grounded theory as an appropriate method of analysis, in part, to allow participants' narratives to drive the theory-building process, a decision that is further explained below.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were semi-structured to allow participants to narrate the communication experiences most meaningful to them. Interviews ranged in length from one-and-a-half to three hours. To allow participant narratives to drive the meaning-making process, data was analyzed with a grounded theory approach. Theoretical sampling (Charmaz 96) was conducted after the first nine interviews, which led to the initial observation that participants perform daily communicative work to shape audience opinions of them and to gain access to both material things like documents and groceries and immaterial things like social inclusion and respect, a phenomenon I call everyday rhetorical labor of disability. Through an initial coding of my textual data from the interviews, I generated a list of about sixty descriptive codes that identify rhetorical moments and strategies that I observed in the early stages of this study. I conducted the final twelve interviews using targeted interview questions to elicit narratives focused on specific rhetorical experiences and strategies (see Appendix A). After conducting open coding on the final set of interviews, the large list of descriptive codes was categorized into three groups: 1) internal dimensions of rhetorical experience 2) external deployment of rhetorical strategies and 3) purpose/intended outcomes of rhetorical labor. Code group number three was divided into three categories that describe intended outcomes of participant rhetorical labor: a) access to inclusion b) access to institutions and c) access to information.

These three codes that describe the intended outcomes of participant rhetorical labor provided the organizational structure for this dissertation. Each chapter is focused on data collected with one of codes "a" through "c". Each chapter focuses on a specific context in which participants perform rhetorical labor. Chapter Two focuses on the rhetorical labor that participants perform to gain access to employment and workplaces. Chapter Three focuses on the rhetorical labor that participants perform to gain access to information. Chapter Four focuses on the rhetorical labor that participants perform to gain access to inclusion in social life. Additional coding was conducted for each chapter to arrive at more specific theories about the nature of participant rhetorical labor in each context. Details about additional coding methods are shared in each chapter.

Researcher Identity

Throughout, I critically engage my own identity as a visually impaired person. While many have commented on the dangers of academic navel-gazing, I strive to be transparent about the fact that my identity as a visually impaired person has played a significant role in my critical analysis. At times, sharing many of the same experiences as my participants was a highly emotional experience. In these moments of intense identification, it was sometimes hard for me to move beyond feelings of frustration to a place of more distanced critical analysis. Other times, sharing many of the experiences of my participants propelled my critical analysis. For example, for a long time I struggled to find a label for the general sense of exhaustion I noticed among participants from having to constantly perform rhetorical labor. I felt this exhaustion too, and sometimes I would move straight from a three-hour interview to a situation in which I had to advocate for my own access. Feeling this sense of exhaustion in my own body led me to arrive at the concept of “access fatigue.” I engage my own personal experiences in order to be transparent about how my own experiences both hinder and propel my critical analysis.

Sharing similar experiences as my participants has also given me access to a community I might not otherwise have had. It is possible that some individuals agreed to participate because they already had a relationship with me and wanted to help. In the case of those participants with whom I already had a relationship, I had to perform very little relationship-building in order to begin the interview. Those participants that I know well continue to contact me after the initial interview to update me on developments in their lives. Some participants continue to ask me about the development of the project, hoping to learn from its conclusions. It is also possible that some participants explained less to me because they knew that I have had similar experiences. In these instances, I encouraged participants to describe their experiences in detail because not all readers of my research will have had similar experiences. At the same time, our shared experiences allowed us to conduct the interviews more like conversations in which I sometimes offered anecdotes about my own experiences. It is true that sometimes the lines between researcher and friend have blurred.

Margaret Price argues that Disability Studies methodology should “make more space for explicit identification by researchers—not in a rote, ‘here’s my diagnosis’ way, but in ways that are characterized by creativity, contradiction, and revision over time” ("Disability Studies Methodology," 171). Price explains that one thing that makes Disability Studies methodology somewhat unique is that a researcher’s identification with disability might change over time—disability is not always a stable thing and Disability Studies scholars have long emphasized that most people will experience disability at some point in their lives. Disability Studies methodology, then, Price argues, should allow room for changes and revisions in researcher identification, and the purpose of researcher identification should not be to overshadow the subjects but to critically reflect on the relationship between the researcher and the subjects ("Disability Studies Methodology"). My goal, then, is to critically engage the fact that the development of this project has coincided with the development of my own identification as a person with a disability. In many ways, I see myself as a participant in my own study—I play the official roles of community writing project coordinator and researcher, but I, too, am a learner.

Chapter Overview

In the following pages I alternate between the varied critical lenses I bring to the rhetorical labor of access—my own personal experience, the voices of community writers, and my rhetorical analysis of participant narratives. The three body chapters are organized around “interchapters” in which I offer my own stories and those of community writers to demonstrate how the community writing project, my own personal experience, and this research study are in constant conversation. My choice to include these interchapters reflects how community engagement, embodied personal experience, and qualitative rhetorical interviewing are all central to my methodology. Each interchapter includes personal and community stories that engage concepts central to my analysis in the following chapter. These interchapters demonstrate how community engagement and personal experience can be used as analytical tools for public rhetoric.

The three body chapters are case studies of contexts in which participants perform *everyday rhetorical labor of disability*: workplaces, literacy contexts, and social life. In Chapter Two, “Normative Commonplaces and their Effects on Accessibility in Workplaces,” my analysis of participant narratives of workplace interactions reveals how what I call *normative workplace* *commonplaces*, or definitions of when, where, how, and by whom work is performed and measured, fix ableist arguments about work in place. Narratives featured in this chapter reveal how participants perform everyday rhetorical labor in order to dislodge normative workplace commonplaces so that they can access the resources they need to perform work and to be perceived as professional and productive. This chapter calls attention to commonly held normative ideas about work and working bodies that need to be collectively reimagined in order to create accessible workplaces.

In Chapter Three, "Technological Commonplaces and the Rhetorical Labor of Information Access," I analyze participant accounts of their experiences accessing information through adaptive tools and strategies. I argue that technological commonplaces that structure our understanding of the relationship between disability, technology, and ability fail to account for the social and ideological contexts in which participants interact with information. While assistive technologies and adaptive strategies do provide technical access, they also exist in rhetorical and ideological space, leaving individuals with the rhetorical burden of countering normative and deficit ideas about adaptation. I advocate for a socio-techno-rhetorical approach to adaptive tools that takes into account the myriad ways adaptation is social, ideological, and rhetorical.

In Chapter Four, "The Rhetorical Pedagogy of Interdependence," I analyze participant experiences of seeking access in social life, examining how normative concepts of human relationality, agency, and responsibility shape those interactions and disrupt opportunities for interdependence. I propose a structure of interdependent relationality, through which I identify specific modes of relationality that people can take up and use to practice interdependence. I accomplish this by analyzing participant accounts of seeking access in social life as rhetorical pedagogies. I examine how participants teach specific actions and ways of thinking about humanness, responsibility, agency, and community. I argue that interdependence requires rhetorical pedagogy because it teaches people skills of public engagement and ways of being in community.

In the fifth and final chapter, “Consequences of the Logic of Individual Responsibility for Access,” I explore the commonalities across all three case studies to build a theory of *access fatigue*. I outline how *access fatigue* functions as a uniquely rhetorical phenomenon and how everyone is responsible for discursively constructing accessibility/inaccessibility, inclusion/exclusion, and respect/discrimination. I also discuss how a “qualitative rhetorical disability life history” could function as a method for investigating embodied rhetoric. While focused on the experiences of people who are blind and visually impaired, this project contributes theoretical and methodological frameworks for examining how difference is noticed and created in everyday interactions, the rhetorical work that individuals must do to enter normative space, and the emotional and intellectual consequences of that rhetorical work. Finally, I discuss the implications of this project for pedagogy in its theoretical contributions to instruction in composition and rhetoric and the curricular model this project provides for investigating public rhetoric through community engagement.

Conclusion

While this project is not about me, in part it documents my learning about my own relationship to disability and how to communicate about it. I have learned and continue to learn so much from the writers I have worked with and the individuals I interviewed. The pages that follow represent only one small piece of the large community that has welcomed me and opened their lives to me. The process of writing this dissertation has helped me develop a political orientation toward disability, not only for my own sake but also for the sake of others. I communicate about my visual impairment more easily now, but I would be lying if I said it is always easy.

Communicating about disability is rarely easy. There are countless contexts in which we are called to communicate about it, and the rhetorical situations are always changing. More than anything, the interviews I collected demonstrate that communicating about disability is a constant process that involves encountering new situations, audiences, ideas and purposes. There are some common tropes that run across various rhetorical situations—like disclosure, accommodations requests, soliciting a shopper, requesting help from a bus driver—but the details vary. People react differently, technologies change, social atmospheres change, and political environments change. In the midst of all these changes is a person with a physical difference—something that is rarely, if ever, life threatening—that makes living in an environment built for sighted people difficult. And yet, the experience of living with little or no vision is commonly perceived as a death sentence (Kleege). While my arguments in this project contribute to rhetorical studies, composition pedagogy, and Disability Studies, the broad purpose of this project is to honor and raise awareness about the communicative labor that individuals with disabilities must perform, learn, troubleshoot, and revise as they move through the world.

Interchapter: Access to Employment

I am a relatively new teaching assistant. It is my second year of teaching and I am 23-years old. I love teaching, and things are going pretty well. Students like me, and I like them. But there is one thing I still haven't figured out, and I worry about how it might affect my relationships with students. I care about my relationships with students and I don't want them to think that I don't care about them. I worry that I'm not making eye contact with them when they speak, and I worry that I am not seeing them when they pass me in hallways. I want them to know that I want to say hi and that I'm not ignoring them. I want them to know that I can't read their handwriting when they ask me to look at their notebooks. I don't want them to think I don't care about them. I need to find a way to tell them that I am visually impaired.

***

"And, there's one more thing I want to tell you about myself," I say standing in front of a group of twenty-five first-year students sitting in an awkwardly arranged computer classroom. I'm holding the syllabus in my hands and it starts to flutter as my hands start to shake. "I'm visually impaired," I say, "so if you see me on the street and I don't see you, it's not because I don't like you, it's because I can't see you." The room is silent. I thought that might be a little funny. But it isn't. I know there are other ways my vision impairment might impact my work as a teacher, but I don't know how to explain it to my students. I worry about what they will think of me and that they won't understand. But the room is silent. I think about how I don't look visually impaired so they're probably just confused. And they probably don't even know what visually impaired means. Will they even remember what I said? I move on to talking about the requirements for the course and the lesson plan for the day, and I never mention it again and no one asks.

***

It's the middle of the summer and I receive a message on Facebook from a name I don't immediately recognize. I take another look and recognize the name as one of my former first-year writing students. She wants to know when my intermediate writing class will be offered so she can enroll in it. I answer her question and she responds with a question I'm not expecting: "Okay, by the way, I was wondering what condition it was that you have in your eyes. You mentioned it briefly in class, but I was a little more curious...if you don't mind my asking." I am surprised to get this question in the middle of the summer, so many weeks after I mentioned this to the class. I can't even remember when I mentioned it but it was likely on the first day of the semester. I wonder about what makes her so curious. I answer in a fairly technical manner, naming the condition and explaining that there is no cure. She responds with, "Wow! That's crazy, and I hope that there is a breakthrough in research for you, honestly." I don't respond.

***

"I just wanted to know, how can you be so open with people about your disability?" a student asks as she nervously approaches me after all the other students have left after the first day of class. "Oh! I say, well, it's taken me a long time, it hasn't always been easy." "Yeah, I just think that most professors won't talk about disability," the student says. I agree and go on to explain that I find it important to talk about accessibility on the first day of class so that students feel welcome to talk with me about their access needs and because I need students to participate in creating access for me. "Yeah, I'm just not sure, I have a McBurney visa [the name for the university's disability documentation system], but I'm not sure…" she says as she starts to leave the room. "Okay, let me know what I can do to help," I say. "Yeah, she says, it's just, I'm not sure" and then she runs out of the room.

***

I walk into a meeting in which a colleague is giving a presentation. I see that they're using presentation slides, and I remember that I forgot to email them to ask for electronic copies of their materials in advance. I start feeling tired. I go through a loop of self-blame, asking myself why I didn't remember to email the person in advance to ask for digital copies, but then I remind myself that I am busy, just like anyone else, and I cannot possibly remember to do this every single time I attend a meeting or a presentation. Then I grow frustrated that there is no precedent for presenting information in multiple formats. I think about how that would be so much easier. The presenter starts showing images and says nothing about what the images are or why they're important. The audience laughs in reaction to an image and I have no idea why. I laugh along with them. A handout is passed around and we are asked to read it. I take in every word that the presenter says, and every word that members of the audience say, but nothing on the slides and nothing on the handout. I pretend to look at the slides and at the handout, but I make do with only what is said. I don't even think about all the information I'm missing because this is just what I do. I've been doing this since I began losing sight of the green and red markings on transparencies in fifth grade.

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I'm Blind–I Quit

By Theresa Sweeney-Smith

February 4, 2015

I am a person of very low vision, however, I have 20/20 vision when it comes to the characteristics that make up a really good person.

I have worked for Mary Linsmeier Schools for 27 years. Shortly after I started, David Linsmeier moved back from Colorado with his family to take over so his parents could retire.

Most of the personnel in the office were somewhat skeptical about this young man, who is exactly 6 months my junior, taking over. I, on the other hand, am someone that can embrace change, and I was very interested to see what changes would be made.

Dave was enthusiastic, had a good sense of humor and was genuinely a very nice guy. On his first day of work dressed in a white shirt, black suit and tie, he took off his jacket and assisted someone who was frantic about locking the computer room door and leaving their keys inside. Dave smiled and said, “Oh don’t worry. I can get them for you.” He pulled himself up through the drop down ceiling and dropped down into the office and opened the door.

This first impression stayed with me as he was dressed in a power suit and did not hesitate getting dirty. He was also very humble about what I considered to be a pretty physical accomplishment.

In 1993, the glaucoma that had plagued me since 1972, took enough of my vision that I was forced to make my decision not to drive any longer.

I married my husband, Gary, and we moved about 25 miles from my office. His job did not always allow him to bring me to work and I was forced to make the decision to quit my job.

I reluctantly wrote the letter with my reasons for resignation. I put it on Dave’s shelf at 8:30 am and waited all day for him to say something about it to me. At 4:55 pm, he came into my office and told that he didn’t want me to leave. He said “This is a new millennium. We have computers and I am sure we can work something out.”

I was saved. I was able to keep a job that I really loved and continue to work with people with whom I had built relationships. I continued to work full time, but worked from home two days per week which allowed my husband to be able to schedule early weekly appointments.

Dave wanted a solid work team. He asked our opinions and was a good listener. He gave all of us the ability to make decisions and encouraged us to take classes to be good decision makers.

I took courses and credentials in both Human Resources and Early Childhood Administration, and Dave assisted me with the technology that I needed to complete the classes and to be effective in my position.

Although my eye sight has deteriorated, Dave still expects me to accomplish tasks and think out of the box. He challenges me, continues to rely on me, and knows that I will work hard for him. He assists me when I have a technology problem and in some cases, has taught me how to solve my own problems.

Dave has not changed since the first impression I have of him. He remains physically strong and has just hiked rim to rim of the Grand Canyon. He is funny, kind, and smart, and has been a good teacher and brought out the best in me.

Not everyone recognizes who is mentoring them during the time they are being mentored. Sometimes people reflect years later and determine that it was a parent, teacher, neighbor or family member that supported them, motivated them and made a life-changing positive difference.

I am lucky to call mine a friend.

Chapter 2: Normative Commonplaces and Their Effects on Accessibility in Workplaces

Access to employment is a significant rhetorical hurdle for people who are blind and visually impaired. As Mary Kathleen describes in “I’m Blind—I Quit,” her journey of remaining employed involved both overcoming her own doubts about her ability to work and finding a mentor who could help her figure out how to be an employee with a disability. Mary Kathleen’s narrative, however, stands out among countless other narratives in which participants described rhetorical situations in workplaces that they could not advocate their way through. As I make clear in my own vignettes, I too have gone through a long journey of figuring out how to disclose my visual impairment to my students and yet I continue to face countless situations in my work life in which I have to strategize to gain access. Gaining access, I’ve come to understand, is much more than a straightforward request. By examining participant narratives of workplace experiences through the lens of rhetorical commonplaces, I identify specific deficit discourses and normative relations that shape the everyday rhetorical labor of access in workplaces.

To introduce my central question about the nature of rhetorical labor of access in workplaces, I begin with two examples from the data. Lisa is a former kindergarten teacher who is visually impaired. When her visual impairment made it difficult for her to see students raising their hands to be called upon, she taught students how to participate in turn-taking conversation. While Lisa’s young students recognized the value of her adaptive strategy, her employer did not. She recalled that one employer said, “You don’t have control of the classroom because they’re not raising their hands.” In contrast, a subsequent employer, who viewed the same adaptive strategy as valuable, said, “That’s brilliant because it’s teaching them how to have conversation rather than dictating!” Lisa’s example begs the question of how two employers can view the same adaptive strategy in such different ways—what assumptions did Lisa’s employers hold that drove their claims about the value of her adaptive strategy? And how did their assumptions about work and working bodies shape the rhetorical possibilities for Lisa's self-advocacy?

Abigail, a retired clinical psychologist, noticed a similar tension in her career between her access needs and how her colleagues perceived her capacities. She remembers her experience of reaching supervisor status as stressful. Negotiating her need for access with her authority status left her feeling conflicted: "I think when I became a boss there was more negotiating that had to happen because in one way I was telling people what to do as a boss, but in another way I was depending on them to help me be all that I could be." Together, Abigail's and Lisa's narratives raise the following questions about the discursive relationships between disability, authority, and access in workplaces: why is having access needs diametrically opposed to having authority? How do access needs disrupt normative workplace practices? What particular practices and attitudes make workplaces less accessible to people with disabilities? And how can normative practices be disrupted to create more accessible workplace environments?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title One, which provides legal protections for people with disabilities in hiring and employment contexts, articulates that negotiating reasonable accommodations should be an interactive process between employer and employee (O'Brien 12). The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals detailed four steps that the interactive process should include:

> First, the employer and the employee are to analyze a 'particular job involved and determine its purpose and its essential functions. Second, the employer consults with 'the individual with a disability to ascertain the precise job-related limitations imposed by the individual disability, and how those limitations could be overcome with a reasonable accommodation.' Third, reasonable accommodations are identified. Finally, the

> employee’s preferences should be taken into account. Nothing in this process allows the employee or the employer to unilaterally determine work conditions. (as cited in O’Brien 106)

And yet some consider ADA Title One to be the most disappointing part of ADA legislation, as it is the most heavily legislated section of the law and eighty to ninety percent of cases have been ruled in favor of employers (O’Brien 18).[1] This interactive process of negotiation between employers and employees is an ideal model, but the large majority of findings from my study suggest that this ideal interaction rarely occurs. O’Brien suggests that the problem lies in the fact that the courts assume that employers have enough knowledge to know what kinds of accommodations are possible and that the worker has enough knowledge or experience to know what accommodations are possible in that workplace. In other words, individuals are often expected to have all the knowledge and resources they need to drive the reasonable accommodations process: “‘Putting the entire burden on the employee to identify a reasonable accommodation,’ the Ninth Circuit Court ruled, ‘risks shutting out many workers simply because they do not have the superior knowledge of the worker that the employer has’” (as cited in O’Brien p. 106). O’Brien’s speculation points to the predominant trend I observed in participant rhetorical experiences: being solely responsible for arguing for access is not sufficient. What is more, bearing the entire responsibility for moving audiences to believe, include, and accept is exhausting on top of managing physical and mental dimensions of living with a disability, a consequence I explore through the concept of access fatigue in the final chapter.

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[1] According to the law, employers are only legally required to provide accommodations when the worker will be able to perform ‘essential functions’ of the job and the accommodation will not cause ‘undue hardship,’ financial or otherwise, to the employer (O’Brien).

While most of the data in this chapter does not feature formal negotiations between employer and employee, these workplace narratives demonstrate the immense amount of informal rhetorical labor that disabled workers must perform in order to be perceived as capable within workplaces. I argue that what I call *normative workplace commonplaces* serve as roadblocks to disabled workers' access. Through the lenses of normativity and rhetorical commonplaces, I analyze participant accounts of workplace interactions to identify specific ableist conceptions common in workplaces that prevent access for disabled workers. Ultimately, I argue that a triangulated approach—between worker, employer, and colleagues—to the relational process of constructing accessible environments would help disrupt the normative commonplaces that construct barriers to access in workplaces.

Employment of Blind and Visually Impaired Individuals

Assumptions about disability, work, and adaptation are important to examine because estimates of unemployment among people who are blind and visually impaired remain high. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010 Current Population Survey estimated that 63.8% of U.S. blind and visually impaired working age adults are not in the labor force (American Foundation for the Blind), while the 2015 American Community Survey estimated that 58% of U.S. blind and visually impaired working age adults are unemployed and actively seeking work (National Federation of the Blind). Per capita blindness and unemployment rates are generally comparable in other high-income countries and significantly higher in low and middle-income countries due to inadequate health and education resources (World Health Organization). A Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-funded international project report indicated similar or more critical disability employment situations in low and middle-income countries around the globe (Cummins).

Feelings of underemployment among people who are blind and visually impaired, though understudied, also have been estimated to be high (Goertz et al. 417).

Employers’ negative attitudes, biases, and lack of knowledge have been cited as significant barriers to employment for people who are blind and visually impaired in the U.S. (Capella McDonnall; Lynch) and for people with other disabilities in other countries (Foster and Wass; Kitchin and Shuttleworth; Price et al.; Sarrett). Through rhetorical analysis of accounts of workplace interactions from the perspectives of people who are blind and visually impaired, I identify specific assumptions about work and working bodies that shape attitudes and arguments about access in workplaces. Rather than arguing for better self-advocacy from disabled workers, I ask, how do assumptions about work and working bodies shape rhetorical situations surrounding disabled workers, and how do those rhetorical situations construct barriers and constrain workers’ possibilities for self-advocacy?

Theoretical Framework

To intervene in interactions around disability in workplaces, it is necessary to understand how ableism shapes collective imaginations of work and working bodies. Fiona Kumari Campbell has asserted that ableism functions within modern societies by determining what kinds of productivity and contributions are most valuable (81). Bill Hughes has argued that neoliberal conceptions of citizenship, which portray all workers as able-bodied, further exacerbate ableism by harboring resentment toward citizens who need state protections to perform the hard work that is expected (992). Together, neoliberalism and ableism set an impossible standard for disabled citizens as they are expected to make certain contributions to society, which are determined based on imagined “normal” workers. When they cannot meet those standards, disabled citizens become the object of resentment and rejection (Hughes 993). This impossible standard of setting expectations based on imagined workers with normal bodies points to the pressing need to interrogate the ableist assumptions that underpin collective imaginations of work. By inference, interactions around disability in workplaces are crucial sites for examining ableist assumptions underpinning collective imaginations of work.

Rhetorical analysis provides a useful tool for interrogating ableist assumptions underlying collective imaginations of work because it reveals how ableism is unknowingly transmitted through everyday discourse. James Cherney has argued that ableism is so invisible that it often "denies its own rhetoricity," or in other words, many people do not understand how privileging certain abilities is not a neutral objective. In the context of workplaces, then, where specific skills and abilities are highly valued, it is especially important to examine how ableist assumptions shape collective imaginations of work and become transmitted through everyday discourse. Illuminating the rhetorical nature of ableist ideas about work opens space for more flexible claims about how work is performed and measured.

Other scholars have outlined the ways capitalism constructs disability as an unproductive, unprofitable type of embodiment. Productivity and profitability are two values often cited as capitalist forces that disadvantage people with disabilities in the workforce (Russell and Malhotra; Hahn). Constantly being evaluated against standards established according to the pace and workflow of imagined able-bodied people sets expectations that people who need accommodations (breaks, shorter work days, assistive technologies, etc.) often cannot meet. Normative attitudes and behaviors can certainly be attributed to the ideologies of a capitalist economy, but my goal is not to argue for dismantling capitalism. Instead, by drawing attention to normative workplace attitudes and behaviors, I aim to inspire concrete changes in workplace cultures that can broaden access for people with disabilities.

I draw upon rhetorical theory of commonplaces to identify commonly held assumptions and beliefs about work and working bodies that shape interactions around access in workplaces. Commonplaces is a rhetorical term that refers to the method of invention that Aristotle described in *On Rhetoric* for finding *topoi* or places where orators can go to find resources for arguments, both general and specific ideas that are commonly agreed upon within an audience or community (Aristotle 44-46). The concept of commonplaces is useful in this study because it provides a method of identifying the commonly held assumptions about work and working bodies that shape arguments about access that manifest in workplace interactions. Given that Aristotle's theory of *topoi* encompassed both general and specific ideas, I identify both assumptions about work and working bodies that traverse the boundaries of professional communities and those that are specific to professional communities.

Using a qualitative rhetorical lens, I demonstrate how normative workplace commonplaces, many of which are shaped by the capitalist ideologies that have long disadvantaged people with disabilities, have immense impact on audiences' perceptions of disabled workers' abilities and on disabled workers' own self-perceptions. If agency is a "mutual accomplishment" (Kerschbaum, "On Rhetorical Agency" 62) that relies on audiences identifying a disabled identity, then rhetorical analysis is necessary for understanding the challenges that disabled workers face in mutually constructing their identities as capable and valuable with audiences in both formal and informal workspaces.

The research question that has guided analysis of these workplace interactions is, what assumptions about work and working bodies are called into question in these interactions? After additional rounds of open coding of those narratives tagged with "access to institutions," accounts of workplace interactions were sorted into five groups of assumptions about work that were called into question in interaction: 1) when work happens 2) where work happens 3) how specific job tasks are performed 4) how professionals look and 5) how work performance is measured. I analyze participant narratives about rhetorical situations in which their access needs bring these five imagined, defining features of work into relief. Although participant accounts of rhetorical experience do not always fit neatly into these five categories, the commonplaces serve as lenses through which to see the textures of ableist ideologies that shape collective imaginations of work. These rhetorical commonplaces are called *normative* to draw attention to the ways ableism privileges norms based on able-bodiedness. These norms masquerade as common sense, disciplinary ideas about what constitutes work. Normative workplace commonplaces refers to the ideological resources available in workplaces for making arguments that define where, when, how, and by whom work is performed and measured.

The narratives I share below also demonstrate the pervasive influences of normative workplace commonplaces on disabled workers themselves. Normative commonplaces often go so unnoticed in workplaces that disabled workers can unknowingly internalize them. As Abigail put it when reflecting on her experience of reaching supervisor status, “I didn't enjoy it all that much. I was on guard that I not ask accommodations out of the people that worked for me and in a way that's kind of crazy-making because, who else are you going to ask? So it was stressful.” In Abigail’s experience dependence and authority were so diametrically opposed that she avoided advocating for her own access needs. Broadly, my goal is to invite readers to think critically about normative workplace commonplaces and their effects on disabled workers. More specifically, I invite readers to ponder the following question: how do normative workplace commonplaces obstruct the identification of disabled people as productive, capable, and valuable workers?

Normative Workplace Commonplaces

For each commonplace, in the pages below I include one narrative that reveals the negative consequences of fixed, normative commonplaces and one or two narratives that reveal the positive consequences of more flexible commonplaces of work.

When Work Happens: Timing, Scheduling, Workflow, and Pace

Jackson's career in customer service and forms processing was punctuated by employers' arguments about his inability to "keep up." In his first job in customer service in 1989, Jackson was not especially confident requesting accommodations. When he found himself unable to keep up with the number of phone calls he was supposed to make, he quit and became a stay-at-home dad due to his own internalization of his inability to keep up. When he had to go back to work in 1997, he did not disclose his vision impairment during the hiring process out of fear that he would not be offered the job. After receiving the job offer, he requested an accommodation of working fewer hours to avoid eyestrain, but he received pushback from his employer until he provided medical documentation. Working fewer hours, however, did not suffice in helping Jackson keep up with workflow demands as he continued to lose more vision. Given the hostile reaction he had received, Jackson was fearful of asking for more accommodations. His progressive vision loss was making it harder to read the insurance forms so he started drawing upon the help of his colleagues, which sufficed until the company diversified and switched Jackson to a department where they used different computer screens that were even harder for him to see. Jackson struggled to keep up until the company closed the department, made all the employees reapply for jobs, and he was not rehired.

Jackson encountered similar arguments about his inability to keep up when he began working in customer service at another company in 2002. This time Jackson negotiated accommodations during the hiring process, but when he still had not received the assistive technologies he requested after three weeks on the job, he began to worry about being deemed unable to keep up. Eventually he did receive the assistive technologies he needed, but when the company diversified, he had to “learn more things and do more work.” To resolve this problem, he applied for a different job within the company that required less phone time and more database and contract work, but once again, the nature of the work changed, he continued to lose more vision, and he could not keep up. As he put it, he was starting to make typos where typos were not permissible. When a coworker helped him speak to the manager about his access needs, Jackson received the negative reaction he feared: “If you can't handle this, can't keep up, we're firing you.” Jackson was moved to another department where there was less work to be done, but without enough work to do, he felt pressured to look busy: “I'd be twiddling my thumbs and they could see that.” Jackson was fired shortly thereafter along with a thousand other employees nationwide.

In contrast, Lee described how a more flexible conception of time opened routes to access in his career. Lee’s narrative of his forty-year career as a litigator focused on his constant efforts to access documents. Accessing documents is affected by commonplaces of when work happens because courtroom proceedings have timelines for producing documents. Lee described that to compensate for his need to access documents in advance, he was always “over-prepared.” He never went into the courtroom alone; he always brought an assistant in charge of making documents accessible to him. In some situations, though, he was faced with a “surprise document” in the courtroom, and he learned that he would need to make more forceful demands for more flexible conceptions of time: “I found early on that my peers and particularly my opponents would take every advantage that they could and they would suddenly produce a document.” Lee explained that he had two options in this situation. The first option is to ask the judge to give him time to let his assistant read the document aloud to him in the courtroom. He did not seem to prefer this strategy because of the way the disruption made him appear: “They show up with a document that I've never seen and I don't have any time to read it and you've got all that pressure, and the courts, and the people in the audience and then you're standing there looking fat, dumb, and happy and then you've got to read it and you've got to react quickly.” The strategy he seemed to prefer involves calling the quality of the evidence into question. Lee would ask the judge, “Where was this last week? I need time to prepare so I want an adjournment.” And then the judge would ask the opponent, “Why didn’t you give it to him in advance?” And the opponent would respond by saying something like, “Well we just didn’t know…we just found it last night.” And the judge would eventually decide, “Well it’s either not good evidence or we’re going to give him an adjournment so he can prepare for the document that you should’ve given him two weeks ago,” giving Lee the time he needed to access documents.

Where Work Happens: Physical Mobility and Presence

When seeking work in 1991 as a healthcare provider who travels around to different locations, Abigail encountered a commonplace of where work happens informed by normative ideas of physical mobility. Abigail described that when one potential employer found out that she is blind, they began asking her questions that implied their normative ideas about physical mobility. After inviting her for an interview, one employer called Abigail back and asked her the following questions: “Did you know that there are mountains here? Did you know there are high land prices here? Did you know there's snow here? Did you know there's wind here?” Abigail did not end up interviewing with that employer because she got an offer from another employer who did not ask her questions about her mobility even though, as she pointed out, they get far more snow. Her potential employer could not imagine how a blind person might travel through wind, snow, and mountains. Given the rigidness of the employer's imagination of physical mobility, Abigail was left with the rhetorical labor of convincing others to reimagine where work happens. She explained that she knew if she had to work there she would have been able to "whip 'em into shape," by which Abigail meant she would have helped her employer and colleagues understand how she performs work, but she tired of such rhetorical responsibility. "But oohh, do I really have to?" she recalled thinking.

In contrast, Mary Kathleen's employer helped her reimagine where work happens when she decided to resign from her job after she had to stop driving and could not get to work. She left a resignation letter on her employer's desk, but as she was waiting for her ride in the parking lot, her boss came to talk to her. She remembered that he said, "You know this is a new millennium coming up. There's no reason for you to quit. We have computers now. You can do things from home. What kind of a commitment can you make?" Mary Kathleen responded, "I really don't know." Then her boss said, "Well I don't want you to quit. Let's talk about what we need to do to keep you here." Mary Kathleen bought a personal computer and her employer bought Microsoft Office Suite and screen reader software for her and she began working from home two days a week. They arranged for her to ride to work with a co-worker on the other three days. Mary Kathleen has been doing this since 1993 and she is now the vice president of the company. In this example, Mary Kathleen's employer initiated the opportunity to reimagine 'the work place.' Without her employer's structural support of providing software and/or helping her arrange rides with a colleague, Mary Kathleen would have quit.

How Job Tasks Are Performed: Assistive Technologies, Error, and Collaboration

Nadine works in international development and when she was starting her career around

2014 she encountered a commonplace of how job tasks are performed that made it difficult for her to meet her employers' and colleagues' expectations. Nadine described that in one internship she would try to explain to her employer why she was not able to send a digital calendar: "Because I technically can't hear what the calendar is saying. It's not accessible." Instead of reimagining how this task is completed, her employers reacted with surprise and expressed the idea that everyone should be able to do everything, especially the most "basic" tasks. Similarly, in a subsequent job, Nadine was unable to use the touch screen copy machine, and once again her colleagues drew upon commonplaces of how job tasks are performed to ascribe the inaccessibility of the technology to Nadine's abilities as a worker: "…people will say, '[in a snarky voice] she can't even make 'em print! She can't even get things out of the printer, or make copies!' or something like that, just something an eighth grader can do." Nadine explained how her employers' and colleagues' ableist assumptions caused her to have to defend her abilities:

> [speaking as though she is speaking to a colleague or employer] So no I'm not the best person to go work this touch screen copy machine because it doesn't work and so what do you want me to do? I'm not the best person for that, but if you need a one-page brief written, I'm your girl. If you need some sort of research, then I'm the one to come to. If you need something to be communicated, you need a meeting to be attended, you need someone to articulate our main talking points, I'm here for you. If you need me to develop the talking points, I'm there for you.

Nadine pointed out that the tasks she emphasizes—writing, research, speaking, attending a meeting—are more essential to the function of the job than the basic tasks like making copies, printing, and sending digital calendars that her employer and colleagues had demeaned her for not being able to do; these basic job tasks had overshadowed Nadine's other abilities as a worker.

Jenny also faced negative attitudes toward her use of assistive technology when she began her training as a healthcare provider in 2011. On her second day of clinical training, Jenny was called into her instructor's office and asked to sign an illegal contract stating that if she made any kind of mistake she would be thrown out of the program. Jenny recalled, "She told me that she didn't think I was going to be successful because of what she saw, but she didn't really have any examples. She was concerned that I had to use a large font on the computer and would I be able to read patient records?" While it is impossible to know exactly why Jenny's instructor had this reaction, it seems the instructor's observation of Jenny's use of assistive technology made her concerned about error. Jenny thought the instructor extrapolated from her use of assistive technology to ascribe weakness and liability without having any evidence to support her claim. After going home, sobbing to her husband, and contemplating quitting, Jenny decided to order a screen magnifier that she can quickly place on any computer screen, and she decided to work even harder since she knew she had a target on her back. She faced similar negative attitudes from other clinical instructors, and she worried about her employment prospects in a field that highly values perfection and by association able-bodiedness.

In contrast to Nadine and Jenny, Mary Kathleen described ways that her colleagues are open to reimagining how job tasks are performed. When Mary Kathleen designs presentations, she relies on her colleagues to help her identify appropriate visuals. She earmarks websites where she finds information for her presentation or finds websites where the content leads her to believe there might be appropriate images. She shares those resources with a colleague and they identify the most appropriate and visually appealing images. Her colleagues' willingness to reimagine how workers design presentations allows Mary Kathleen to complete a task that might not typically be considered a collaborative one.

How Professionals Look: Discomfort and Authority

Lisa, whose workplace experience was referenced in the introduction, began her career as a teacher and later worked in consulting. When Lisa became a consultant in 1995, she encountered commonplaces of how professionals look that called forth her rhetorical labor of building credibility with her clients. Lisa described that even though she consults with clients about how to learn about difference, she senses her clients' discomfort when they notice that her physical appearance is different. Her clients' discomfort makes her feel pressured to disclose because they remain uncomfortable until she provides an explanation. At first, Lisa resisted the pressure to disclose because she thought it was unfair to have to build credibility based on disclosure rather than on her behavior as a professional. When Lisa began consulting in collaboration with her partner, Janet (pseudonym), who is not visibly physically disabled, their clients' discomfort about how professionals look became even more obvious. Clients would often direct all their questions and commentary toward Janet and Lisa was left wondering, "Am I in the room?" Lisa and Janet developed a triangulated approach to responding to these situations; when clients directed the conversation toward Janet, she continued to ask Lisa what she thinks, and when clients only looked at Janet for an answer, Lisa responded anyway. Lisa recalled that Janet expressed the importance of taking on some of this labor so that Lisa does not appear pushy. Now that she has been working as a consultant for over twenty years, Lisa has accepted the burden of immediately disclosing her visual disability to more quickly dispel her clients' discomfort about how professionals look.

Mary Kathleen also described that she faces initial discomfort from colleagues about how professionals look when she facilitates workshops with unfamiliar audiences. She dispels her colleagues' discomfort by using humor, which makes room for reimagining how professionals look. She asks the audience members to introduce themselves by sharing one interesting fact about themselves, and Mary Kathleen shares that she is legally blind and follows her disclosure with, "'I cannot see you right now. I see your silhouettes and you're telling me your names and who you are and I'm going to know where you're sitting, so no changing seats!' And they all laugh." Mary Kathleen noted that after disclosing her disability and making the audience laugh, some colleagues take it upon themselves to provide her with visual information that helps her function as a facilitator. For example, sometimes participants tell her that someone else in the audience looks confused, which helps Mary Kathleen perform her role as a facilitator.

How Work Performance is Measured: Markers of Success

To demonstrate the disciplinary quality of commonplaces of how work performance is measured, the contrast between Lisa's two different experiences working as a kindergarten teacher is elaborated here. Lisa explained that although she took a transparent approach to disclosing her disability in her first placement as a student-teacher, she encountered commonplaces of how work performance is measured that prevented her adaptive teaching strategies from being perceived as equally successful. As was explained in the introduction, since she could not see students' hands when they were raised, she convinced her students that turn-taking conversation is a more valuable skill. She explained that raising hands is not a lifelong skill but instead a way for teachers to control the conversation. Students responded with amazement and excitement, and then Lisa taught them how to have a conversation in which they wait for pauses and take turns. Lisa recalled, "And the kids loved it because it was so empowering for them to not have to be controlled by a hand raise." Despite her kindergarten students' abilities to dislodge a marker of successful teacher performance, Lisa's employer was not able to recognize her adaptive strategy as an equal performance. Her employer told her, "You don't have control of the classroom because they're not raising hands.”

After this experience, Lisa sought a teaching position in what she described as a more non-traditional school where she felt her adaptive strategies would be valued. When she deployed her adaptive strategy of asking students to engage in turn-taking conversation, her employer reacted by saying, “Oh my god that’s brilliant because it’s teaching them how to have conversation rather than dictating!” This employer also helped Lisa gain confidence in her own capacities as a teacher with a visual disability. Like many participants, advisers had told Lisa that no one would hire her, so believing in her own abilities was not always easy. As any kindergarten teacher does, Lisa worried about losing students during lunchtime. Since she couldn’t rely on her own vision to keep track of them, she developed adaptive strategies like asking the students to count each other, which doubled as a means of teaching them to count. Lisa inevitably lost track of a couple students who were later found hiding in cubbies or in the lunch room and she worried that her performance would be deemed unsuccessful and her disability would be to blame. Instead of measuring her performance through the lens of her disability, however, Lisa’s employer depersonalized her error in a way that had tremendous impact on her confidence as a disabled worker. Her employer assured her that this could happen to anybody and it did not happen because Lisa is visually impaired or because her adaptive strategies are not as effective—it happened because those students were not ready to be in school all day. Lisa emphasized the impact that her employer’s belief in her abilities had on her: “That was such a gift and I still have such a huge place in my heart for that director to just have the clarity to say that.”

Conclusion

Findings from this chapter demonstrate how widely accepted ableist assumptions, what I call normative workplace commonplaces, fuel claims about work and working bodies that prevent access. These claims are communicated in interaction between disabled workers and their employers, potential employers, and colleagues, and the hegemonic power of normative workplace commonplaces often leaves disabled workers with the challenging rhetorical labor of destabilizing commonplaces to gain access. Whereas previous researchers identified access barriers like employer attitudes, biases, and lack of knowledge (Capella-McDonnall et al.; Foster and Wass; Kitchin and Shuttleworth; Lynch; Price et al.; Sarrett), and sociologists identified everyday interactions in workplaces as sites where access is often negotiated (Engel and Munger; O'Brien), this chapter specifically identifies five normative workplace commonplaces that provide rhetorical resources for ableist claims about work and working bodies. In the pages below I discuss how normative workplace commonplaces can either be used to reinforce ableist standards, or conversely, to reframe adaptation as beneficial to workplaces and to reimagine defining features of work.

Normative commonplaces of when work happens set unrealistic standards for workflow, timing, and pace based on imagined able-bodied workers. Throughout Jackson's narrative the commonplace of when work happens, or more specifically, the pace, timing, and scheduling of work, provides employers with rhetorical resources to push him out. Over and over, Jackson is held to standards based on normative constructions of time without being given the resources he needs to perform work. Without the support of employers and colleagues open to collaboratively reimagining time, Jackson is stifled by arguments fueled by the hegemonic power of normative workplace commonplaces, so much that he internalizes ableism and becomes fearful of the consequences of self-advocacy. Even without access to the employers' perspectives, it is evident that the constant changes in workflow, pace, and technologies used in workplaces, combined with Jackson's own progressive vision loss and fear of requesting accommodations, make keeping up an impossible standard. While some might blame Jackson for not being a better self-advocate, his narrative demonstrates how employers' limited imaginations of when work happens have real material consequences for workers with access needs.

Conversely, Lee gains access by leveraging a commonplace specific to his discipline. He draws upon legal commonplaces of what counts as good evidence to persuade the judge to throw out the evidence or to call for an adjournment so he can have time to access the document. While some might attribute Lee's success to his own rhetorical skill of reframing a legal commonplace, this example stands in stark contrast to Jackson's in its demonstration of how commonplaces of when work happens can be reimagined in the interest of access. Business and professional communication students need to learn how commonplaces of timing, workflow, and pace set impossible standards for disabled workers and how those standards are implicitly communicated in access negotiations in workplaces.

Normative commonplaces of where work happens set ableist standards for physical mobility and presence. When Abigail's potential employer finds out that she is blind, they ask questions that suggest that they cannot imagine how a blind person might travel for work. In this example, the employer's questions imply a normative conception of physical mobility and its relationship to work. While Abigail knew that she would eventually be able to challenge their normative ideas about physical mobility, she tires of the rhetorical responsibility and chooses to work in an environment where she would not have to expend as much effort challenging normative commonplaces. In contrast, Mary Kathleen's employer provides her with structural support and leverages other workplace commonplaces (innovation and progress) to reimagine where work happens. While her boss's flexible attitude could be attributed to personality or the credibility that Mary Kathleen had already established, this example suggests that employers can leverage workplace values like innovation ("a new millennium") and collaboration (ride sharing) to marshal existing resources to make arguments for access. Without the support of her employer, Mary Kathleen would have quit due to her own internalized ableist assumptions about where work happens. In addition to learning how to reimagine physical mobility and presence in relationship to work, employers should leverage existing workplace values to make persuasive arguments that promote access.

Normative commonplaces of how job tasks are performed construct rigid ideals about what it looks like to complete specific job tasks. Nadine and Jenny both experienced how these commonplaces can be used to ascribe weakness to their identities as workers. Nadine's colleagues perceived her inability to perform what they considered to be a basic task as evidence of her weakness as a worker. Nadine responds by drawing upon other values in the workplace—communication, listening, research—to move her colleagues and employers to reimagine her value as a worker, even though her inability to use the touch screen copy machine is not as essential to the function of her job. In Jenny's clinical experience, her instructor draws upon a commonplace that is especially strong in health care—make no mistakes—to make a claim about Jenny's inability to perform work. Jenny's experience of being deemed liable for using assistive technologies causes her to doubt her own capabilities as a worker and makes her believe that she needs to make no mistakes, an impossible standard for any worker. In contrast, in a workplace where her employer provides structural support for reimagining work, Mary Kathleen's colleagues are open to reimagining how job tasks are performed, sharing the task of incorporating visual information into her presentations without denigrating her abilities. Employers and colleagues need to participate in the work of reimagining specific job tasks without denigrating the identities of workers.

Normative commonplaces of how professionals look need to be reimagined to allow workers with disabilities to establish authority based on their professional abilities. Lisa finds that her clients' discomfort about her non-normative appearance affect her ability to establish credibility, but with the support of her colleague, Lisa can dispel her clients' discomfort and establish authority based on her professionalism. Mary Kathleen uses humor to dispel a new audience's discomfort so that they can participate in reconfiguring her role as a facilitator. Employers and colleagues need to learn that shared responsibility is essential for destabilizing normative ideas and promoting the dignity of disabled workers.

Normative commonplaces of how work performance is measured need to be reimagined from disciplinary perspectives. The contrast between Lisa's two different experiences using the same adaptive teaching strategy demonstrates how discipline-specific ideas (in this case teacher control of the classroom) can either be leveraged to reinforce ableist assumptions or they can be reimagined in the interest of innovation and creativity. By reimagining how work performance is measured, the employer supports rather than stifles Lisa's development of new adaptive strategies. Adaptive strategies need to be viewed as tools for innovation and creativity.

These findings suggest that normative commonplaces set unrealistic standards based on imagined able-bodied workers, and without employers and colleagues who are open to collaboratively deconstructing those norms, workers with disabilities are left without confidence and agency to persuade others in workplaces to reimagine those normative commonplaces. Inflexibility and an absence of structural support have material, social, and emotional consequences for disabled workers, and workplaces lose opportunities to collaborate with disabled workers on innovative and creative strategies. Based on my rhetorical analysis of participant accounts of workplace interactions around access, I argue that cultivating access in workplaces requires redefining essential features of work, a mental task that requires shifting focus from an ableist perception of tasks and their outcomes to a constructive perception of disabled workers' ability to adapt to achieve the same work goals. Open communication and collaboration among employers, colleagues, and workers with disabilities is essential to this process

The positive examples from the findings indicate that employers and colleagues should share in this responsibility, as reimagining work for people with disabilities can have a "chain effect of pro-disability climate" (Wittmer and Lin) on workplace cultures. For example, in the school where Lisa's adaptive strategies were valued, she saw numerous examples of colleagues taking responsibility for "mutual adaptation." When the school secretary noticed that Lisa was having trouble locating her colleagues' mailboxes, she took it upon herself to redesign the labels so they would be easier to see and more aesthetically pleasing for everyone. Valuing flexibility can fuel creativity and innovation. Through triangulated approaches to negotiating access in workplaces, employers and colleagues can develop flexible thinking skills necessary for reimagining fixed definitions of work and working bodies. I argue that for disabled workers to integrate into workplaces, everyone needs to be willing to reimagine what inclusive work looks like. If everyone takes part in reimagining work in the interest of accessibility, flexible mindsets can cultivate workplaces where creativity and reinvention lead to new possibilities.

In order for people with disabilities to succeed in presenting themselves as valuable workers, audiences need to recognize disabled workers as capable, valuable, and productive in their own rights. Normative commonplaces need to be dislodged in order for new, more accessible conceptualizations of work to emerge. Triangulated approaches to access—between worker, employer, and colleagues—are essential for affecting cultural changes in workplaces. As I've shown, the rhetorical efforts of disabled workers can lead to cultural change, but without structural and emotional support from employers and colleagues, it is a long, arduous road littered with fits and starts. For those who aren't as confident in their own abilities or don't have the rhetorical skill to reframe deeply rooted markers of success, it is nearly impossible. It is time for everyone to help reimagine and reframe what it means to work.

By examining participant accounts of their workplace interactions through a rhetorical lens, I have identified commonplace ideas, or widely accepted beliefs about work and working bodies, as factors that prevent access. Five categories of defining features of work were identified in participant accounts of their workplace interactions: 1) when work happens 2) where work happens 3) how job tasks are performed 4) how professionals look and 5) how work performance is measured. Employers and colleagues wielded these commonplaces to enforce normative standards and parameters, constraining the rhetorical possibilities for disabled workers' self-advocacy. While some participants used rhetorical strategies that improved their access in workplaces (especially drawing upon other workplace commonplaces), many were left with few rhetorical resources and little agency for advocating for their own access because the hegemonic power of normative commonplaces left them fearful of the consequences of self-advocacy. Employers and colleagues must share responsibility for reimagining normative workplace commonplaces so that workers with disabilities can access and integrate into workplaces. These conclusions also suggest that all professionals need to actively question what has been assumed as "normal" in workplaces and view ability as a multifaceted, embodied quality that manifests itself in different forms in different bodies and always exists on a continuum.

Interchapter: Access to Information

I am sitting on the bed in my childhood bedroom flipping through a collection of creative nonfiction essays. After my first year of college I discovered creative nonfiction and spent the entire summer in my childhood bedroom devouring McSweeney's collections and dissecting the anatomy of nonfiction essays. I monitored the essays section at the bookstore down the street from my parents' house.

Now I am a graduate student teaching college composition and I want to expose my students to the world of creative nonfiction. I want to share some of my favorite essays with them. I'm flipping through this book to remind myself of my favorite essays as I put together the syllabus for the next quarter. I know the pink, yellow, and green stripes on this book's cover so well and I think about how I found my voice in this book.

But now I can't read the text very well. I can read the titles of the essays and make it through the first few sentences of each essay but then I get tired. I can't do it, no matter how close I put the book to my face, I can't focus on the words. I had been reading so much already that year. I took a history of rhetoric course in which I had to read from a giant, encyclopedic volume of rhetorical history in which the letters were so small and there were two columns per page. I rummaged through Barnes and Noble on campus to find a copy that seemed to have slightly darker print. I spent hours hunched over that huge volume squinting at tiny, faded print as I pored over theories I didn't understand and didn't care to understand. I developed a system for quickly identifying passages by placing post-it notes over specific paragraphs and copying in large print the most relevant quotes. But I'm home now and this creative nonfiction book feels like me.

"I can't read this!" I yell as I slam the book down on my bed and get up to yell for my mom. "I can't read this book!" I yell again as I open my bedroom door. My mom starts rushing up the stairs. "Annika, what's wrong?" she asks. And I burst out into tears, picking up the book again to tell her that I can't read it. In the midst of my tears and the frustration I can't convey how much this book means to me.

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I am at the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind and I'm not even sure what a lighthouse for the blind is. As my mom and I walk into the office the person guiding us tells us that they have a factory there where people make clocks and brooms. I see several blind people navigating through the hallways, opening doors and passing through them. "Clocks and brooms?" I wonder. I'm not sure what this place is. We enter what looks like a shop with various gadgets and technologies displayed across a maze of tables. We sit down with someone who works there who tells me he has to ask me a few questions about myself so that he can figure out how to help me.

He asks me what I have trouble doing. "What I have trouble doing?" I think to myself. I hate admitting that I can't do things and I don't like how this interaction is structured around a negative. "Do you have trouble reading the newspaper?" he asks. "Yeah," I say, not explaining that I gave up reading print newspapers a long time ago. He hands me a rectangular device that's about the size of tissue box. "You can use this to magnify small print, like a newspaper." He turns the device on and the text he slides beneath it pops up as gigantic letters on the screen. "There's only two letters on the screen," I say. He explains that you can adjust the level of magnification and lowers it for me. I move the magnifier around the paper and the screen jerks as the display adjusts to the lighting and movement. "How can people read like this?" I wonder. I think about carrying the laptop I have, a few books, a water bottle, and this huge boxy *magnifier. I try to imagine using this thing while lying down on the couch reading a paperback. I try to imagine using this thing while reading in a classroom or a coffee shop. I think about the time it would take to move this magnifier around and read only what's magnified within the screen. I can't believe this is how people read.*

He shows me more tools. A closed-circuit television that sits on top of a desk and magnifies anything you put underneath it. I admit that it's pretty cool. And the options for contrast and colors would be really helpful to me. But again, I think about how huge it is. It's not mobile. It's the size of another desktop computer, at least. And where would I put it? And what would people say when they see it? It costs several thousand dollars and it's ugly. I tell my mom that I don't think I would use it. We leave the store empty handed, and I'm still not sure why people are making clocks and brooms at the lighthouse.

***

I am conducting background research for my dissertation. I discover a book called "Digital Disability: The Social Construction of Disability in New Media" that seems to be exactly what I am looking for. To gain access to the book, I log into my university library's interlibrary loan system and place a request for a scanned copy of this book.

A few days later I open my email and see that the library canceled my request, stating that the book is not available through the library system. Then I request that they purchase the text. Several weeks later I receive notice that the library has purchased the book, so I request an electronic copy again, and a few days later I receive an email saying that it is available for me to pick up from the library's holding shelf. I reply and request an electronic copy, and they apologize for the mistake.

Eleven days later, I start feeling impatient. I had wanted to start the research for this chapter at the beginning of January and I had gone on to read other texts, but it is now the middle of February. I write another email asking when the electronic copy will be available. I receive what sounds like a form response stating that requests for accessible copies can take four weeks or more with a link to a library web page that explains the library's accessible formats policy, which restates that it can take four weeks or more to receive accessible formats depending on demand and peak times of the semester. Four weeks or more. Four weeks or more?! I think about how I had already waited almost a month and a half (granted some of that lag time was because the library didn't own the book). But four weeks or more. I am sick of waiting weeks for books. I have been patient in the past, hesitant to "complain." And I am sick of writing emails to clarify mistakes and to advocate for my access, over and over. Ironically, I am starting to feel like my lack of access to literacy is affecting my ability to write a chapter advocating for better access to literacy. So I write another email.

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My Cane and I Walk Together, Hand in Hand

By Ericka Short

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Where ere I go,

Though I have eyes that see

some of the world around me,

I feel ill-equipped without thee.

As I walk it fills in the blanks,
To keep me safe and sound.
My five senses allow me to take in
God’s blessings that abound.

Sometimes we go up,
and sometimes we go down,
across and around too.
Sometimes passersby think we’re lost,
but we’re just sharing information-don’t they know?

Tap-oh the curb is two inches deep you say,
as you gently caress the curb before I step.
Tap slide, tap slide, since we’re at church there’s a pew.
I don’t hear anyone speaking, it must be open.
Let’s slip right in and greet those behind.

Smell the sweet bliss of rain?
Hear it flow down the sewer drain?
Cane in front my shoes stay dry – for it plays “I Spy.”

Slish, slosh, whoosh—my Old White and Black takes a dive just for me.

Tap, tap and there's a crowd,
Let's pull in and use pencil grip today.
My ears and nose pull me in many directions.
A whiff of corn on the cob,
greasy this and that,
even spilled drinks from little kids.
Oh, a great band is playing here, and there, and there?
Many times like Moses and his staff
the crowds part
and we're able to safely find the direction we need to head
without treading upon many shoes.

Do we ever dread?
Oh yes we do at times!
When people don't shovel snow or remove ice,
Landing in a snowbank trying to cross the street is not nice!
When people turn and drive us over
instead of obeying the white cane law—

is my buddy ok?

Yes, the team sometimes comes apart—

You've been stuck in car doors and broken in half.

I have left you dear friend so many places.

Worst I've had to rescue you was from a dingy bathroom floor!

We've gone so many places

from airports, Summerfest, school field trips, jobs, and more!

The beautiful thing is you're always welcome wherever we go

because nobody's allergic to you.

Thank you partner, my fiberglass pal, you make so much possible!

Ericka's Author's Note

I haven't always used my cane. I wised up about eight years ago when I got sick of doing a little lady shuffle to avoid tripping over curbs or down stairs, which are unreliable in their unevenness. Starting to use my cane was the best thing I ever did in my life.

Lots of people with some vision carry a cane. It signals freedom and safety. For me it fills in a lot of the depth perception problems that come with only seeing through the right eye. I wear sunglasses because my cataract makes me more light sensitive and that's miserable. Even snow hurts! So never assume someone who carries a cane cannot see anything. Even when I wore glasses a couple years ago I carried my cane faithfully. Many people couldn't figure it out.

But now you know that our canes help us learn a lot about our environment. We're out there walking around in all types of weather—in rain, sleet, snow and everything in between. Address us instead of grabbing our canes out of our hands. Just ask us if we need help. Answering courteously and respecting what we need is the best help you could ever give us.

Chapter 3: Technological Commonplaces and The Rhetorical Labor of Information Access

"Our bodies do not end at the skin. Our bodies transgress our skin by the means of technology."

--Bodil Ravneberg 110

In *Cockeyed*, a memoir about his vision loss, Ryan Knighton describes the range of reactions that people have to his oncoming white cane. He divides sighted people into two groups: the "Stumps" and the "Jiggers." When Stumps see an approaching white cane, they "fix in place. They are stumped. They hope that somehow the blind person heading their way will magically change their course…Of course some of them feel regret. Some apologize, too, and are sincerely sorry for not moving. The apologists are Stumps who've added a moral dimension to their paralysis" (72). Jiggers are stumped at first, but then they move in a panic: "Given a wide berth and a long, plain view of an approaching white cane, Jiggers paralyze, then boogie at the last second. They threaten to bolt left, then right, then left again, indecisive and panic-stricken, until either a direction is chosen or, more times than not, they dance in place until impact" (72). Knighton's comical description points to how the white cane, a relatively simple assistive tool, functions in rhetorical space. It provokes responses from passersby who clearly are not sure how to interact.

Similarly, in "My Cane and I Walk Together, Hand in Hand," Short describes the white cane as a tool that both provides her with crucial sensory information and interacts with the social environment. She describes that sometimes the white cane signals an unintended message: "Sometimes passersby think we're lost, / but we're just sharing information-don't they know?" Other times, the social environment interrupts her ability to effectively use the white cane to access information about the physical environment: "Do we ever dread? / Oh yes we do at times!

/ When people don’t shovel snow or remove ice, / Landing in a snowbank trying to cross the street is not nice! / When people turn and drive us over / instead of obeying the white cane law.” In the author’s note, Short instructs her audience how to interact with the white cane: “Address us instead of grabbing our canes out of our hands. Just ask us if we need help. Answering courteously and respecting what we need is the best help you could ever give us.”

Both Knighton and Short reveal how assistive technology, even one so simple as a white stick with a red tip, exists in rhetorical space and unravels our normative modes of relationality. The white cane, while relatively simple in design, is meant to be a two-way communication tool. It is designed to communicate information both to its user and to its receiver—it communicates about the physical environment to its user through haptic feedback and it communicates information to its receivers by signaling blindness. It is in the latter half of this two-way mode of communication (the signaling of blindness) that I am interested. I am interested in audience responses to assistive technologies because I believe they reveal how we think about who uses what technologies, where, when, and for what purposes. While this chapter is not about the white cane, it serves as a useful example to begin unpacking the role of technologies in the rhetorical situation of access.

Participants in my study described the white cane as “a blessing and a curse” and they described other assistive technologies like it as tools that do open access but also create additional burdens of literate and rhetorical activity. For example, Jenny, whose workplace narrative is explored in the previous chapter, found that while enlarged font on a computer screen made it possible for her to read patient charts, it made one supervisor skeptical of her abilities as a nurse and created the need for her response. Jenny had to respond to her supervisor’s ideas about how adaptive technology signals deficiency and potential for error. Instead of engaging in the risky rhetorical work of attempting to directly challenge her supervisor's ideas, Jenny purchased a more discrete assistive technology—a portable magnifier that she could quickly attach to and remove from any computer screen. Examples like these reveal how what I call technological commonplaces, or widely accepted beliefs about the promises and purposes of technology in relationship to disability, structure rhetorical situations of access, and when interrogated, they reveal ableist thinking about modes of communicating and receiving information. While the previous chapter focuses on how commonplaces structure thinking about work and working bodies, in this chapter I focus on how technological commonplaces shape rhetorical situations of information access.

While it would be disingenuous to claim that assistive technology has no benefits for people with disabilities, discourses that perpetuate the promises of assistive technology as "fixing" the "problem" of disability are commonplace. These discourses run counter to many tenets of Disability Studies and the disability rights movement. Assistive technology is believed to "afford greater independence and an ability to transcend the body," while disability studies scholars and activists have long argued against the ideal of independence and advocated for the celebration of difference and interdependence (Foley and Ferri 195). Foley and Ferri go so far as to claim that expectations about assistive technology force people with disabilities to use assistive technology as a means of fitting able-bodied norms: "assistive technology could be thought of as promoting a form of what McRuer calls 'compulsory ablebodiedness', wherein individuals are compelled to rely on technology to approximate able body norms rather than push the boundaries of what is considered normal" (195). In other words, societal expectations about the potential of assistive technology to "fix" disability displaces responsibility from societies to reimagine norms and places responsibility on individuals to acquire and use appropriate tools to approximate a norm (Foley and Ferri). Technology corporations are also responsible for contributing to technological commonplaces that constructs technology as a “fix” to disability and for using what Bonnie Tucker calls “technocapitalist disability rhetoric” that “attributes agency to technology and tech companies and simultaneously revokes it from disabled people” (“Introduction”). Through technocapitalist disability rhetoric, technology companies and their products are positioned as the “solution” to the “problem” of disability.

In addition to discourses that construct assistive technology as “fixing” disability, assistive technology is often construed as a neutral good disarticulated from the context in which it is designed, distributed, used, and interpreted. Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell explain that histories of wheelchairs, for example, often lack attention to the contexts “in which wheelchairs are made, what they are made of, why they exist in their current forms, why they exist in the numbers they do, why there are variations in form and design, who controls access to the wheelchair, and who are the gatekeepers of ownership of the wheelchair” (9). Discourses that disarticulate assistive technologies from their contexts fuel technological commonplaces that construct users as solely responsible for acquiring, learning, and using tools for adaptation and access.

Despite being construed as a “solution” to disability, assistive technology has been found to have a high likelihood of abandonment (Scherer; Söderström and Ytterhus) for two reasons. First, in some cases, assistive technology use requires a significant amount of technological literacy. For example, using the built-in VoiceOver feature on an Apple iPhone, which allows the user to navigate the interface by listening, requires that the user has vision to navigate to the settings menu to activate VoiceOver. Once VoiceOver is activated, the user has to learn how to navigate with a variety of taps and swipes. Learning to use assistive technologies is its own barrier. Second, assistive technology has been found to have a high rate of abandonment because it plays a significant role in identity performance. Several scholars have argued that while AT can and does open routes to inclusion for people with disabilities, in some cases it also can contribute to social isolation. Several researchers have documented the ways that AT serves as markers of difference and are rejected by users with disabilities. For example, Söderström and Ytterhus's study included one visually impaired youth who preferred to not use his screen magnification software when playing computer games with friends because it made him stand out, even though it made him a faster gamer. He preferred to be perceived as a "poor" user of technology over a clearly marked, disabled user of technology. Similarly, Ravneberg found that wheelchair users and users of hearing devices would like to exercise more agency over the types of products available to them in order to express personal identity. And yet, users of AT are not often given the opportunity to exercise agency or given choice over the design of the assistive technologies they prefer to use.

Söderström and Ytterhus claim that usability of AT is intimately tied to its social dimensions, and as such, to be highly usable, assistive technologies must:

> reduce physical, cognitive and linguistic effort, promote convenience, efficiency and productivity and, even more importantly, support a positive impression of the user in the eyes of significant others. Recognizing that usability is not solely an attribute of the assistive technology itself is vital, but equally vital is recognition of the human-device-environment interaction. (209)

As such, functional and social uses of assistive technology are intimately linked, and learning and using assistive technologies does not happen in a vacuum. Instead, technological commonplaces perpetuate the myth of technology as always progressing and "fixing" the lives of people with disabilities. Failing to understand assistive technologies within the contexts in which they are designed, distributed, acquired, used, and perceived "conceals the political and social contradictions and conflicts" from which they originate (Goggin and Newell 9).

Retrofit and "apartheid" (Goggin and Newell 136) design of assistive technology also constructs disability as deficit. Disability is constructed in the simple fact that mainstream technology is often designed with imagined "normal" users in mind and assistive technologies are designed with non-normative users in mind. It is true that fixes exist, and some mainstream technologies are designed with built-in accessibility features, but these "fixes" also construct people with disabilities as after-thoughts. Sushil Oswal argues that retrofitting reflects ableist assumptions that construct disabled people as deficits ("Exploring Accessibility"; "Participatory Design"; Yergeau et al). Accessibility is not achieved, Oswal asserts, when disabled people gain access through retrofit or fixes, which usually occur after the fact, at a slower pace, at a much higher price point, or after a long process of self-advocacy (Yergeau et al). These technologies participate in a discourse of adaptation that seeks to "fix" some users, ultimately un-harming normative modes of information access.

Discourses that perpetuate the promises of technology originate from within disability communities too. Like the "literacy myth," some view braille literacy as the single most viable solution to poverty and unemployment among people who are blind and visually impaired (Helquist). Melissa Helquist has demonstrated how the National Federation of the Blind's (NFB) 2009 braille literacy campaign called "The Braille Literacy Crisis in America: Facing the Truth, Reversing the Trend, Empowering the Blind" relies upon "literacy crisis" narratives and outdated data to attribute poverty and high unemployment rates to the problem of braille illiteracy. Invoking John Trimbur's work on literacy crisis narratives, Helquist argues that braille literacy crisis narratives ignore the myriad external factors that influence the acquisition of braille literacy:

> NFB’s report links unemployment and poverty rates primarily to braille literacy, ignoring issues such as blindness stereotypes, inaccessible environments and technology, etc.—exemplifying ‘the rhetorical power of the phrase ‘literacy crisis’. . . to condense a broad range of cultural, social, political, and economic tensions into one central image.’ (Helquist)

Through technological commonplaces that place responsibility on individuals without accounting for the myriad social and political factors that shape access to information, even people within the blind and visually impaired community blame blind people for their inabilities to acquire adaptive skills.

While all adaptive modes demand performance, technologies of information access deserve special attention because they are tied up with discourses of literacy. The promises of adaptive technologies share striking resemblance to the promises of literacy. Discourses about the promises of literacy are relevant to examining how technological commonplaces structure interactions around access because they are part of the context surrounding the tools of information access. Sylvia Scribner’s three metaphors of literacy (literacy as adaptation, literacy as power, and literacy as state of grace) provide a useful framework for understanding how technological commonplaces operate. ‘Literacy as adaptation’ promotes individual ability to adapt to changing times, technologies, and context-specific uses of literacy. ‘Literacy as power’ promotes the utility of literacy for social change and the mobilization of disenfranchised groups. ‘Literacy as state of grace’ promotes individual salvation, self-enhancement and greater life meaning via literacy. All three metaphors place responsibility on individuals to acquire literacy skills for access to upward social mobility and self-improvement, failing to account for the countless societal, institutional, and economic forces that create barriers to social mobility. Like literacy, technological commonplaces promise access, social and personal acceptance, and upward social mobility. Participants internalize these commonplaces too, echoing statements like, "I know I *should* use my white cane…I know I *should* use my magnifier." Much like Scribner's three metaphors of literacy, technological commonplaces place responsibility on individuals to learn and use adaptive technologies and skills to access information without accounting for the meaning of technology and adaptation in social, symbolic, and ideological space, and I argue, the ways technological commonplaces structure the rhetorical situation of information access.

While countless literacy studies scholars have taken up Brian Street's ideological model of literacy to identify disenfranchising discourses of literacy, they have overlooked how these ideological assumptions impact users of adaptive tools and strategies. Elisabeth Miller, through her study of the literacy practices of people with aphasia, argues that disabled experiences with literacy underscore how materials of literacy are designed for imagined able-bodies, which results in what she calls a "literacy misfit" between materiality, the body, and social expectations about literacy: "Literate misfitting, then, reveals both how people with disabilities are often excluded from normative conceptions of literacy and how their experiences adapting and innovating in the face of literate misfits offer vital insights into the social and material aspects of literacy" (37). Miller reveals how social expectations about literacy and materiality push back against individuals' adaptations, sometimes stifling their creative adaptive strategies and literacy development after aphasia: "Literate misfitting…is as much about the social construction—or the expectations—of materiality and embodiment as about the physical or cognitive characteristics of readers and writers" (51). While literate misfitting reveals social expectations about materiality, literacy, and the body, I offer technological commonplaces as a means for understanding how discourses of adaptation shape rhetorical situations surrounding assistive technologies and their users.

Similarly, while wearable technologies have gained critical attention in rhetoric and technical communication, as evidenced by the recent special issue "Wearables, Wearing, and the Rhetorics that Attend to Them" in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, assistive technologies and their bearing on the rhetorical situation of access have not gained similar critical attention from rhetoric, technical communication, or literacy researchers. Lisa Meloncon calls for a more fully developed theory of "technological embodiment" that incorporates an "understanding that we are all embodied, and all technologically embodied" (78). Meloncon points out the contradictions inherent in how technologies are classified into a hierarchy of socially acceptable kinds of technological embodiment, like bionics, cyborg, prosthetics, and wearable, while assistive technologies are stigmatized and relegated to a 'technological ghetto'" (77). To the same end, Sushil Oswal has argued for participatory action research that involves disabled users throughout the cycle of multimodal interaction design ("Participatory Design"). My analysis of participant experiences accessing information, often with the use of digital and non-digital assistive technologies, reveals how technological commonplaces structure our thinking about modes of communicating and receiving information.

A similar discourse has been identified in recent scholarship on rhetorics of wearable technologies. Catherine Gouge and John Jones explain that rhetorics of wearable technologies promote a logic of mastery and control of bodies, which is similar to technological commonplaces that promote "fixes" to disability. Gouge and Jones explain that these rhetorics can be found in the "quantified self" movement and in medical applications of wearable technologies in which tracking and analyzing the body is construed as "revolutionary" without accounting for the myriad economic and social forces that make these products narrowly available: "Such approaches to wearables often reinforce what Rosemarie Garland- Thomson and others have observed about ableist narratives of bodily mastery and control: That they privilege a 'Cartesian image of [the] individual as a separate, isolated, efficient machine' and are, therefore, 'focused on disciplining all bodies in the name of improvement' (Gouge and Jones 200). Using the breast pump as an example, Jordynn Jack offers a rhetoric of wearable technology that accounts for "not simply the design of a technology or the rhetoric promoting it, but the embodied rhetorics and sociorhetorical networks that define users' experiences of that technology" (15). Jack offers four elements of wearable technologies as embodied rhetoric, which provides a useful framework for understanding how technological commonplaces structure rhetorical situations of information access:

> 1.how wearable technologies enable micro-performances of gender, status, and identity; 2. how wearable technologies are embedded in policy/political frameworks; 3. how wearable technologies are embedded in spatiotemporal networks of actors, objects, and so on; and 4. how the material design of technological objects themselves do or do not live up to the promises of wearability and mobility. (4)

With these four facets of wearable technology as embodied rhetoric, Jack provides a framework for understanding how technological embodiment operates within rhetorical space, and I draw upon Jack's framework to organize my analysis of how technological commonplaces shape rhetorical situations of information access and reveal ableist thinking about relationships among humans, tools, and modes.

Technological Commonplaces

By examining the rhetorical strategies that participants perform to access information, I reveal how they labor against technological commonplaces that structure our thinking about the relationship between technology, modes, the body, and human capacities. The narratives below demonstrate how participants come to understand assistive technology as situated within social and ideological space and the rhetorical strategies they develop to negotiate that relationship. Building upon Jack's theory of wearable technologies as embodied rhetorics, I examine both how "embodied rhetorics and sociorhetorical networks define users' experiences" (15). Examining how participants negotiate the place of assistive technologies in rhetorical spaces reveals how technological commonplaces:

1. do not account for the role of **embodiment** in the rhetorical situation of access
2. do not account for the ways **systems of distribution** disarticulate individuals from the rhetorical contexts in which they use adaptive tools
3. create **expectations for independent use** of assistive tools and strategies, not accounting for how they are situated with a fabric of other technologies and users
4. obscure **a hierarchy of modes** that ostracizes assistive technology users and creates the need for their response

These commonplaces reveal how we imagine assistive technologies and their users as disconnected from the social contexts in which they access information. Examining technology as a commonplace reveals how assistive technology is positioned as separate from social and ideological space and indicates that we need to use an embodied and sociorhetorical understanding of technology to inform how we understand the rhetorical situation of information access.

I take a broad view of adaptive technologies, including both non-digital technologies like large print or braille and digital technologies like screen reader software and computer magnifiers. I focus on how these adaptive technologies, while promised to provide independence, create rhetorical situations for users. By examining participant rhetorical labor surrounding information access, I reveal how technological commonplaces structure our thinking about who does and does not belong, and I demonstrate how participants have to strategize to restructure those relations.

While participant narratives included in this study span several decades, the rhetorical labor created by these tools transcends advances in technology. As assistive technologies become more discretely integrated into mainstream technologies, like smartphone applications (for example, a smartphone application called BlindSquare uses global positioning systems to give audio orientation and mobility directions to blind users wearing headphones) and wearable technologies (for example, a clip-on device called OrCam can now be placed onto the frame of any pair of glasses and with an attached earpiece will speak back any text that the user points it toward), it will become increasingly important to understand how these technologies, whether wearable, embodied, or otherwise, function in rhetorical space and what that means for their users. For example, in the case of BlindSquare and OrCam[2], if a user has headphones in while walking down the street or while reading a menu in a restaurant, what rhetorical situations will arise? Will they need to deploy strategies to invite interaction and dispel discomfort? Meloncon points to the need to understand the meaning of embodied technologies like these in social and

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[2] BlindSquare costs $39.99 and OrCam costs $3,500. While cost is not the focus of this chapter, it is important to note that the cost of adaptive technologies is a significant factor in its meaning in social and institutional spaces. Most adaptive technologies are not covered by health insurance plans. There are some nonprofit o'rganization that will help customers with expenses, but in general adaptive technologies cost more than mainstream technologies and users are largely individually responsible for their costs (Yergeau et al.).

symbolic space: “the question needs to be, how does this technologically embodied user imagine thing X as part of himself or herself and what does it mean to all of us?” My qualitative rhetorical methodology sheds light on what adaptive technologies mean to all of us, specifically the ways that assistive technologies shape the rhetorical situation of access.

By examining the rhetorical labor that participants perform to gain access to information, I reveal how they must resituate assistive technology within the fabric of social and ideological space. Examining the presence of assistive technologies in rhetorical spaces reveals commonplaces that structure our thinking about information access. Ultimately, these narratives demonstrate that we need to reimagine normative relationality between bodies, information, and means of access. We need to view assistive technology not as “different” but as part of the fabric of how we access information, moving away from normative ideas about relationships between physical capacities, information, and modes of receiving information.

Embodiment

The following examples demonstrate the significant role that embodiment plays in the rhetorical situation of information access. Many participants have spent significant portions of their lives resisting the ways that adaptive tools and skills force them into non-normative embodied modes of information access. For example, almost all participants described spending years and sometimes decades resisting the use of the white cane. Jenny explained how the relationship between the tool and her embodied space is what keeps her from using it: “I use it, but I can still see the looks and the people staring at me…I can see them like pointing or staring or whispering. And it's hard.” In many of these examples, participants forgo accessing information altogether, revealing the ways that technological commonplaces obscure the significance of embodiment in the rhetorical situation of access.

Both Lisa and Ethan learned in early childhood that directly asking for access to information would result in a rhetorical situation they did not want to encounter. Lisa and Ethan told similar stories about requesting access to information written on a blackboard and then finding themselves in a rhetorical situation in which their embodied difference was highlighted. When Lisa told the teacher she couldn't see the blackboard from where she was sitting, her teacher's response changed her idea of what the rhetorical situation of access requires. Lisa recalled, "So she [the teacher] grabs the front of my desk and I'm still in it and she hauls it to the front and it's scraping itself against the floor and I thought, 'Oh this is fantastic [sarcastic tone]!'" Like Lisa, Ethan realized that he needed to change his rhetorical strategy when his teacher told him to move closer to the blackboard to see the pop quiz. Ethan described that this situation required quick decision-making on his part: "Am I going to embarrass myself in front of all of my fellow students so I can get a better grade or do I want to be kind of more of a cool kid and not get up there and do that stuff?" Most of the time he did walk up to the board to see the teacher's writing, but his peers would yell at him to get out of the way because he was disrupting their view. Being accommodated in ways that did not account for the significant role of embodiment in the rhetorical situation of information access caused both Ethan and Lisa to realize that they would need to develop their own strategies for accessing information.

Both Lisa and Ethan began developing strategies to resist the ways assistive technologies like large print books and magnification tools created a situation that called attention to their non-normative bodies. Rather than continuing to ask directly for what she needed, Lisa decided to develop what she calls her own "covert ways" of accessing information. For decades, like many other participants, Lisa chose to "suck it up," as she put it, by strategizing on her own about how to navigate the rhetorical situation of information access. She often relocated her reading activity from public to private spaces. Lisa recalled the public humiliation of holding her paper close to her face and getting black ink on her nose. In middle school and high school, she began trying to sit further back from her paper, which caused a familiar internal struggle: “I can’t see this but I don’t want to look like I’ve got my face planted.” The strategy she developed, then, allowed her to circumvent being seen using adaptive strategies. She learned to listen carefully to the lecture in class and take notes, and then “haul the textbook home and read what we were supposed to be reading in class at home at night where it didn't matter if my nose got dirty.” By adapting her reading practices in space and time, Lisa avoided expectations for a normative body.

This example points to the ways technological commonplaces create rhetorical situations that individuals who use adaptive strategies must navigate their way through. These rhetorical situations place new demands on disabled rhetors, calling them to develop strategies and adopt new literacies to meet expectations for normativity. While Lisa did not comment on the extra time it took her to read everything at home, or the extra physical strain of carrying all her books home with her, other participants commented on the added physical strain of transporting large print and braille books and the additional time it takes to listen to audio recorded reading materials, to learn braille, or to wait for accessible formats. As Roberto put it when describing what it was like to access information in school via multi-volume braille textbooks that could not be easily transported around the school: “It just made it a lot more difficult because you couldn't just hop around and do things as fluidly as you can when you're sighted.”

Ethan described using memorization as a way to perform a normative embodiment while accessing information. Often teachers would ask students to read a text aloud with each student reading a line or paragraph. To conceal the fact that he needed to put his face close to his large print textbooks, Ethan would count the number of students ahead of him and count the number of paragraphs to find which one he would be reading, read it in advance with his face close to the large print page, memorize it, and then recite it while maintaining “normal” posture: “I'd have my face to that page real quick, memorize that paragraph and when it came my time to read I just sat there like any normal kid and sat back and read that thing flawlessly, I had it memorized.” Ethan remarked that sometimes this strategy failed because his large print textbooks were not verbatim copies of his peers’ textbooks. Ethan used a similar strategy when he was asked to give readings in front of his church congregation—he would memorize the Bible passage beforehand so that he wouldn’t have to read in front of a crowd with the paper pushed close to his face or his back hunched over it: “I still to this day can't figure out how I did it but I could scan a page and have that thing memorized so when it came my time to stand up there I just stood up front with that book a couple feet from me and recited that thing flawlessly and then sat down.” Ethan explained that while many people in the field of blindness and low vision might claim that he was “in denial” about his vision impairment, Ethan likes to think that he was “in defiance” of the situation. He explained that he could see well enough to see how his peers stared at him if he read a book with his face planted close to the page and his back hunched over it, but he did not see well enough to see all the text, so he chose to be “in defiance” of the situation. By memorizing texts in advance and pretending to sharpen his pencil while reading the blackboard, Ethan performed a normative embodiment of information access.

These narratives demonstrate that even when participants do have access to assistive technologies and adaptive tools, like large print and braille books, they still find themselves in rhetorical situations in which they have to make choices that affect how their bodies will be received in space and time. Lisa encountered the same technological commonplace that obscures the importance of embodiment again when she began exploring a more overt relationship with assistive technology in college. When she began planning for college, she applied for a student grant from the state's Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, and an employee of the department came to her home to show her assistive technologies that might help her in college. She remembers that she was shown a cathode ray tube (CRT), an older magnification technology that has been replaced by the closed-circuit television (CCTV), that is most often used for magnifying text and other objects. Lisa remembers that she was curious about the CRT and realized that it could help her access print materials, but she told the state employee that she did not want it:

> You know I do not want that in my dorm, I don't want it taking up the space and I do not want to be stuck in my dorm to study and not be able to go to the library, and I do not want to have my roommates see it or my roommate have to explain it to. There was just that shame thing again. So I was interested in what he was showing me but I said to him, 'Oh I don't think that will be helpful,' which was the cover-up for I don't really want to explain why I don't want this thing.

While Lisa recognized the tool as helpful for reading, she rejected it because of its spatial limitations (it would take up too much space in her dorm and it would restrict where she could study) and social implications (it would create a rhetorical situation in which she would have to explain what the tool is for. Lisa preferred to control the rhetorical situation through her own "covert ways" of performing normativity by reading in private and taking lots of notes in class.

When she began college, however, Lisa found that her rhetorical strategies for performing normativity came at the expense of information access. Lisa described that when she began college, she appreciated lectures because she was good at listening and taking notes. When it came to reading, however, Lisa recalled that she felt exhausted by the task and sometimes regretted not taking the CRT: “Reading all the textbook stuff was exhausting. I remember having this thought of oh I wish I would have said yes to that CRT but I'm still not going to ask for it.” Instead, Lisa continued to develop her own strategies for performing a normative embodiment of literacy. She would peruse the used copies at the bookstore and purchase the copies in which other students had highlighted the most important information throughout the text. When she was pressed for time to complete her reading, she would read only the highlighted information. In this way, limitations in the design of assistive technology and its failure to account for social expectations for normative bodies make it so that Lisa continued to perform normativity. Now in her fifties, Lisa more proudly and openly presents her disability to the world, and she gladly incorporates assistive technologies into her life, though, like many other participants, her rhetorical life history is riddled with situations in which she confronts technological commonplaces that obscure the importance of embodiment in spaces and times of information access.

Systems of Distribution

While in the above narratives participants reject adaptive strategies and assistive technologies, not all participants reject adaptive tools and strategies at all moments. For many people with disabilities, their abilities to perform work, attend school, and participate in social life depends on their access to adaptive technologies and skills. While the previous section demonstrates how technological commonplaces do not account for the significance of embodiment in the rhetorical situation of information access, in this section I demonstrate how technological commonplaces also do not account for the ways systems of distribution disarticulate individuals from the rhetorical contexts in which they use adaptive tools. As individuals are sold adaptive tools and skills as social goods that will result in upward social mobility, they are given little agency in the face of institutions that control access to those goods. I analyze narratives from three participants, Louise, Ethan, and Ropo, who explain how institutional control of adaptive tools and skills has left them with little agency to decide when, how, where, and why to use those tools.

Louise, who has a bachelor's degree in social work and is now in her forties, has interacted with several institutions that control access to literacy adaption and throughout her interview, she repeated that she has felt like she has no agency in deciding how and when she will access the tools she needs to develop her adaptive skills. Louise remembers her first experiences with state services for the blind and visually impaired as frustrating because of the lack of agency she was given to decide what she wanted to learn. For example, as a young adult, she attended a summer camp in which she was meant to learn blindness skills. She resented being forced to learn coding because at the time, computer programming was believed to be a promising career path for people who are blind and visually impaired. Louise said that she had no interest in computer programming and she would have preferred to learn braille instead. Her sense of resentment about her lack of agency in relation to institutions that control access to adaptive skills continued into her adulthood.

At the time of our interview, due to recent rapid vision loss, Louise was struggling to continue using her vision to read and write. She explained that she wants to learn braille because she physically cannot continue to use her eyes to read and write. Using her eyes to read and write, even with the help of assistive technologies, gives her headaches, and she experiences intense back and neck pain from spending so much time hunched over a paper or a screen. She explained that she can use VoiceOver on her iPhone and use screen reader software to read and dictation software to write, but she would like another means of composing because she finds it tedious to edit using dictation software. She does not currently own a personal computer because she cannot afford one since she is currently unemployed due to her physical inability to continue using her vision to read and write. She quit her previous job because she could no longer bear to use her vision to process forms, either on paper or on a computer screen. Learning braille, she hopes, would relieve her eye, neck, and back pain and allow her to return to work.

Accessing braille skills, however, has required a lot of rhetorical work for Louise. She has been trying to teach herself braille for twenty years using a self-guided curriculum provided by The Hadley School, a free distance learning service for people who are blind and visually impaired, in which they mail braille workbooks with an audio curriculum and access to an instructor via email. After twenty years of trying to teach herself braille, however, Louise can only read a simple children's book. She explained that she is better at reading braille than writing with it because a braille writer requires writing backwards, as when you flip the page over, the raised dots run from left to right. As such, she has known for a long time that in order to become more fluent in braille, she needs greater access to braille literacy.

For the last two years, she has been petitioning the state's Department of Vocational Rehabilitation to provide her with education in braille, but they argue that she does not meet their requirements for how blind you need to be to receive braille training. Her external rhetorical labor in this situation, then, has involved marshaling support from other institutional powers, like doctors, physical therapists, and other advocacy agencies. She has sent the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation multiple letters from doctors and physical therapists who attest to her back pain and headaches and argue that she needs to learn braille to alleviate her pain. She also has been seeking help from an advocate from the state chapter of the National Federation for the

Blind, who is helping her write petition letters to the state advocating for her access to braille literacy. Louise’s self-advocacy work continues while she remains unemployed and unable to access adaptive tools and skills. She continues to experience physical pain as she attempts to use her little remaining vision to access the information she needs to advocate for her access to information.

Ethan has also encountered technological commonplaces that disarticulated him from the context in which he was working. Before accepting a job offer in 2000, Ethan disclosed his vision impairment and made accommodations requests, which included receiving help from their computer technicians to enlarge the text size on his computer screen. After about a week on the job, however, he still hadn’t received the assistive technology he needed, and his employer called him to reprimand him for not keeping up with the workload (a normative workplace commonplace explored in chapter two):

> My boss called me in and said, ‘You're not getting such and such things done here,’ and I said, ‘Well I'm trying to work on the computer and your technicians can't get the print blown up.’ And she said, ‘Why do you need that print blown up?’ And I said, ‘Well like I explained to you, I don't see that well.’ And she goes, ‘Your eyes are that bad?’ and I go, ‘Well I need it [the print] blown up to see and certain types of magnification.’

Ethan explained the nature of his vision impairment in a lot of detail to the human resources manager who arranged accommodations. Despite his efforts to explain his access needs, the next day Ethan was fired because his boss thought he would be unable to do the job. While it is impossible to know why exactly Ethan was fired, his example demonstrates that the process of acquiring access to adaptive technologies required rhetorical effort on Ethan’s part of proving his specific need for the software. While Ethan did file a lawsuit, he explained that taking legal recourse is not a good solution to the problem because even though he received a settlement, it left him in a position in which he did not want to return to the workplace where the complaint was filed and he was once again, left to find a new job.

Ropo described that he has found himself in work situations in which assistive technology is readily provided, but his employer, as he put it, was "painting everybody with one brush." He described that in one situation he took a job in a government office in which there were already other blind and visually impaired people working there. The problem Ropo noticed was that while his employer readily provided him with assistive technologies like screen reader software, they gave him no agency in decided which types he would want to use: "So because they've got two or three other visually impaired people working there and what they use, they tend to think that that will be what you are using as well." Ropo explained that he would try to express a preference, but his employer's response was that they had already contracted with a specific company to provide the software so that is what everyone will use.

> Over time I would talk to the other coworkers who also had other visual impairments and I would say maybe we should try this or this tends to work more, what the government has procured for us here is not adequate, maybe we should advocate ourselves for this. So we were able to get them to alter their views on that. So in terms of advocacy, my other coworkers there tended to fall into the thinking that they didn't, and this is my own opinion, they tended to fall into the, they didn't really want to advocate much but they felt like they were being done a favor to be hired in the first place, but I tend to be radical.

In this way, Ropo identified how the bureaucratic control of access to assistive technology did not take into account the ways individuals use assistive technologies in space and time. Together with his colleagues, Ropo had to strategize to work against the technological commonplace that had not accounted for the ways systems of distribution disarticulate individuals from the rhetorical contexts in which they use adaptive tools. Bureaucratic control of access reflects an ideology that constructs disabled people and adaptation as disparate from the networks and social environments in which live, work, and learn. For Louise, Ethan, and Ropo, the institutional structures that control access to adaptation (state rehabilitation programs and offices of human resources) prevented their access to information and created the demand for their response. Institutional control of access constructs access as something that can or cannot be provided based on appropriate documentation, evidence, and on a particular timeline. Bureaucratic approaches to access reflect an ideology that constructs access as something that can be managed with appropriate gatekeeping, but they disarticulate disabled people and their assistive tools from the times and places in which they are used. While some might argue that institutional control of resources is necessary for an equitable distribution of resources, and that gatekeeping is necessary to prevent fraudulence, these narratives make it clear that obtaining access to information via assistive technology, while purported to be a neutral good, is a rhetorical act.

Interdependent Users

Adaptive technologies and strategies are often sold as social goods that will result in greater independence for disabled individuals—put another way, they are marketed as "solutions" to physical disability—but given their retrofit design, they often require cooperation with other technologies and people in order to be used. In this way, I argue that technological commonplaces create expectations for independent use of assistive technologies, obscuring how these tools are situated in a fabric of other tools and people. The rhetorical situation of information access, then, often involves negotiating with other people in order to effectively use assistive technologies.

Candace described her interactions with what she called “mainstream IT folk” as sometimes a barrier to her use of assistive technologies. Despite having access to assistive technologies in the workplace, she found herself in a rhetorical situation in which technological commonplaces about independent use of assistive technology called forth her rhetorical labor. Typically, after her employer purchases screen reader software, she moves on to interacting with technical support staff to have the software installed, and then again when it needs to be updated and fixed when it malfunctions. Candace described that she puts a great deal of effort into explaining her needs to the technician in detail, but some technicians’ lack of familiarity with assistive technologies and their negative attitudes toward it make it a more challenging situation. Some technicians give her the feeling that they do not want to help her because the technology itself is so unfamiliar and frustrating. When I asked her what they say to her, she described their reaction as follows: “It’s more like, ‘This is a headache.’ You know I mean it was implied. It never had to be told that that's how the person thought. I mean not that he wouldn't do it you know. It was clearly a bigger deal you know.” In contrast, she described one technician who, as she put it, “never ran”:

> There was actually one particular IT person who I often said to him, ‘You know what? For being a sighted IT person you never run.’ And he's like, ‘Why would I?’ And I'm like, ‘You have no idea, most mainstream IT people would not want to deal with this stuff.’ And there were things that would change like JAWS [Windows screen reader software] wouldn't read and then I would need an update or whatever and he totally got it. He was just like, ‘Yeah okay well it is what it is.’ Something about the application changed and something different with Java, I mean name it, it's probably happened.

> Obviously, he had numerous other projects but he was the technician who always fixed me up. I mean ninety-nine percent of the time.

Candace’s description of a “mainstream IT folk” who “never runs” from her situation emphasizes the crucial role that other people play in the interdependent relationship that is often required for effective use of assistive technologies. Because many assistive technologies are retrofits, they are notorious for needing support from a sighted person to be installed and fixed. Other “mainstream IT folk” that Candace has interacted with bring a lack of familiarity with the technology and a negative attitude to the situation, causing Candace to have to perform more rhetorical labor to clearly explain her needs and navigate the unpleasant interaction that affects her information access. Their frustration might be attributed to their lack of familiarity with assistive technologies, but retrofit design of assistive technologies makes it so that their help is often required. Also, retrofit assistive technologies are notorious for frequent glitches because when the technologies they modify change, then the retrofit technologies present challenges to users and help from others is often needed.

Many participants complained about the burden of having to resolve issues with assistive technologies often only with the help of a sighted person. For instance, Abigail described the irony of smartphone apps like NPR One that are marketed as accessible but are only accessible once the user navigates through the inaccessible “front door.” Abigail described needing to call upon a sighted friend just to move beyond the app’s inaccessible main menu. As a result, Abigail has taken on the rhetorical labor of repeatedly contacting National Public Radio to explain to them that their claims about “the public” are disingenuous unless they fix the inaccessible entrance to their radio app. In both Candace and Abigail’s experiences, technological commonplaces create expectations for independent use of assistive tools and strategies, not accounting for how they are situated with a fabric of other technologies and users. Retrofit design of adaptive technologies creates rhetorical situations in which users must call upon others for help. In chapter four, I discuss in more detail the specific rhetorical strategies that participants must use to move audiences into interdependence.

Joanne, a visually impaired teacher of the visually impaired who works for a school district, described how her students' access to information depends on a network of tools and people operating in a coordinated effort. Joanna's students must explain to each new teacher every semester what accommodations they need and what kind of support they will need from their teachers. Simply having the appropriate assistive technologies is not enough; for example, even if a student has access to a laptop with screen reader software, their teacher still needs to know how to convert documents so that they are screen reader compatible, and they need to remember to do this every time they distribute a test, handout, or other reading material. When Joanne's students reach high school age, she requires them to explain their accommodations to their teachers on their own and educate them about how they need to participate:

> We can easily have a list of ten to fifteen accommodations and it's so hard to remember to say all those when you're [a student] meeting with a teacher, so what I have students do is write down bullet points of what their accommodations are, like I need preferential seating, I need materials in electronic format, I use my iPad to access them, I've shared a Google drive folder with you and you can upload materials in a PDF format. Then those are all teachable moments, how do you explain what does PDF even stand for? How do you save a Word document as a PDF? What apps do you need them to use to access those worksheets or materials? That's helpful for the older kids because I think too they will

> become more comfortable and be able to answer teachers' questions as they know more about their own accommodations.

Joanne added that the rhetorical work is easier when the teacher has familiarity with vision impairment, but most do not: “They'll [teachers] say, ‘Oh I 've never had a student with a visual impairment before.’ They haven't even had exposure. So it's really important that the student understands their accommodations and how to explain what they need and be able to understand the technology that they use.” Joanne added that this rhetorical work is always ongoing because technologies change often and so do the teachers, classes, and learning materials. While some rhetorical labor might always be required for acquainting people with what is required, a society in which multiple ways of doing things is woven into the fabric of daily life would make for a situation in which less rhetorical labor is required. Audiences’ lack of familiarity with adaptive technologies combined with their retrofit design hidden from the mainstream makes for a rhetorical situation in which most audiences are very unfamiliar and require education. Technological commonplaces that construe users as independent from the network of people and tools in which they exist obscures how retrofit design of assistive technology disarticulates individuals from their contexts.

A Hierarchy of Modes

Participants also described encountering technological commonplaces that perpetuate a hierarchy of modes that ostracizes assistive technology users and creates the demand for their response. Their rhetorical labor involves challenging ideologies that privilege vision as a superior means of knowing by redirecting audience ideas toward a multiplicity of modes and tools for accessing information. Multiple participants recalled casually telling people that they read a certain book and being asked, “But did you read it or did you listen to it?” Abigail explained: “A lot of people consider that when you have a book on CD or MP3 or whatever, or you have a book that is read aloud, that you're not reading. So people will say, ‘Well did you read that book or did you listen to it?’” Abigail said that in the last ten years she’s developed a response to these kinds of remarks that attempts to teach people that you can access information through multiple modes: “I've started saying, ‘I read it *and* I listened to it’” [emphasis original in audio recording]. Abigail also mentioned that she volunteers in schools to teach children about blindness and difference, and when she talks to them about literacy, she tells them, “You can read with your eyes, you can read with your fingers, you can read with your ears. And it doesn’t matter. And it’s all good.” She commented that children have no problem understanding that you can engage in literacy in equal ways using different modes, but many adults make distinctions, even some librarians. Similarly, Candace recalled that the first time she realized she was different was when her peers saw her read with her fingers, not her eyes. In this way, using adaptive modes of literacy serves as a means for people to make arguments about what “counts” as literacy.

Abigail described that she encountered technological commonplaces about non-visual modes of information access when she participates every year in a local literacy organization’s competitive Scrabble fundraiser. Even in a space where access to literacy is the primary goal, Abigail finds that technological commonplaces perpetuate a hierarchy of modes that ostracizes her use of adaptive tools. She has played with the same team for five or six years and each year they play with her tactile Scrabble set: “You know other people play with just a print set but my team plays with my set because I am fierce about ‘we are all literate in our own ways.’” Every year people come over to her and “gawk” at her tactile scrabble set and ask her who plays on her team, to which Abigail replies, “Ah, friends.” To avoid fierce competition, the organization determined that everyone would play a “spill and spell” style of Scrabble. Given that Abigail needs to have her hands on the board to engage, which makes it so that her teammates cannot see the board, she suggested that they have two leagues, one that plays “spill and spell” which she calls “the tortoise division.” While Abigail has a rhetorical goal in mind—to demonstrate to people that there are multiple modes for literate activity—she continues to feel frustrated by people’s reactions to her adaptive tool:

> I think they sort of think of it as sort of Special Olympics kind of a, ‘oh that's nice,’ and the fact that we raise the most money it's kind of, and we're kind of proud of being the Tortoises. I pick people that will join me in saying yeah, we're Tortoises, we're not the fastest. And that whole it's sort of a we're not accepting second class status. We're almost saying we're better than you, not directly, but it's I think it's a little uncomfortable still. For example, last time it was mentioned on TV because they always have a commentator from TV that's commenting on the whole thing and they have a little clip about it on the ten o’ clock news and so when ours got mentioned, the last time the guy said, ‘Well I don't know what that's all about but they seem to laugh a lot and have a lot of fun and raise a lot of money so you know that's the Tortoises!’ Okay. So it's a different image of disability, sort of a proud one.

While Abigail has a clear purpose of demonstrating a proud image of disability that involves engaging in multiple modes, she remains unsure about its effectiveness. Even though she’s been doing this for five or six years now, she doesn’t plan to stop. She persists with her rhetorical work of showing people that “you can read with your eyes, you can read with your fingers, you can read with your ears.”

Joanne described that she finds it important that her visually impaired students perform the rhetorical work of inviting their peers to learn more about how information access occurs in multiple modes through a variety of tools and resources. Joanne helps her students hold yearly in-services or “show and tell” sessions in front their classes to help their peers understand their visual impairment and the adaptive technologies they use. The biggest struggle for many of her students, Joanne explained, is their feelings of isolation and self-consciousness about their outward appearance of disability, which is often marked by the adaptive technologies they use. She explained that many students worry about the fact that other students stare at them when they are doing something out of the ordinary, like using an adaptive tool. Joanne works to help her students reframe their peers’ staring as “admiration.”

Demonstrating how technological commonplaces perpetuate a hierarchy of modes that ostracizes users of assistive technologies, Joanne described one student who complained that he has been holding in-services with his class for four or five years now and his peers still don’t understand his use of assistive tools. Joanne said she emphasized that he needs to do it every year because his peers need reminders and as they grow older they can understand more. Once her student decided to do the in-service again, he found that his peers took an interest in braille, and by the end of the semester, he had decided that he wanted to teach his class braille. Joanne emphasized the importance of persistence and she tells students, “You have to be persistent. It’s a new year and I just ask that you try different things.” The importance that Joanne places on her students’ consistent efforts to invite peers to learn about adaptive tools and modes serves as testament to the ways ideologies that privilege vision as a primary means of engaging with literacy shape participant experiences accessing information through adaptive tools and strategies. Her student's complaints about having to hold an in-service with his class every year attests to the phenomenon of access fatigue, which is further explored in chapter five.

Conclusion

These narratives demonstrate how interrogating technological commonplaces, which lead us to believe that technologies necessarily lead to access, reveal how normative conceptions of embodiment, acquisition, use, and modality structure rhetorical situations around access. There are certainly participants who described smoother processes of acquiring and using assistive technologies, but they were few and far between. While it is well known within the field of Disability Studies that retrofit design, institutional control, the ideal of independence, and the primacy of vision construct people with disabilities as deficit, my contribution lies in revealing how technological commonplaces shape the rhetorical situation of information in the following four ways. I argue that technological commonplaces…

1. do not account for the role of **embodiment** in the rhetorical situation of access
2. do not account for the ways **systems of distribution** disarticulate individuals from the rhetorical contexts in which they use adaptive tools
3. create **expectations for independent use** of assistive tools and strategies, not accounting for how they are situated with a fabric of other technologies and users
4. obscure **a hierarchy of modes** that ostracizes assistive technology users and creates the need for their response

When we view technology as part of the rhetorical situation of access, we see how technological commonplaces structure how we imagine who uses what technologies, for what purposes, when, where, and how. Examining our expectations for technology reveals how information access is a highly rhetorical act. My analysis of participant rhetorical strategy in these situations reveals the normative ideas that structure these rhetorical situations

While the focus of this chapter is on the rhetorical situations surrounding access to literacy, I believe it is important to acknowledge that the narratives shared in this chapter demonstrate that accessing literacy through accommodation, adaptation, and assistive technologies is a mentally, emotionally, and physically strenuous task. Many participants told stories about the physical and mental exhaustion of literally “relearning how to learn” through tactile and aural modes with little or no support while experiencing life crises like abruptly losing vision and subsequently losing their house, job, and significant relationships while enduring mental health issues as a result. Not all participants experienced such sudden trauma, but almost all expressed physical, mental, and emotional strain associated with learning and using non-visual modes of literacy. While this chapter is not about the process of “relearning how to learn” through tactile and aural modes, I believe it is important to recognize the physical, mental, and emotional pain that individuals endure to remain literate in a society that is structures reading and writing as a visual activity.

Interchapter: Access to Social Life

I am sitting on the couch in a counselor's office. I have reached a point where I know I need to start communicating more openly about my vision impairment, but I don't know how. Despite being a student of writing and rhetoric, I feel like I have no tools for communicating about it. I receive rattling responses from people that make me feel sorry rather than empowered. Things aren't great on my end either—sometimes my voice trembles or I struggle to explain my condition. I'm not sure how technical I should be or if I should brush it off as "no big deal." And I'm not sure when the appropriate moments to disclose, with whom, why, and what to ask for. I am hoping this counselor can tell me how.

The counselor asks me why I find it difficult and I tell him it's because I think it makes people sad. He tells me that's not a good reason to remain silent about it because sadness is a normal human emotion. This doesn't satisfy me. I don't like that my condition makes people sad. It wouldn't make me sad if other people weren't so sad about it. He tells me that I need to present myself to the world in ways that I want people to react to me. He tells me that if I'm sad, other people will be sad too, but if I'm confident and relaxed, other people will be relaxed too. I see the logic, but I don't like it. It doesn't seem fair.

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It is Ok. I am Blind –Talk to Me.

By Chad Nelson

June 15, 2016

Imagine this situation: you are blind, and you walk into a restaurant, bank, or some other business and you want to get a meal, make a transaction, or buy something. You just happened to go in with a sighted, or even partially sighted friend or significant other, for no other reason except that you are with him or her. You and your friend walk up to the counter and the clerk turns to your friend and asks, “Good morning. What would he like today?”

Now, in this situation there can be two outcomes; the first is that your friend answers for you and says, “Yes, he would like the turkey sub with lettuce and tomatoes,” or, the second response would be, “I don’t know, ask him.”

Here are two other examples:

A sighted friend and I walked into a bank together to get money out of my checking account, and I walked up to the teller line, indicating that I wanted $20.

Bank teller: “Can you please give me his account number? I need to look up his account information.”

Sighted friend: Looks at the teller, smiles and shrugs.

Me: “You don’t need to ask her. I can speak for myself. I am only blind.”

The teller didn’t know what to say. I think that she felt pretty embarrassed. The second time was at a sandwich shop. I went in with a partially-sighted friend.

Cashier: “Good afternoon. What would he like on his sandwich?”

Friend: “I don’t know. I didn’t ask him, but you can ask him yourself.”

Me: “I am able to answer questions by myself.”

Clerk: Ignores me.

It comes time to pay, and the same thing happens, only worse.

Clerk: “Please take his card and swipe it through the machine for him.”

Me: “Sir, you know just because I can’t see, doesn’t mean that I am unable to hear. You need to please address me, and please stop talking to others about me like I am not here.”

Clerk: Ignores me.

By this time, we were both getting pretty insulted and angry at the lack of respect and tact by the employee who just couldn’t get the idea that, just because I am blind, I can’t handle my own business.

This doesn’t happen every time. As a matter of fact, a lot of times, such as the other week at a bank branch and the other day at a department store, I dealt with people who addressed me respectfully and treated me like I am a real human being. But, on the occasion that people ignore me and talk to the other person I am with, it makes me and my sighted friends angry. We feel like people think blind people are helpless in every other way as well as not being able to see. This is not true at all and the general public needs to be educated, realizing the blind have feelings and can do everything anyone else can do, just in a slightly different way.

There are a lot of times when people don’t know how to act around someone who is blind, and they think that person needs to have a caregiver. Blindness is not something that makes a person incapable of doing things; it simply takes away any useful vision. There needs to be more positive education for those who are either ignorant of people who are blind or simply don’t understand blindness.

Some things a sighted person can do when encountering a blind person would be to say something like, “Is there anything I can do to help?” Not, “What does he or she need?” Another thing that is also helpful and won’t make a blind person feel as if they are incapable is to lightly touch a shoulder or hand in a way that is not obvious to others and ask “How can I help you?” This will let the blind person know that they are the one being addressed.

Some things a blind person can do if someone is talking to a sighted friend or significant other instead of talking to them directly would be to simply say, “Can you please ask me the question? I am perfectly able to speak for myself.”

If a blind person knows that someone is talking about them, simply answer in the affirmative. Such as, if someone asks a sighted friend, “Would he like something to drink?” The blind person could say, “Yes please, I would like a Coke.” This is a gentle way of letting the sighted person know it is expected that they should be talking to the person who is blind.

Being blind is like any other disability that isn’t understood. It only takes education to help people know how to react in a positive and acceptable manner.

Isolation Bubble

By Katherine Schneider

Aired on Wisconsin Public Radio’s Wisconsin Life on June 30, 2014

I don’t think much about being blind—I just am and have been so since birth. Like most things, it has its ups and downs. I’ve had the privilege of working with nine wonderful Seeing Eye dogs in my life. But on the other hand, there’s a bubble of isolation that surrounds those of us who have visible disabilities that is a pain in the anatomy at times.

Recently I went to a funeral of an amazing woman at my church in Eau Claire. My yellow Lab guide dog and I got there and got in line to sign the condolence book. The isolation bubble began forming for me when the person standing by the book asked in a surprised tone if I was sure I wanted to sign the book. Maybe they were holding out a pen toward me which I didn’t see? Or maybe the fact that I was digging around in my purse looking for my signature stamp threw them off. I suppressed my tendency to say something snarky and just said “Yes, I do.”

Then the usher seated us in an empty pew and the bubble settled around me. Nobody sat in the row with us. Time passed, the church filled and still we sat in the pew by ourselves.

If this was a cartoon, the thoughts bubble over my head would contain thoughts like: “Please somebody break the bubble of isolation and sit near me. Jesus would I’m sure.” “I took a shower this morning and the dog hasn’t rolled in anything. Please sit here!

What were people thinking who knew me but sat elsewhere? “There’s Kathie and her guide dog. I could sit by them, but I don’t usually so would I have to help them or what. I’ll just sit over somewhere else.”

One of the tough parts about being blind is I can’t spot a friend to sit by unless they’re talking loudly when I walk in. At parties I usually roost somewhere and wait to see who comes up to greet me. My guide dog can nose people in greeting who smell interesting, but that isn’t always a good thing depending on where she noses. She often helps in bubble-breaking because she’s a kid magnet and then parents come forward to drag the kids away. Friends with other disabilities tell me it’s not just blind folks who live in the bubble of isolation.

After the funeral several people said “hi” and we chatted briefly as we exited the church. Sweet relief!

Sometimes the isolation bubble is broken in amazing ways. A fall trip to the local farmers’ market to pick out gourds as little gifts for friends is a good example. After having great fun pawing through all the gourds with all their interesting twists and turns, I went to pay the Hmong farmer for my choice gourds. He said “no pay” he was giving them to me. I said no, I’ll pay. He said no again and tapped his heart and said “gift from the heart.” I have a hard time accepting charity, but this was different. Clearly he knew the truth of Anne Frank’s quote: “No one has ever become poor by giving.” I relished giving the gourds out and telling each recipient the story of this man who had reached through my bubble of isolation.

As I trotted home from the funeral I mulled over how it could have gone better. Should I wear a sign that says “Please speak to me; I don’t often bite!”

We are people of action in Wisconsin. Now that you’ve heard my story next time you see a person with a visible disability sitting alone, you’ll know how to break the isolation bubble and I’ll bet you’ll do it.

Chapter 4: A Rhetorical Pedagogy of Interdependence

"Because most of it is just a glancing kind of an interaction, to quickly be able to not minimize the difference [but] not overdramatize the difference and get what you need all in a one-sentence interaction. I continually find that challenging."

--Abigail, study participant

"*You can't ever have that attitude [of] that's their problem if they don't make eye contact. No, it's your problem as well too. And you have to kind of help them overcome their adversity and those kinds of things*."

--Ethan, study participant

"When we recognize that dependency is an aspect of what it is to be the sorts of being we are, we, as a society, can begin to confront our fear and loathing of dependency and with it, of disability. When we acknowledge how dependence on another saves us from isolation and provides the connections to another that makes life worthwhile, we can start the process of embracing needed dependencies"

--Eva Feder Kittay (57)

In "It is Ok, I am Blind—Talk To Me," Nelson describes what it is like to be perceived as incapable of basic human capacities. Instead of directly asking him what he wants or needs, interlocutors look to his sighted companion to navigate the interaction. In "Isolation Bubble," Schneider describes an interaction in church in which the person holding the condolences book asks if she is sure she wants to sign the book and she identifies the act of helping as a possible explanation for why people avoid sitting near her and her guide dog in church. In both narratives, uncertainty about how to interact with a person with disability and a perceived lack of human autonomy structure their interactions and create an overwhelming feeling of social isolation. To break the “isolation bubble,” writers have published over one hundred narratives on The Outlook From Here, exposing public audiences to the everyday lives of people with disabilities and providing specific instructions for how to think about and interact with people with disabilities. Their narratives represent just one form of rhetorical pedagogy that participants use to teach people how to interact with them. In this chapter, I examine participant experiences of using rhetoric to access social life in order to understand what it takes to move beyond the uncertainty and perceived deficit that fuels social isolation around disability.

Scholars of Disability Studies have long argued for interdependence as a solution to exclusionary ideal of autonomy that disadvantage people who need help from others in everyday life. While interdependence has grown appealing in theory, many have remarked that interdependent relationships are rarely experienced in everyday interactions (Price et al.). What can a lived rhetorical perspective, then, tell us about why interdependent relations are rarely found in social interactions? And what can the rhetorical labor of disabled individuals tell us about the conditions under which interdependence is and is not possible? By examining participant experiences of seeking access in social life and the rhetorical pedagogies they use to promote interaction, I propose a structure of interdependent relationality that reveals how disability demands that we unravel and critically examine normative modes of relationality.

While the previous chapters focus on participant experiences of seeking access in professional and educational settings, this chapter focuses on experiences of seeking inclusion in social life. I use the term “social life” loosely to refer to the informal and formal social relationships upon which access and inclusion are built across contexts.[3] Social relationships, for

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[3] Many of the participant experiences examined in this chapter occur in professional and educational settings, but the attention to social relationships in this chapter exposes how access in educational and professional settings depends upon interdependent social relationships.

people with disabilities, often require some form of what might be normatively considered dependency. Dependency is normatively understood as an inherently unequal power relationship. Independence, in opposition to dependence, reigns as a defining ideal of human dignity and citizenry. Tobin Siebers points out that through the ideals of independence and freedom, "citizens are construed as autonomous beings who are fit to walk the earth in solitude if they so desire" (182). Despite the fact that vulnerability is inherent in all human experience, social supports are meant to be "fixes" that move people from temporary states of dependence to independence, or as Siebers puts it, the social contract acts "like an insurance policy to protect individuals against uncharacteristic descents into dependency" (Siebers 182). Similarly, from a feminist philosophy perspective, disability raises significant ethical questions about the binary of dependence and independence that shapes how we understand social relationships. Feminist philosopher Eva Feder Kittay writes that when we uphold independence as an ideal, assistance and adaptation are "a sort of prosthesis that permits one to be independent" (50). Through the hegemony of independence, states of dependence are construed as "fixes" to the problem of vulnerability.

Interdependence, however, challenges the independence/dependence binary by assuming that all humans are inherently and necessarily dependent on each other, regardless of their abilities at various moments in time. Rather than viewing disability as a weakness but as a concept that "reveals the structure of dependence inherent in all human societies" (Siebers 183), I aim to understand how interdependence offers a more inclusive structure of human relationality. Siebers writes that all humans, communities, and states are vulnerable, requiring that "we depend on other human beings not only at those times when our capacities are diminished but each and every day and even at those moments when we may be at the height of our physical and mental powers" (183). Instead of an ethics of inclusion that places autonomy at its center, Kittay argues for an ethics of inclusion that relies on a network of interconnected humans with necessary dependencies. Kittay's ethics of care views dependency as a resource rather than a deficit: "Dependency implies power inequalities and a care-based ethics appears to embrace rather than challenge those inequalities" (53). As a practice, Kittay defines care as the active giving and receiving of "selves-in-relation" (54). It is the practice of interdependence in everyday life that I am interested in and I aim to establish a structure for interdependent relationality in public life.

Specifically, I am interested in relations of interdependence and the rhetorical labor involved in facilitating those relations. I am concerned with defining interdependence as a rhetorical pedagogy, which like the other rhetorical labors of access outlined in this project, involves the tandem rhetorical work of reshaping audience ideas about disability and moving audiences toward active responsibility for access. For Kittay, care is both a labor and an attitude. As a labor, according to Kittay, care is work that "requires skills on the part of the carer and uptake on the part of the cared for" (52). As an attitude, care "denotes a positive, affective bond and investment in another's well-being" (52). Kittay notes that the labor cannot be appropriately performed without attitude, or "the open responsiveness to another that is so essential to understanding what another requires" (52). As both a labor and an attitude, "Care, as a virtue, is a disposition manifested in caring behavior (the labor and attitude) in which 'a shift takes place from the interest in our life situation to the situation of the other, the one in need of care'" (52). Nel Noddings makes a imilar point about the importance of "caring-about" in creating the conditions for justice. For Noddings, there is a distinction between caring-for and caring-about others, and caring-for can only happen under conditions of caring-about: "The key, central to care theory, is this: caring-about (or, perhaps a sense of justice) must be seen as instrumental in establishing the conditions under which caring-for can flourish. Although the preferred form of caring is cared-for, caring-about can help in establishing, maintaining, and enhancing it (Noddings 23–24). Like Noddings and Kittay, I am interested in the kinds of thinking and relationality that make justice possible, specifically interdependent relationships in social life. Similar to the distinction between caring-for and caring-about, participating in interdependence with people with disabilities, I believe, requires specific capacities and orientations toward disability.

In *Talking to Strangers*, Danielle Allen argues for a structure of stranger relationality that accounts for the side-by-side gains and losses of democratic citizenship. Allen points out that we teach our children "don't talk to strangers," yet democracy depends on "vulnerability before one's fellow citizens" (180). Allen argues that democratic citizenship is comprised of networks of relationality that inherently involve moments of loss and vulnerability for the benefit of the collective good: "side-by-side but not touching, what are these citizens—laborers and investors—to each other? Inevitably, they are one another's supports though in diverse ways and at different moments" (Allen 156). Drawing upon the philosophy of Ralph Ellison, Allen argues that we need discourse that accounts for our mutual dependencies and provides us with tools for weighing the varied gains and losses and for responding to the political emotion inherent to those modes of relationality:

> On the same page or in the same city, alongside each other without touching, citizens of different classes, backgrounds, and experiences are inevitably related to each other in networks of mutual benefaction, despite customary barriers between them, and despite our nearly complete lack of awareness, or even disavowal, of these networks. This

> relationship is citizenship, and a democratic polity, for its own long-form health, requires practices for weighing the relative force of benefactions and for responding to them. (169)

In the current political climate, in which individuals and communities are increasingly segmented by political and ideological differences, we need a structure for breaking down divisions in the "networks of mutual benefaction" that Allen describes. Like Allen, my goal is to construct a structure of interdependent relationality that accounts for the relative moments of dependency and the inputs and outputs inherent to a notion of democratic citizenship that is truly inclusive of people with disabilities.

The ethical problem that Kittay identifies is further complicated by the work that disabled people do to accommodate audiences around them. Like Kittay, moral philosopher and feminist bioethicist Jackie Leach Scully points to the ethical problem inherent in the pressure for disabled people to accommodate audience experiences and perceptions of them, or to perform what she calls the "hidden labor" of disability. According to Leach Scully, "hidden labor" of disability, or of managing and manipulating nondisabled people's reactions and interactions with disabled people, is unethical because it is a labor that relies on asymmetrical relations and functions as an exercise in developing autonomy. Like Kittay, Leach Scully points out that pressuring disabled people to manage and manipulate other people's reactions to them relies on a Kantian ideal of autonomy, rather than a feminist relational autonomy (34). Leach Scully calls for better understanding of the conditions our society creates that calls disabled people to perform the "hidden labor" of managing self-presentations and manipulation of nondisabled people. My analysis responds to Leach Scully's call by using a rhetorical perspective to understand the discursive conditions under which interdependence is and is not possible in daily life.

Rhetorical scholars have also questioned the ethics of disabled rhetors needing to move audiences toward collective responsibility for access. For example, Julie Jung argues that an ethics of individual accommodations relies on "rhetorics of coming-to-terms," or disabled rhetors must accommodate audiences by making them comfortable with the idea of disability, persuading them to make one-time accommodation (citation ("Textual Mainstreaming"). Allison Hitt, in her archival study of disability advocacy campaigns, has highlighted the shortcomings of both individualized and universal access disability advocacy campaigns, neither of which, she argues, adequately persuades audiences into collective responsibility for access. Stephanie Kerschbaum has argued that if agency is created in shared rhetorical space, then in order for disability to be recognized as a mutual responsibility both parties need to recognize it as something other than deficit ("On Rhetorical Agency"). What has not been examined, however, is the rhetorical conditions under which interdependence is and is not possible. While scholars have critiqued the rhetorical shortcomings of disability advocacy based on both individual accommodations (Jung, "Textual Mainstreaming; Hitt) and universal appeal (Dolmage, "Mapping Composition"; Hitt), I analyze participant accounts to identify what needs to be uprooted and reimagined in order for audiences to participate in interdependence.

Building upon rhetorical scholarship and feminist philosophy of care, I interrogate how participants use rhetoric to move audience into interdependence, what happens when interdependence is not possible, and what their rhetorical experiences teach us about the kinds of structures, capacities, and habits are necessary for interdependence to become status quo. I examine interdependence as a rhetorical pedagogy because participants aim to teach new modes of human relationality, specifically modes of relationality for being in community with disabled people. Through their rhetorical pedagogy, participants aim to instill new norms of interaction around themselves and other disabled people in future interactions. I examine this labor as rhetorical pedagogy because it aims to compel people to move norms of public engagement with disabled people in both physical and ideological senses. Teaching interdependent modes of relationality not only requires teaching specific actions and behaviors but also more significantly, it requires teaching audiences to unravel and critically examine dominant notions of humanity, agency, responsibility, and institutional structures.

While I engage more deeply with the concept of Universal Design in the final chapter, I view the theory-building performed here as extending Jay Dolmage's theory of Universal Design as "a way to move" ("Mapping Composition," 24) or as "disability praxis" ("Mapping Composition," 25). Dolmage theorizes Universal Design by de-emphasizing the "universal" and emphasizing the verb "design" to call attention to the need to "move" the world:

> Universal Design is a means of seeing the whole world at the same time while seeing that space as in process and new spaces as being constantly renegotiated. The emphasis on design allows us to recognize that we are involved in the continued production of space. Universal Design is *kairotic*—in this sense, seeking the opportune, but also acknowledging that context forever shifts. ("Mapping Composition," 25)

I identify these modes of relationality and belief systems through the structure of interdependent relationality that I propose in this chapter. This structure of interdependent relationality, grounded in participant stories and rhetorical practices, offers a *praxis* of relationality that does not view disability as relationality based on dependency but instead provides a structure for interaction that "flips the script," so to speak, and places interlocutors in the role of agents responsible for moving norms toward mutual responsibility for access. This structure of interdependent relationality requires using rhetorical pedagogy to unravel and examine the following four notions:

1) **Humanness** - A recognition of humanness, which requires audiences who invite engagement with difference and embrace unfamiliar relationality and difference as resource
2) **Agency** - A notion of agency that bases empowerment on cooperation among human and nonhuman tools and adaptive strategies and disarticulates dependencies from other capacities
3) **Social Responsibility** – A notion of social responsibility that includes habitual uptake and transfer of non-normative modes of relationality in unfamiliar interactions
4) **Leadership** – A practice of leadership that involves challenging norms, making infrastructure flexible, and modeling interdependent relationality

In the following pages, I analyze participant accounts of seeking access and inclusion in social life, identifying the larger goals behind their rhetorical pedagogies. In doing so, I demonstrate the dire need for a structure of interdependent relationality that includes the four conditions outlined above.

Humanness

Above all, participants described feeling isolated. Participants who carry markers of disability, like a white cane, guide dog, or sunglasses, and participants who cannot participate in embodied norms of engagement like eye contact and targeted body language, described feeling isolated in social situations and having to strategize to break the “isolation bubble.” In this section I examine rhetorical strategy of invitation, which involves moving audiences to engage with difference and embrace unfamiliar relationality. I argue that rhetorical strategy of invitation reveals a question of humanness at the center of the rhetorical situation of interdependence—if audiences do not recognize the subject as human, often they will not invite difference or embrace unfamiliar relationality. If audiences do not initiate and invite engagement, and the burden of invitation always falls on disabled people, then interdependence is not possible. In this section I discuss verbal and embodied strategies of invitation that participants use to prevent and break social isolation, which points to the need for audiences who invite engagement around difference and embrace rather than avoid unfamiliar relationality.

. In "Isolation Bubble," Schneider reflects on an experience in which she attended a funeral and was seated in an empty pew by herself, and as the church filled up, no one sat around her and her guide dog. She speculates about what people might have been thinking as they looked for a place to sit: "There's Kathie and her guide dog, I could sit by them, but I don't usually, so would I have to help them or what? I'll just sit over somewhere else." In speculating about why no one wants to sit by her, Schneider points to the act of helping as a barrier to inclusion. In this example, it is apparent that disability, and the potential for what might be normatively perceived as dependency, obstructs an audience from initiating engagement around difference. It is likely that audiences do not engage because they identify the potential for dependency and they do not know how to interact around that dependency, providing a rationale for not engaging.

Abigail described her relationship with her church community as one that involves a lot of invitation. Even though Abigail has been part of her church community for a long time and holds a leadership role within the organization, she finds that she continues to have to invite engagement. Although people have known her for a long time, she continues to have to invite people to interact, which often involves teaching them how to help her participate in social life.

For example, she explained how she solicits help from a fellow church member in the buffet line:

> For example, at church the other day after mass, we had a mix and mingle, and mix and mingles are hard for me even though I've been going there a long time. So I grab somebody who I thought was in line and I said, “Ah, are you in line for the food?” and they said, “Yeah and I said gee how'd you like to help me too?” And they kind of, “Mmm okay!” You know it wasn't something that they were going to offer but when called upon directly oh okay, and I said, “Tell me what you see and I'll say yes or no.” So we get through the line, they dumped me at a table by myself, and they said, “Well where do you want to sit?” and I said, “Oh at a table with some other people,” knowing the bubble thing, and so they dumped me at a table by myself and I think I said thanks, and off they went.

In order for Abigail to access social life, she needs to first invite audiences to engage and second to teach them how to participate in interdependent relationality. In this example Abigail describes inviting a person to help her through the buffet line, teaching a person how to help her through the buffet line, and providing them with instructions for how to find her a seat. Abigail’s narration of the interaction suggests that it did not play out how would like it to; she hints that she would like it better if a person had offered to help, precluding the need for her invitation to help. And when the person seats her at a table by herself, after she has requested to sit by other people, it becomes clear that this interaction does not demonstrate the kind of interdependent relationality that Abigail hopes for. She explained that after sitting by herself for a few minutes, someone approaches her and they have another awkward interaction:

> Okay so up comes somebody that had helped me give me some transportation to some places where I've spoken and she had heard my bubble thing one too many times and she

> said, “Ah I'm going to come over here and break the bubble…” da da da okay so she sits down, some of her buddies come over sit down, and they're kind of apologizing because we're supposed to be mixing and mingling with people that we don't know and I said, “Hey you're mixing and mingling with me so that counts,” and you know she kind of made some reference to the bubble thing which they had no idea what she was talking about but so it was. But it's so, there's five minutes of awkwardness that's just ugly, and then it settles down and it's all good.

Abigail reflected on how this situation serves as an example of the exigency for her larger rhetorical project of teaching audiences to initiate engagement with difference and embrace unfamiliar relationality:

> To keep putting myself in those spots, because I'm on the parish council, people have obviously voted me in, but then at the same point when it comes to a mix and mingle it's ugly for five minutes and then it's all fine. To keep doing those things and know that next time we might get it down to 4.3 minutes or, that's the hard stuff. Because you can educate and you can give them five tips or they can see it in their bulletin or wherever, it's on the Catholic digest for November, but to translate that into, “Can I help you through the line?” That's a long process.

Abigail mentions several modes she uses for her rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence: presenting the information as “five tips for interaction,” writing a piece for the church bulletin, recording an audio story for the state’s public radio station, and directly requesting help in the buffet line. It is clear that Abigail’s rhetorical strategies are varied, and yet she suggests that this is a repetitive process that only leads to marginal improvement over time. It is clear that the intended outcome of Abigail’s rhetorical pedagogy is for audiences to initiate engagement and offer help (“Can I help you through the line?”) and to prevent social isolation. In other words, the learning outcome of Abigail’s pedagogy is interdependent relationality that involves audiences who initiate and invite engagement, but the constant, repetitive demand of this rhetorical labor is difficult to deal with (“that’s the hard stuff.”). In the next and final chapter, I return to this example to explore *access fatigue*, a lived consequence of the repetitive, recursive demands of everyday rhetorical labor of disability.

Other participants described how embodied norms of interaction cause social isolation and might prevent audiences from inviting or initiating engagement. Many participants commented that social gatherings are especially difficult to navigate because the norms of interaction rely heavily on vision and eye contact. Abigail commented, “I can’t spot a friend to sit by unless they’re talking loudly when I walk in, I usually roost somewhere and wait to see who comes up to greet me.” She joked, “Should I wear a sign that says please, speak to me, I don’t often bite?” Similarly, Jackson described going to parties and having to stick with the same group of friends because he cannot easily leave the conversation and find another one. Ethan described being perceived as “bashful” because he does not always make eye contact and people expect to receive eye contact as an invitation for engagement. Candace, who has been blind since birth, described that in college, people never visited her dorm room or sat next to her in classrooms, and still, people never say hello to her at bus stops unless she initiates the interaction.

In response to normative modes of relationality, some participants use rhetorical strategies to create comfort around unfamiliar relationality, a strategy they find effective in moving audiences to engage. Mary Kathleen believes it is important that people find her approachable, and when I asked her how she makes herself approachable, she described her "open" posture and tendency to smile, even in situations that don't warrant a smile. Several participants described a comforting affect as a strategy they use to invite engagement. Lisa commented that she used to "pretend things were all good, even if I couldn't see something." She explained that she would use a tone of voice and nonchalant affect so that people around her would not become uncomfortable, even if she needed their help. Over time she learned that it is more effective if her embodied affect matches her words:

> My comfort level is so different that what I'm communicating with my body language and my energy is congruent now…before I got really comfortable with that there would be a way that my voice would quiver of I could feel the nervous energy in my body coming up and so I know that on the non-verbals I could be emanating some of my own discomfort and now I know that my non-verbals and my verbals are all in alignment.

What Lisa articulates here points to a normative structure of relationality that operates based on discomfort around disability and the act of helping. Lisa's need to project calm and invitation suggests the need for a structure of interaction that promotes comfort with stranger relationality, especially around perceived embodied difference and acts of helping. Similar to Lisa, Nadine highlighted how projecting a comfortable affect helps calm people around her, and in turn, facilitates their participation in interdependence. Nadine said, "...sometimes I spend more time getting people comfortable with the fact that I'm comfortable." Nadine comforts people by using a friendly, relaxed demeanor when reorienting normative relations toward interdependence. She said,

> I've developed this very laid-back demeanor which is just a part of my own personality, whereby I say things like 'Hey, how ya doin'? My name is Nadine, what's your name? Okay, awesome. Um, I'm wondering if you could just give me a little assistance getting

> here or could you tell me directions on how to get here. Now it's completely fine. What we'll do is I'll just take the back of your arm, okay, just like that, all right, we are good to go, now we're groovin'!' [all said in a very sweet, soft voice]

While Lisa, Mary Kathleen, and Nadine all described accepting the need to comfort others, and described being quite good at doing so, their rhetorical efforts point to the need for audiences who invite engagement and embrace unfamiliar relationality. While initiation of engagement around difference is necessary, invitation that embraces unfamiliar relationality is also necessary because it creates a structure for the kind of "ethics of care" (Kittay) or "caring-about" (Noddings) that feminist philosophers argue is necessary for conditions of justice.

Participants described other strategies they use to accommodate audience expectations for norms of engagement, further demonstrating the need for structures of interaction that promote comfort with non-normative means of engagement. Lee explained that he deliberately tries to look at people when they speak to him, even though he cannot see them. People often tell him that they forget that he's blind, and he attributes this pattern to the fact that he doesn't "act blind," or when considered through the lens of rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence, he accommodates audience expectations (Jung, "Textual Mainstreaming") for normative embodied engagement: "I mean when somebody talks to me I look at them. Some blind people don't. When I'm addressing somebody, a judge, jury, friends, socially, I talk *to* the person. I communicate with that person. And again, I don't act blind. People forget very quickly with me and I've been hearing that for forty-eight years." Roberto explained how he creates "the illusion of eye contact" by scanning his eyes from left to right when he is standing in front of a crowd. He explained that creating the illusion of eye contact, and not exhibiting "blind-isms," helps him establish authority in his role as a teacher:

> …in our culture we have to make eye contact or at least the illusion of eye contact when we're addressing an audience or a group or even an individual and so when I would be up in front of the class I learned to scan from left to right. I learned to give the illusion that I was looking at them. I would get students commenting on it, "Well Mr. [last name], you look like you're looking at us," and I said, "Well if I were doing a Stevie Wonder and I was rocking back and forth looking up in the air I said would you pay attention to me when I said okay open up your books to page 210?" "No" I said but in our culture, you're used to at least having the illusion of eye contact and that's what I'm trying to do, so you learn little tricks, little things to help you.

Similarly, Jackson described anticipating handshakes and orienting his body toward voices to invite engagement: “I've learned over the past as far as like nonverbal communication also as far as verbal, when somebody says hi take their hand and shake it first. Don't wait for them. Or if you see them, if you can't, but you hear the voice, go that way, talk to them, don't just like stare into space and start speaking.” Ethan commented on how so much of social interaction is structured around eye contact, and when you can’t make eye contact, it’s difficult to invite engagement. Ethan explained that even when he can’t make direct eye contact, making “direct verbal contact” is part of his responsibility for helping people overcome their hesitation around disability: “you can't ever have that attitude that's their problem if they don't make eye contact, no it's your problem as well too. And you have to kind of help them overcome their adversity and those kinds of things.” In this way, participants described a range of embodied and verbal strategies they use to make audiences comfortable around disability, largely through performing normative means of engagement, as a way to invite social interaction. Participant rhetorical labor of accommodating audience expectation for normative structures of interaction points to the need for structures of relationality in which audiences are comfortable with deviance and familiar with their own ignorance around interdependence and participation in access.

Participants described a few ways that audiences could invite engagement and embraced unfamiliar relationality. Thomas expressed that he would like people to ask, “How can I help?”, “Is there anything I can do to help?” or “What can I do?” rather than assuming that he needs help. He explained that he wishes people would think about the fact that he traveled and arrived to wherever he is on his own, rather than not being able to imagine how he can go places or do anything on his own: “People gotta think, how do you think I got here? I did it on my own. So I probably don't need your help, like ‘need’ sounds bad, but it's okay to ask what can I do to help? Don't expect that I need your help.” Thomas articulated that while he appreciates it when people offer help, the way they offer it can reveal how they imagine the humanity of disabled people. “Tell me what I can do to help” sets up a relationship of interdependence, while assuming that disabled individuals need help communicates a normative conception of individual agency, or Kittay puts it, a paternalistic notion of autonomy: “Paternalism is the only alternative to autonomy when autonomy is the norm of all human interaction. Cooperative, respectful, attentive relations are, I suggest, better alternatives than paternalistic responses toward those who depend on us in times of need” (55). A transformed conception of individual autonomy, then, is another condition necessary for a structure of interdependent relationality to become normal.

Agency

Another condition necessary for interdependence is a conception of agency that bases empowerment on cooperation among human and nonhuman tools and adaptive strategies and one that disarticulates dependencies from other capacities. Many participants described encountering notions of agency based on individual autonomy that obstruct interdependent relationality. In

"Isolation Bubble," Schneider describes walking into a funeral service and getting in line to sign the condolences book. The person holding the book, however, asks her in a surprised tone if she is sure that she wants to sign the book. Schneider explains that it was at this moment that the bubble of isolation started forming around her. While the person holding the condolences book is engaging with her, this moment reveals how a conception of agency based on individual autonomy prevents interdependence. Schneider gives the interlocutor the benefit of the doubt, saying that maybe the person holding the book noticed her rummaging around in her purse for her signature stamp. While we cannot know exactly why the person holding the book acted surprised and asked her if she was sure she wanted to sign the book, the reaction sends the message that the person holding the book imagined the task of signing the book as one that necessarily requires an independent agent who uses vision and a pen to imprint their handwriting as a mark of their identity. It is possible that the person holding the book could not imagine how Schneider would sign the book because she did not have the information she needed to know that some blind people use rubber stamps to provide their signature. It is normative conceptions of individual agency like these that surface in everyday interactions across social contexts that must be transformed in order for interdependence to become possible. Since interdependence requires a dynamic reconfiguration of norms for how people organize themselves around tasks and tools in space and time, it requires a transformed notion of agency that bases empowerment on cooperation among human and nonhuman tools and adaptive strategies, rather than singular autonomy. The following examples demonstrate how normative conceptions of agency prevent interdependence and the rhetorical strategy that participants use to challenge notions of individual agency.

In many cases, participants are assumed to have a lack of agency stemming from perceived deficit in their physical capacities, which are then superimposed onto other capacities. Roberto described his experience of rapidly losing most of his vision in his thirties in the early 1990s and being treated, as he put, “like I had a lobotomy.” Rather than extending a helping hand, Roberto described, even some of his closest family members and friends assumed that he was incapable of making basic decisions and finding meaningful, profitable work after losing his job as a medical illustrator:

> Even my mother in law, who was the sweetest nicest lady in the world, she'd come over and she'd be sitting across the table from me and she'd ask my wife, “Oh Joan would Roberto like some coffee?” My wife would say, “Why don't you ask him?” They started treating you really differently, and she tells me well maybe you can get one of those jobs in telemarketing. And I'm going, how am I going to support a family on making these cold calls to people?

Roberto was surprised that rather than help him find new employment, people in his life assumed that he no longer had the capacity to work, so instead, they rationalized that he should do nothing more than remain on social security: “Rather than say, ‘oh let me help you get a job or help you do this or help you do that,’ they would be like, ‘oh well it's too bad, yeah well if you stay on social security you'll be all right, you should be able to make ends meet.’” Roberto emphasized that people reacted to him as though “it wasn't even like you have any ability once you've lost your sight.” Eventually, Roberto reeducated himself to become an auto mechanic and later completed a degree in special education and taught high school auto mechanics. Now retired after moving to a new state where he could not find work as a substitute teacher, Roberto continues to face similar discourses of deficit in his pursuit of volunteer work in hospitals.

During his career in education and auto mechanics, Roberto encountered countless situations in which people could not imagine how a blind man could command a classroom or navigate an auto mechanics shop. Roberto encountered deficit ideas about his abilities to read, write, and communicate. When pursuing a special education degree, Roberto took a speech class in which the professor pulled him aside to tell him that if he showed up every day, he would give him a “B.” Confused, Roberto asked why, and the professor said, “Well if you can't make eye contact with people you can't communicate properly.” In another course, when Roberto was required to read a long paper in front of the class, he knew his carpal tunnel would make it difficult to read twenty pages of braille without his fingers going numb. Roberto asked the instructor if a peer could read it for him, and she agreed. But at the end of the presentation, the teacher asked Roberto in front of the class if he wrote the paper himself. Later, when Roberto received a grade, he noticed that he was downgraded for not reading the paper himself. In this example, we see how normative conceptions of agency based on individual autonomy are used to assign deficit to Roberto’s capacities—one instructor set low expectations for his communication skills because of his inability to make eye contact and another instructor enforced a normative understanding of individual autonomy. Even though Roberto attempted to reconfigure, or “move” how people typically organize themselves around tasks and tools in space and time by asking a peer to read his paper for him, the instructor did not interpret this dynamic reconfiguration as innovative or resourceful.

Like Roberto, other participants described feeling pressured to constantly prove their abilities in order to be viewed as agentive. Nadine commented that sometimes people assume that she cannot or does not participate in activities or have other achievements or abilities. When she introduces herself, she always follows her introduction with other facts about her accomplishments to emphasize that she is capable of many things, which she demonstrated in our interview:

> Hi, I'm Nadine, recently I became the first legally blind general manager of the [college] radio, da da da da…" and I kept going because I wanted them to know that yes, I'm legally blind but this is obviously not something that hinders my growth and what I'm capable of doing so I would always couple it with something else, it would never just be hi I'm Nadine, I'm blind. It would be hi, I'm Nadine, okay obviously I'm blind, but HEY [really loud] let me tell you something else really cool that I just did. Or another part that shows you a bit more of who I am, because again you do not want it to be the defining characteristic because it's people's go-to, it's the easiest thing sometimes for people to classify you by…And so again making sure that people understand yes, okay this is a part of me, so no longer ignoring it or hiding it but also letting them know hey these awesome other things are a part of me too and these things give me great pride, just as the fact that I did all of them while being blind gives me great pride.

Nadine's self-introduction disarticulates her physical disability from her other capacities. What is striking about Nadine's introduction is that she emphasizes specific roles and capacities she holds in her life in an attempt to disarticulate her blindness from her other capacities, anticipating that her audiences might recognize her blindness as deficit and extrapolate to make other assumptions about her abilities and identities. While it is common that audiences do not know how a blind person can be a radio station manager because they are not familiar with the adaptive strategies and tools one might use, Nadine's need to emphasize this information highlights the need for a conception of agency that bases empowerment on cooperation among human and nonhuman tools and strategies and one that disarticulates different areas of dependence from one another. Similarly, other participants commented that they do not walk into a room and immediately announce that they are blind or visually impaired. They highlight other aspects of their identities and abilities first, both verbally and nonverbally, in order to move audiences away from normative conceptions of agency based on individual autonomy. Nadine said she makes casual verbal remarks about her activities to demonstrate her agency, as well as simply by living and allowing others to observe:

> When speaking simply fails I just tend to try to show it with my actions and some of the things I'm doing in other parts of my life. So if you think that I don't dance or something like because people have that perspective. I'll just slightly mention oh I sweated my hair out a couple weeks ago dancing all night with a friend of mine, we had a really great time and I'll just gradually throw these into conversations because this is what everyone else is talking about, you know we're all young people you know. I'm twenty-five I just turned twenty-five yesterday. We're all making our way in this world, we're all talking about these things and you should know that I'm also doing these things as well, I may not be doing them with you but I'm also doing these things you know so. Someone will say we were at the bar last night, had a great time, I'm like oh which one did you go to, oh okay no I was at a different one, a couple bars, oh Nadine you went out! It's like yeah dude I did. You know what I mean it's just kind of getting people to understand that so I think those, showing people with your actions again is kind of a great way to break down those communication barriers when they just don't understand it when you're constantly trying to beat a dead horse and saying people with disabilities can do this they can do this they can do this. It's like look, let me live my life and you can just look on with from the peripheral and see what's possible.

Candace encounters a similar situation when people over-offer help, which sometimes sends the message that they imagine her as completely incapable or they can't imagine how she might perform certain tasks using human and nonhuman tools and adaptive strategies. For example, she has encountered audience expectations about her lack of agency when asking for help from healthcare professionals. Many participants described a similar phenomenon in which they ask for help and receive it, but then audiences continue offering help and give the impression that they assume the individual cannot do anything at all. Candace explained that when she visits the doctor, she is often asked if she needs help undressing:

> A lot of times I've been asked if I need help dressing or undressing. I've gotten that one a lot recently. I'm like no just close the curtain please. No, I'm good. That one's probably my favorite, just like oh my goodness no. I may not see you but I can certainly dress and undress myself. Obviously, I'm not going to be a jerk you know. People don't know sometimes.

In the example above, Candace hints that her audiences often don't know how she performs tasks, revealing a conception of agency that does not disarticulate dependencies from other capaities. Her audiences imagine these tasks through a framework of agency based on individual autonomy, ignoring all the adaptive ways that people with disabilities perform a variety of tasks. Likely, many audiences do not have the information they need to know how a blind person can, for example, find matching clothing, but this example also demonstrates how notions of agency that associate areas of dependency with one another result in conditions inhospitable to interdependence.

Similarly, Candace described asking for help with locating the bathroom in a doctor's office where she needed to provide a sample for laboratory testing. She explained that when the technician told her where the bathroom was, she realized that because of her unfamiliarity with the layout of the lab, her dog guide would not be able to locate it, so she asked the technician if she could show them how to get there:

> She follows me over and she proceeded to ask me if I needed her to come in to accompany me in there and I'm like no you can't help but I just laugh and I'm like noo, and just kind of smiled, nope all I need to you to do is, I'm fine, just take it out and tell me where I'm putting my sample or make sure it gets labeled.

While Candace responded with a lighthearted manner, laughing and smiling and giving very specific instructions (a pedagogical strategy explored below), this example demonstrates how imagining disabled people as lacking agency creates a rhetorical situation in which individual have to move audiences to transform their normative conceptions of individual agency. Through specific instructions, Candace teaches her audience about how to participate in interdependence by providing verbal information that helps her memorize where objects are located in space. Below, I explore how specific instructions function as part of rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence.

Candace also described that she encounters situations in which people doubt her ability to know where she is going. Candace is a dog guide user, and she explained that sometimes when she asks people for directions, they assume that she doesn’t know where she is going or how to get there:

> I don't mind that you come with me or make sure that I get there, that's fine, but you know it's like, I really *do* want to go here. Some people are like oh you want to go this way and they assume you want to go to point “C” or something and you don't, so I think sometimes that's hard. It's like really knowing that sometimes you really *are right* {emphasis added to

> reflect verbal emphasis]. And they don't think you are. I think sometimes that's especially hard when you just want to get somewhere, like if it's cold or whatever, no come on. I think sometimes that's the most frustrating part I guess.

In this example, Candace describes that when she interacts with people who intend to provide her with help, they assume that she doesn't have any idea where she is, where she wants to go, or how she wants to get there. While audiences might not intend to offend her, their assumptions send the message that because of her blindness she lacks agency in all capacities, when in fact many blind and visually impaired people use effective adaptive strategies for orientation and mobility, including the use of both human and nonhuman guides. As such, interdependent relationality requires a conception of agency that bases empowerment on cooperation among human and nonhuman tools and disarticulates dependencies from other capacities.

Sometimes audiences assume so little agency that they do not directly address people with disabilities. In the preceding interchapter, in "It is Ok. I'm Blind—Please Talk to Me," Nelson describes what it's like to encounter an audience who does not directly address him. Several participants described not being directly addressed when interacting with customer service professionals. Louise explained that many times she has walked into a restaurant and encountered a cashier or customer service representative who would not directly address her. She explained that this happened a lot when she was married, as people would address her husband but not her:

> They were talking to my husband instead of me and I was trying to talk to her and ask her about some item or combo or something. I was calculating our money we had and stuff and I was asking her questions and she didn't want to deal with me. She did not want to look me in the face. I hate that, when they think you can't see them so they don't look you in the

> face.

Louise went on to explain that she knows it must be annoying to look at her because of her rapid eye movement, but she expressed frustration with not being addressed as an agentive human capable of placing her own food orders. Other participants described similar situations in which they are accompanied by another person and they are not addressed.

Sometimes audience assumptions about individual agency rise to level of a violation of body autonomy. Many participants described some of their most unpleasant interactions as moments when people grab their bodies—their arm, their shoulder, their hand, their white cane, or their guide dog's harness—and pull them across a street or in a certain direction, intending to help them navigate. Almost all participants described these moments as the worst possible interactions, and the most difficult to respond to. Curtis, who described his response to access denials in public places as "cool, calm, collected," said, "If somebody comes up and just grabs me, that freaks me out. That just really throws me off." The fact that people grab means that they don't know how to imagine blind people as capable of crossing the street using adaptive strategies of mobility and orientation. Other participants made the point that people grab because they don't know how to appropriately help. As Mary Kathleen put it, "So I don't think that people try to help you, that people try to get in your space, that people try to ask you questions to be nosey or obnoxious, to push you out of the way, or to hurry you up. I think it's because they want to help you but they are uneducated about it and they don't know how to do it." Candace described what it is like when people provide help but then overcrowd her bodily space, attempting to continue helping:

> If you ask me for help or if people do ask me for help because they're well intentioned and I say no and then they don't back off that is that's kind of difficult. Sometimes I don't even

> realize it. You know if it's a really noisy area or busy like I don't even know if the person's backed off or not you know. Sometimes I do but not always. And so I think sometimes that's a little bit difficult. It's like okay thanks but I'm fine or we're fine. And then they'll try to get Sally’s [her dog guide’s] attention…

In one particularly harrowing experience, Candace was waiting at a bus stop and she felt her dog guide’s head go down and started chewing something. Knowing that she didn’t feed her dog anything, she was surprised and asked what was going on. A woman responded that the dog looked hungry so she fed her a sandwich. Candace explained that in this moment she completely lost her cool. She argued with the woman, asserting her agency as a dog guide user who provides food to the working animal on a strict schedule, and cried the entire way home on the bus. The woman boarded the bus with her and they continued to argue. While this example involves the violation of Candace’s agency over her dog guide, it demonstrates what happens when people associate certain areas of dependence with other capacities and violate individuals’ sense of agency in doing so.

A notion of agency based on individual autonomy, as demonstrated by the participant narratives above, results in modes of relationality in which deficit is assigned to disabled individuals across their capacities and the act of helping is approached with paternalism. There are real social, emotional, and material consequences of relational modes based on agency as individual autonomy, from the loss of an educational opportunity to a physical altercation on a street corner. Interdependent modes of relationality, then, require a transformed notion of agency that decenters individual autonomy and re-centers adaptation and disarticulates areas of dependence.

Social Responsibility

In addition to a recognition of humanity and a transformed notion of agency, interdependent relationality requires an unraveling and critical examination of human responsibility. In this section I examine how participants teach habitual uptake and transfer of non-normative modes of relationality, which involves unraveling and prompting critical examination of responsibility. While many participants described tiring of the rhetorical and emotional labor of invitation and challenging individual notions of agency, a few participants described pedagogical theories they use to teach responsibility for interdependence. Some participants described more specific pedagogical theories than others, but the strategies I describe below cut across many participant narratives. I analyze two key strategies that multiple participants described: 1) positive reinforcement of interdependent behavior and 2) providing specific instructions for participation in non-visual modes of relationality. Together, these two strategies of rhetorical pedagogy reveal that interdependent relationality requires habitual uptake and transfer of non-normative modes of relationality. Rather than reacting in the moment and making it through a single interaction, the narratives below demonstrate that we need a structure of a habit for learning non-normative modes of relationality and transferring those modes to future situations.

Many participants described using positive reinforcement as a means of teaching responsibility for future interdependent behavior. Rather than pushing people further away from engagement, participants use positive reinforcement to teach habitual uptake and transfer of non-normative modes of relationality. Positive reinforcement strategies range from deliberately thanking people for helping to praising specific behaviors in order to teach transfer of interdependence to future situations. Several participants explained that they use thanking as a way to invite future interactions, even if the present interaction was not perfect. Curtis explained that he makes a point of thanking people for their help, even if the interaction is unpleasant, because other people could be watching and he does not want to scare people away from interacting with other disabled people in the future:

> And I always thank them. You know, not be rude about it. I think that's the last thing you want to do because you know if you need help again and you're mean to somebody you don't know who's watching. I'm not going to help that person, I saw them bite somebody's head off one time. I don't want to be humiliated publicly. I always thank people, even if they're mean.

Louise explained that she makes a point of thanking people for asking her questions about her disability because she wants to invite understanding, rather than create more distance between herself and the sighted world:

> I try to be open an encourage people to ask questions and a lot of people won't but when they do, the first words out of my mouths are, "Thank you. I'm really glad that you asked. I know that took a lot of courage." Because a lot of people are so terrified to offend us. And I make it a point to them to understand that I would rather be asked and explain and be understood than create a situation of fear and misunderstanding and mistrust because that fear and everything I think perpetuates stereotypes and that's not what we want. We want bridges built. We don't want more distance between us, that's already there. And it's a Grand Canyon. It's not a little street crossing. So that's me. And I continue to do that kind of stuff.

Similarly, Mary Kathleen highlighted that even if people are not helping her in appropriate ways, she still thanks them for their participation and tries to gently redirect their behavior:

> I've also learned that whether people are a thorn in my side helping me with all the

> wrong things or whether they're doing exactly the thing I need them to do I thank them for everything they do. I may say, "Thank you very much. I appreciate your help very much. I'm good with this. I can use my cane and I know when the steps are coming up. What I would appreciate, though, is if you're going to the door if you could go in front of me and make sure I don't hit a door in my face." I give them things that they could do. And people really seem to like that.

Here, Mary Kathleen describes combining positive reinforcement with specific instructions for behavior. Through positive reinforcement and specific instructions, Mary Kathleen aims to teach habitual uptake of non-normative modes of relationality.

Lisa articulated an even more specific rhetorical pedagogy in which she uses positive reinforcement to teach transfer of non-normative relationality across situations. First, she explained that she tries to "book end" her positive reinforcement by setting the stage with specific instructions for how to interact and then follows up with positive reinforcement to help audiences transfer their behavior to future situations:

> I often start my workshops and my one-to-one meetings with folks or small meetings with folks just letting them know upfront, saying I have low vision, I have rapid eye movement, I joke with them and say, "I'm glad you've got your name tags on but in order for me to read them they'd have to be sign boards and people keep telling me they're not comfortable sitting in a sandwich board so when you speak for the first time or when we do intros if you could just give me your first name then that will help me." When I run into them again they're good about saying, "Hey it's so and so." Because I've set that cue that I'm not going to visually remember you. So it kind of bookends it and I love that. I ran into somebody who works for a state agency yesterday at a coffee shop and she's like,

> “Hey Lisa it's so and so,” you know, and I was like, “Thank you!” That's been a good reinforcement of me doing the work on the front end helps with that but that was definitely a big thing in my early college days, I'd be like, [very hesitant sounding] ‘Hi, nice to see you again!’

Lisa also stressed the importance of specific positive reinforcement that emphasizes the value of certain behaviors. To demonstrate her point, Lisa referenced two interactions that happened during the course of our interview—when she ordered a drink and asked the cashier to read the tea menu to her and later when the barista delivered her drink to our table:

> I think the positive reinforcement is what is needed and specific positive reinforcement, not just thank you but specific positive reinforcement is what's going to help the behavior to continue. ‘Oh thank you so much for…’ I think I even did it with the gal today, ‘thank you so much for reading that to me.’ So that kind of thing is like oh that was really helpful and then you know I saw that behavior transfer when he brought the tea over, you know, ‘this is where your tea is and it's really hot.’ You know and I'm like okay that little moment of teaching transferred into me getting really good quality supportive service.

Others emphasized the importance of giving specific instructions for how to interact. Providing specific instructions for how to interact requires guiding people to reimagine tasks in ways that do not rely on vision. Often, audiences don’t know how to help blind people because they don’t know how to imagine the task at hand through a non-visual mode. Curtis emphasized the importance of asking specific, guiding questions to help people interact through non-visual modes:

> You know they say can I help you? And I'm like, ‘Absolutely, tell me where I am.’ And they'll say, ‘Okay you're at the corner of such and such.’ ‘Okay what's near me?’ and I help

> guide them to give me more information because they don't know how to give that information. ‘So am I on the northeast or northwest corner?’ ‘Ok well the social security department is right across the street and that's the street right in front of you.’ ‘Okay. I know wre I am. Thanks, Thank you so much.’

Roberto shared an anecdote about a time when he realized the importance of asking specific question because his audience doesn’t always know how to interact through non-visual modes, even close family members:

> I've got to laugh at my dumb mistakes. When I first lost my sight it had maybe been six months to a year and my wife had gone out and done some shopping and I was home with the kids and I was going to make lunch for them and so I decided I'm going to make some soup and sandwiches, so I'll make some grilled cheese sandwiches and some soup. So I started on the sandwiches and I grabbed a couple cans of soup out of the cupboard and so I asked my son are these the same kinds of soup and so I poured them in there and I'm mixing it up and call the kids to sit down and I'm serving them sandwiches and soup and thinking nothing of it and all of a sudden I hear all these moans and groans and I said what's wrong? And my oldest daughter said dad you mixed the split pea soup and tomato soup together. And I said well I asked my son are these the same kind of soup and he said yeah, they're both Campbells. I learned I’ve got to be very specific when you ask a person a question because there's certain things we take for granted and we forget why people aren't going to be able to make that distinction. And so you’ve got to be very, very specific about things and sometimes people think you're being a little overdramatic when you ask this or that.

Lee elaborated on this point by describing how he asks for directions by using very specific questions. Without asking specific questions, he explained, he cannot guarantee an answer he trusts:

> The general rule is yes, the general public doesn't know. You learn very quickly when you're blind that you don't ask a question, especially if you're alone somewhere, you don't ask a question that can be answered with a yes or no, ever. You never ask that kind of a question. Because most people don't want to be bothered or they're nervous being around a blind person or they don't know how to help and so they really don't pay attention. So if you say to them for example, is this Spruce Avenue? You could be standing on Thompson Street and you're going to get a yes probably. You just will. And if it really is Thompson Street and you say is this Thompson Street? you might get a no. You can't trust the response. And so you say could you tell me what street this is please? Well I don't know. Well okay fine. So you ask questions and you attempt to elicit a response that you can trust.

Lee's description demonstrates that in many situations, disabled rhetors have an immediate need for participation in interdependence. Since many audiences do not know how to interact through non-visual modes, participants have developed strategies to help make sure that they receive the information they need. While there are certainly some situations in which the immediate need for information takes precedence over the pedagogical agenda of teaching habitual uptake and transfer of non-normative modes of relationality, the rhetorical strategy of giving specific instructions for interaction demonstrates how interdependence requires an unraveling and critical examination of human responsibility. Put simply, many audiences have no idea how blind people accomplish daily tasks like navigating a neighborhood, crossing a street, or reading a book, so the rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence involves prompting audiences to reimagine the nature of those tasks through non-visual, participatory modes that include the use of human and nonhuman adaptive strategies. Through positive reinforcement and specific instructions, participants move audiences to unravel and examine their notions of social responsibility. Interdependence as a mode of relationality, then, requires a notion of social responsibility in which people take up and transfer non-normative modes of interaction without being prompted.

Leadership

While interdependent relationality requires transformed notions of humanness, agency, and social responsibility, it also requires leaders who model interdependent relationality for systemic cultural change. While the majority of participant narratives focused on their own efforts to facilitate interdependence, some participants described a few relationships that exemplify features of interdependence "in the wild," or moments when interlocutors assumed leadership roles and modeled interdependent relationality for systemic cultural change. While participants did not use the term "interdependence" to describe these relationships, they cited these moments as positive experiences in which they needed to perform little rhetorical work. The examples demonstrate the need for a structure of leadership that involves modeling interdependent relationality for systemic cultural change within institutions and communities. The following examples demonstrate the kind of anticipatory, pre-emptive, flexible, creative mindsets and behaviors are needed for interdependence to become possible "in the wild."

Mary Kathleen described how a structure for leadership that involves modeling interdependent relationality functions in her workplace. When Mary Kathleen had to stop driving in the early 1990s (an experience that is explored in depth in Chapter Two), she thought she had to quit her job. After leaving a resignation letter on her supervisor's desk, he came to speak to her and told her that they would find a solution. Like many other participants, Mary Kathleen herself had internalized deficit ideas about her disability. With her employer's structural and social support, they have cultivated a workplace in which interdependence has become a norm. For example, when she gives presentations, Mary Kathleen memorizes her speech, but given that she is likely to lose her place, a colleague keeps track of keywords they can shout out if she needs a reminder. When she designs presentation slides, Mary Kathleen gives her colleagues the information they need to find appropriate and appealing visuals. When she received white cane training, Mary Kathleen invited her colleagues to participate so that they would have the information they need to help. The result, Mary Kathleen said, is dynamic interdependence. She said, "In turn I'm very approachable. People come to me with all kinds of things, but they are also very receptive if I say, 'Can you read this to me? I can't read this on my reader. Would you just read this to me for a minute?' They're very receptive. I've never had anybody go 'I'm really busy.'" Mary Kathleen's example demonstrates that when there is a structure for leadership that involves modeling interdependent relationality, normative relations are reconfigured, rhetorical responsibility is distributed, and interdependence becomes possible and normal.

Nadine described how her friends have taken it upon themselves to develop interdependent relationality in social situations like nightclubs and parties. She lamented the difficulties of attending parties and dance clubs on her own—it can be very difficult to navigate dark, crowded spaces and her use of a white cane often acts a repellent to social interaction. She noted that in social situations like these, especially ones in which the intention is to find a romantic partner, she cannot participate in normative ways because she cannot make eye contact and approach people unless they approach her. She said her use of sunglasses and her comfortable affect, combined with her white cane, makes it unlikely that people will approach her in social situations. Nadine’s friends started giving her verbal cues about the people interacting and dancing around her so that she can more fully participate: “they would kind of be like sizing people up, and be like, ‘No she's not dancing now,’ or you know they would kind of tell me they would be like, ‘Oh he's kind of an 8 or a 6,’ so we developed these different things.” Nadine described that this is a strategy other friends have taken up in other contexts, like a recent dating event she had gone to:

> One friend was just like openly describing people in front of them and so she's just like, “Yeah she has a chiseled face, beautiful brown eyes, her hair is like long,” and it was just the funniest thing [lots of laughing] and she was like, “Oh now she's blushing, she's blushing now,” and it was just like the funniest thing, and of course it was meant to be very fun and laid back, it was such a good time…People still do that. And you kind of need it because otherwise you have no idea who you're talking to unless you're feelin’ ‘em up [uncomfortable laughing], which sometimes tends to happen.

In this example Nadine’s friends take on the labor of inventing strategies for participating in social life through non-visual modes. Through creativity, her friends reimagine normative ways of engaging in social space and develop a system that they relies on shared responsibility for access. This example is in stark contrast to others shared earlier in which individuals, like Abigail, are constantly taking on the rhetorical labor of inviting engagement, asking for help, and teaching people how to give help, even in familiar communities.

Similarly, in the context of education, Nadine and Abigail described a similar experience in which their geometry teachers took responsibility for the labor of inventing non-visual means of learning geometric concepts. Having attended a private school where there were no disability resources available to her, Nadine explained that she did a lot of the rhetorical labor of inventing and asking for accommodations on her own. In some cases, though, she did not already have an accommodation in mind, as in the case of learning geometry. She explained that she told her teacher they were entering “uncharted territory,” and so he developed methods for teaching geometry that utilized different tools and resources. She explained that her teacher used different objects and props from throughout the school and they did most of her math after school one-on-one because she could not see the board. To make the visual content accessible to her, she and her teacher amassed a collection of black markers of different thicknesses and the teacher would redraw all the shapes and visual content for her:

> He would, I still have this binder somewhere at my house and it was this big thick binder and he used Sharpie markers to draw out every single shape, all of these geometric shapes. You would think that you would've been so lightheaded because of all of the Sharpie markers we went through. We would go back, and we used to be like connoisseurs of Sharpie markers, how thick is that one? Which one is this one? Where did you get these from? Because we would go through so many markers. And he would draw out all of these shapes for me. And sometimes he would go over them several times until it was dark enough or big enough for me to see. And so again extraordinary but using rudimentary tools and resourcefulness in order to really get the job done. Which was extraordinary.

While Nadine and her teacher should not have needed to spend extra time after school to learn and teach geometry through alternate modes, this example stands out in Nadine’s mind of a time when someone used interdependence to invent a new strategy for accessing information. It is this type of leadership involving creative re-imagination, flexible infrastructure, and initiative that is necessary for interdependent relationality. Similarly, Abigail described when her geometry teacher took it upon himself to figure out how to make the concept of perspective accessible to her. Abigail remarked that she remembers this experience as a positive one because the teacher consulted her first about her preferences and ideas, but then he took it upon himself to invent an entirely new way of communicating the concept. He asked his wife, who was a seamstress, to translate perspective drawings onto fabric using the seams to demonstrate the concept of perspective.

Ethics of Responsibility for Inclusion

It should be apparent by now that while participants accept and perform the rhetorical burden of seeking access to social life, and while their rhetorical strategies are often effective, the structure of rhetorical responsibility for inclusion raises significant ethical questions. Throughout this chapter, it is clear that rhetorical pedagogy for interdependence requires moving audiences to unravel and examine normative modes of relationality. In the section on humanness, it is apparent that norms of social engagement make it difficult for people who are blind and visually impaired to access social situations, and they are often burdened with the task of figuring out how to navigate within those norms. Many of them find ways to perform normativity by faking eye contact, anticipating handshakes, using open and inviting body language, or using an assertive and inviting tone of voice to accommodate audience expectations for normative means of engagement. From my interview with a blindness and low vision rehabilitation specialist, as well as remarks that participants made about their training in rehabilitation, these are strategies that many blind and visually impaired people are taught during their blindness education in public schools or in adult rehabilitation training. While it is often advantageous for individuals to perform normative means of engagement because they are rhetorically effective in allowing the disabled individual access to the social situation, this strategy raises an ethical question about the rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence. It is clear from countless participant examples that seeking access in social life requires uneven sacrifice (Allen), involving the disabled rhetor performing normative markers of social engagement. A structure for interdependent relationality, by contrast, would include audiences who invite engagement around difference and embrace unfamiliar relationality.

My analysis of participant encounters with arguments about agency makes it clear that participants must engage audience ideas about ability/disability and independence/dependence in order to help them participate in interdependence in ways that are not dehumanizing. In both verbal and embodied ways, participants use rhetorical strategies to persuade audiences to think differently about autonomy. They face audiences who assume they cannot perform physical and mental tasks like working, writing, dancing, traveling, dressing and undressing, and navigating. As a result, some audiences violate their autonomy, either physically or verbally, by attempting to help in ways that perpetuate paternalism. To respond to and prevent situations like these, a rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence involves transforming notions of agency to include empowerment based on cooperation among human and nonhuman tools and strategies, and one that disarticulates areas of dependence from one another.

My analysis of participant rhetorical strategy related to social responsibility demonstrate that while interdependence can be taught, and these strategies can be effective, their pedagogies raise ethical questions about the need to accommodate audiences in order for interdependence to become taken up and transferred to new situations. Similar to invitational strategies for breaking social isolation, positive reinforcement of interdependent behavior accommodates audiences by making them feel good about interacting with a person with a disability and invites further engagement. While it could be argued that all pedagogy requires positive reinforcement of behavior, interdependence as a rhetorical pedagogy reveals the power dynamics inherent in how we organize ourselves around difference. Why should audiences need to be made to feel good about their actions when helping another person? The strategy of providing specific instructions for behavior reveals the lack of familiarity in our culture with thinking creatively about alternative ways of organizing ourselves around tasks and tools in space and time. For example, providing specific instructions for how to appropriately lead a blind person across the street reveals our cultural lack of familiarity with collaborative ways of navigating, drawing upon multiple senses and combining resources to accomplish a task, while not degrading a person for not having certain capacities. Interdependence involves much more than collaboration because it requires that we reimagine how we organize bodies around tasks and tools in space and time while confronting and dismantling normative conceptions of what it means to be human, agentive, and socially responsible.

The examples of leadership shared in the final section demonstrate practice of leadership that involves challenging norms, making infrastructure flexible, and modeling interdependent relationality. While none of these examples exemplifies all of these qualities, they point to traces of interdependent thinking and behavior “in the wild.” In each example, the disabled individual is unburdened of the rhetorical responsibility for seeking access and inclusion and other people participate in the rhetorical work of reimagining how we organize bodies around tasks and tools in space and time, while not denigrating the person based on a binary understanding of autonomy. Mary Kathleen’s colleagues reorganize how they share responsibility for various visual tasks in the workplace, Nadine’s friends develop a system for using verbal cues to include her in social space, Abigail’s and Nadine’s geometry teachers invent creative strategies for conveying visual information, and Candace’s colleagues take up the labor of preventing social isolation by being the first ones to engage in casual, friendly conversation. Examples in other chapters, too, demonstrate this type of leadership, like Lisa's colleagues (discussed in Chapter Two), who practice what Lisa calls "mutual adaptation" by redesigning mailbox labels so that Lisa can see them and so that they are more aesthetically pleasing to everyone. These traces of interdependence "in the wild" stand in stark contrast to the many examples of moments when participants advocate for their own access and inclusion in ways that require accommodating audience expectations for normative behavior and normative conceptions of what it means to be human, agentive, and socially responsible.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that enacting collective access involves challenging normative ways of relating and deficit ideas so that interdependence can become a creative, flexible, collaborative way of relating and reimagining tasks among people, tools, and technologies in space and time. Participant narratives make it evident that we do not currently have a structure for interdependent relationality in social life. By analyzing participant narratives of seeking access in social life as rhetorical pedagogies, I uncover four conditions necessary for interdependent relationality. While not exhaustive, this list is a start to developing a structure for interdependent modes of relationality that can be taken up to make collective responsibility for access a norm in social and professional life.

1) **Humanness** - A recognition of humanness, which requires audiences who invite engagement around difference and embrace unfamiliar relationality
2) **Agency** - A notion of agency that bases empowerment on cooperation among human and nonhuman tools and adaptive strategies and disarticulates dependencies from other capacities

3) **Social Responsibility** – A notion of social responsibility that includes habitual uptake and transfer of non-normative modes of relationality in unfamiliar interactions.
4) **Leadership** – A practice of leadership that involves challenging norms, making infrastructure flexible, and modeling interdependent relationality

In the following and final chapter, I explore the consequences of everyday rhetorical labor of disability, focusing specifically on a phenomenon I call access fatigue. I also explore the implications of the rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence for teaching and learning.

Interchapter: Access Fatigue

I am doing the dishes after work and I am thinking about how I've had to ask for electronic copies from the same colleague two or three times within the last week. I try to think if there's a way I can be more transparent or more helpful in my communication. This makes me feel exhausted. I've repeated myself three, four, five times and still it seems that I'm working against the dominant mode of operating and I'm still responsible for constantly strategizing a way for me to get what I need. I spent extra time scanning hundreds of pages and scrolling through them on my iPad because there was no other way to access that information. I had to invent that strategy on my own, take an extra trip to campus, take extra time to scan the documents, and clumsily scroll through a linear document searching for the information I need. It takes so much extra time and I always have to be strategizing about how I'm going to get the information. But then I realize that this is the exhaustion that so many participants conveyed to me in their interviews. This is more than exhaustion. This is something else. Why is this so exhausting? This is a real fatigue, access fatigue.

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Self-Advocacy Starts with Self-Acceptance

By Denise Jess

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Negotiating a sighted world as a person with low vision is a full-time undertaking, calling on my physical, mental and emotional stamina, skills and creativity.

Navigating busy streets and sidewalks, finding my way in unfamiliar buildings, and filling out countless forms, are among the daily activities that are complicated by low vision or blindness. Additionally, I interact with strangers, co-workers, friends and family who may respond to me with curiosity, confusion, discomfort, over-protection or indifference. Being able to meet these challenges with dignity, integrity, clarity and compassion is deeply connected with my ability to practice self-acceptance.

On the road to self-acceptance I've experienced resignation, internally and externally, directed anger, as well as attempts to "overcome" my disability. Similarly to the debunked belief that grieving happens in clearly defined stages, self-acceptance doesn't happen in a linear manner. While traveling on the road to self-acceptance, I might find that I've exited down the path of grief at not being able to do certain things that others take for granted, like seeing birds at the feeder, glancing quickly through the mail, or ordering food at the sandwich counter without having someone read me the menu first. Other days I might get sidetracked with my perception of people's insensitivity and their inability to "get it" when I've expressed my needs in what I believe are clear and concrete ways.

My most habitual roadblock is trying to "overcome" my disability. These attempts have taken many forms, from wanting to play baseball in elementary school in the same way as my fully-sighted friends, declining the use of a CCTV upon entering college, choosing to not ask for help in reading street signs, or pretending to see something pointed out to me by a friend; all in the attempt to "fit in" and maintain a sense of self-agency and self-confidence.

While resilience and perseverance are worthy character traits, my habit has been to see my visual impairment as something to be climbed over, pushed past, or ignored, so that others would understand that I was talented, creative, competent, and worthy. It's no wonder that people in my life held expectations that I could do so many things despite my disability or seemed to ignore my needs. There was a subtle way that I was communicating this and yet I would get angry when they would behave in "insensitive" ways. Whenever I'd run up against a "doubter," someone who believed that I was less able, competent or intelligent because of my disability, my goal became to "show them," pushing myself to once again "overcome."

External forces, such as the media, certainly didn't help my perception that I needed to overcome my disability. My Google search yielded ten pages of references about how people have overcome their disability to conquer a physical challenge, break into a profession, succeed at college or become a world-class athlete. Terms like "inspiring" or "exceptional" are often attached to these stories, sending a strong message that it is important for others to not see your disability, so that you "fit in."

My ever-growing awareness of my habit of "overcoming" my visual limitations is an important step on the road of self-acceptance that my visual disability is simply a part of who I am. When my old habits and self-talk start to arise, I can more readily recognize that I don't have to push so hard to "prove" myself. This might mean, if I'm fatigued from reading at the computer, I tell a client I'll review their documents in the morning when I've got fresh eyes, without fretting about any judgment they might make about my competence. I can ask for help without feeling embarrassed or ashamed when needing assistance to sign a credit card receipt, asking for directions in an unfamiliar place or to tell me the price of an item on the grocery store shelf. I can lessen my disappointment in others for not "getting it" and communicate with them with more grace and respect, speaking in ways that they are more likely to hear.

While I have a lot of "how-to" ideas to share on advocating for oneself – stories for another day – my foundation for self-advocacy and self-acceptance is to recognize, own and take responsibility for owning my patterns that create barriers to living fully.

Chapter 5: The Rhetorical Act of Access

At its core, this project asks, what is access? While my initial coding of the data strongly indicated that disability is an everyday rhetorical labor, my rhetorical analysis of participant narratives has led me toward theorizing access as a rhetorical activity. Findings from this study demonstrate how ideas, discourses, and assumptions are unraveled when we place access at the center of rhetorical situations. In Chapter Two, my analysis of interactions around access in workplaces reveals how normative workplace commonplaces structure how we imagine work and working bodies. In Chapter Three, my analysis reveals how technological commonplaces structure our thinking about who uses which technologies, for what purposes, how, where, and when, a phenomenon that places individuals in rhetorical situations in which they are disarticulated from the times and spaces in which they access information. In Chapter Four, my analysis of participant accounts of seeking access in social life reveals how independence shapes our collective notions of humanness, agency, social responsibility, and leadership. In all of these situations, participants perform rhetorical labor that involves moving normative ways of being and deficit discourses that shape each of these situations in different ways. As such, I argue that access is a rhetorical act that requires moving and teaching audiences to critically examine shared assumptions about how, why, when, and where we do things and with whom we do them.

Broadly speaking, these findings prompt us to ask, if we put access at the center of the rhetorical situation, how are we called to rethink relationships among speakers, audiences, modes, tools, and contexts? How does access as a rhetorical activity that involves “moving” norms change our understanding of access? Rather than approaching access as an after-thought, if we put access at the center of the rhetorical situation, how does it change how we interact in space and time? To begin answering this question, first I will briefly summarize the findings from each chapter and then explore my theory of access fatigue, a concept that helps reveal the nature of access as rhetorical activity.

The Rhetorical Act of Access to Employment, Information, and Social Life

The preceding chapters document how the rhetorical act of access involves reconfiguring normative relations and challenging deficit discourses. In this section I will briefly summarize what the rhetorical act of access looks like in each of the three cases and discuss the implications of those findings for each context.

Employment

My analysis in Chapter Two demonstrates how what I call normative workplace commonplaces structure interactions around disability in workplaces and create barriers to access in employment. My analysis identifies five normative workplace commonplaces: 1) when 2) where 3) how and 4) by whom work is performed and 5) how work is measured. Often, participant rhetorical efforts are stifled by these normative workplace commonplaces, but in some cases, employers and colleagues make these commonplaces flexible and use other existing commonplaces like innovation and collaboration to fuel creativity and access in workplaces. Beyond learning about legal requirements for accommodations, employers need to reimagine work and working bodies in ways that promote access and fuel creativity and innovation. These findings also have implications for business and professional communication pedagogy. Business and professional communication instructors should teach flexible thinking and communication skills necessary for reimagining norms that prevent access for workers with disabilities. Instructors should teach flexible thinking and open communication around questions of access through triangulated approaches that share responsibility among employers, disabled workers, and colleagues.

The framework of normative workplace commonplaces developed in this study can be used as a method for investigating how specific disciplinary bodies of knowledge provide resources for arguments about access in workplaces. It would be useful for professionals to know exactly which defining features of work specific to their discipline might need to be reimagined when access is needed. Researchers could interview workers with disabilities in specific disciplines, asking them about their self-advocacy experiences in the workplace to identify discipline-specific commonplaces. Researchers could also interview those same workers' employers and colleagues, asking about what defining features of work were called into question and how they were or were not reimagined. Researchers should also strive to uncover strong examples of how defining features of work were reimagined in ways that promoted access and inspired creativity.

Information

Findings from Chapter Three indicate that accessing information, through both digital and non-digital assistive tools, is a rhetorical activity shaped by context. My analysis of participant narratives of seeking access to information demonstrates how technological commonplaces structure the rhetorical situation of information access. Technological commonplaces refers to our commonly held beliefs about who uses which technologies, for what purposes, where, when, and with whom. Examining experiences of information access through the lens of rhetoric reveals how technological commonplaces disarticulate users of assistive technologies from the contexts in which they access information. My analysis reveals how technological commonplaces do not account for the role of embodiment in the rhetorical situation of access; technological commonplaces do not account for the ways systems of distribution disarticulate individuals from the rhetorical contexts in which they use adaptive tools; technological commonplaces create expectations for independent use of assistive tools and strategies; and technological commonplaces obscure **a** hierarchy of modes that ostracizes assistive technology users and creates the need for their response. Ultimately, technological commonplaces, which promote the promises and possibilities of technology to "fix" disability, disarticulate individuals from the social and ideological contexts in which they access information and create the need for their rhetorical labor to resituate assistive tools within social and ideological space.

To improve access to information, action is needed from assistive technology designers, educators, and policymakers. Assistive technology designers need to account for the social and ideological meanings of adaptive tool and literacies from the outset of the design processes. Retrofit design of assistive technology perpetuates deficit discourses of adaptation by placing the user in the position of the dependent who needs another person to use technology that should be designed for their own access. Educators need to practice accommodations and universal design in ways that do not perpetuate deficit discourses of adaptation. Policymakers need to create structures that give disabled people agency in the process of acquiring adaptive skills and technologies. And finally, educators, designers, and policymakers need to work to construct information access as an activity that is structured by multiple, different embodied modes.

Social Life

Chapter Four documents the discourses of independence and autonomy that create barriers in the social lives of people with disabilities. With a dominant structure of relationality that relies on binary relationships between independent and dependents, participants find themselves socially isolated and carrying the rhetorical burden of invitation and education. Examining participant experiences in social life as rhetorical pedagogy, I argue that interdependent relationality requires four conditions: 1) a recognition of humanness that invites engagement with difference 2) a notion of agency that bases empowerment on cooperation among human and nonhuman tools 3) social responsibility that promotes habitual uptake and transfer of non-normative modes of interaction and 4) leadership that makes infrastructure flexible and models collective responsibility for access. By examining participants' rhetorical pedagogies, I propose a new structure of relationality for communities that can be achieved by practicing a rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence. A rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence teaches a mode of being in community with other people that requires a network of cooperative agents. Through an interdependent structure of relationality that displaces independence and autonomy from the center of interactional space, we can construct more inclusive communities.

Findings from this chapter raise ethical questions about norms of public engagement and habits of interaction around difference. Participant narratives reveal how people with disabilities are constantly placed in the position of being responsible for other people's discomfort and ignorance around disability, and they often have to educate others about how to be interdependent. The lived consequences of this normative structure of relationality are explored through the concept of access fatigue, which helps develop a theory of access as a rhetorical act.

What Access Fatigue Reveals about the Rhetorical Act of Access

Beyond the normative relations and deficit discourses that shape access in each of these three contexts, what do these three cases tell us about the rhetorical act of access? In this chapter I begin to theorize the rhetorical act of access by exploring a concept I call access fatigue. On its surface, access fatigue describes a physical and emotional response to the phenomenon of everyday rhetorical labor of disability. On a theoretical level, though, understanding why the rhetorical work of seeking access is so fatiguing helps us understand the nature of access as a rhetorical activity.

I argue that the concept of access fatigue reveals five elements that characterize the rhetorical act of access. The rhetorical act of access involves:

1. Performance of self
2. Vulnerability within power relationships
3. Repetition
4. Value exchange
5. A “dynamic loop” of feedback

Performance of self

While I mainly asked participants to describe their encounters with the external world, I found that a large portion of the data focused on what I have termed the internal dimensions of rhetorical experience. By internal dimensions of rhetorical experience, I mean a process of invention that involves much more than strategizing rhetorical approaches; it is a process of invention that involves constantly inventing a self, coping with audience reactions, and reinventing selves in pursuit of access. This internal dimension, I argue, is the result of rhetorical situations that are structured around deficit models of disability and demand that individuals respond to such discourses.

In “Self-Advocacy Starts with Self Acceptance,” Jess argues that the success of her disability self-advocacy depends on her own ability to accept rather than attempt to conceal or overcome her visual impairment. In addition to navigating inaccessible environments, she writes that her daily life involves interacting with audiences and their reactions to her low vision: “I interact with strangers, co-workers, friends and family who may respond to me with curiosity, confusion, discomfort, over-protection or indifference. Being able to meet these challenges with dignity, integrity, clarity and compassion is deeply connected with my ability to practice self-acceptance." In this way, Jess directly connects access to her presentation of self to the world. Reflecting on her journey toward self-acceptance, she describes how her history of attempting to "overcome" her disability made it difficult for those around her to help her with access. While attempting to prove her abilities to others by pretending to see things, choosing to not ask for help, and rejecting assistive technologies, she believes that she communicated to the external world that she can do everything and that she does not need their help, perpetuating the myth of independence, and paradoxically, when they ignored her needs or acted in "insensitive" ways, she grew frustrated with them. Now, Jess explains, she reminds herself that if she practices self-acceptance, then she can more effectively communicate with others about how to help:

> This might mean, if I'm fatigued from reading at the computer, I tell a client I'll review their documents in the morning when I've got fresh eyes, without fretting about any judgment they might make about my competence. I can ask for help without feeling embarrassed or ashamed when needing assistance to sign a credit card receipt, asking for directions in an unfamiliar place or to tell me the price of an item on the grocery store shelf. I can lessen my disappointment in others for not "getting it" and communicate with them with more grace and respect, speaking in ways that they are more likely to hear.

Through her own self-acceptance, Jess argues that she can more effectively present a self that audiences will be more responsive to ("with more grace and respect, speaking in ways that they are more likely to hear"). Jess makes the argument that responsibility for access lies, at least in part, with her own self-acceptance, a practice that has taken her decades to cultivate and has been sidetracked by disability narratives of overcoming and inspiration. Her argument implies that by projecting self-acceptance, she can more gracefully and respectfully help others understand what she needs from them, making access in interaction possible.

While Jess describes that she has reached a place of relative comfort with her own disability and her ability to present it to the world in productive ways, her argument about the close relationship between self-acceptance and self-advocacy points to how the rhetorical act of access involves a performance of self, and as many of the participant narratives have shown, a self that is "okay" in the world. Jess's argument raises the following ethical questions about the rhetorical activity of access: should cultivating access require self-acceptance and should access depend on a projection of disabled self that is "okay" in the world?

Interview participants described a similar rhetorical phenomenon. Participants described decades-long journeys of slowly moving from self-hatred, self-consciousness, and denial about their disabilities toward a more prideful, accepting, confident presentation of their disabilities. As they journeyed toward self-acceptance, participants described that their abilities to effectively communicate with others about their disabilities and their access needs improved. When examined from a rhetorical perspective, this phenomenon of progressing toward self-acceptance of disability and effective communication with the world about access raises a question about the ethics of rhetorical responsibility for access. Findings from this study demonstrate that the journey toward self-acceptance is a rhetorical battle too; internal rhetorical labor of disability involves combatting internalized deficit that originates in external encounters with deficit discourses of disability. Internalized deficit contributes to access fatigue. To avoid access fatigue, we need to interrogate how the rhetorical activity of access demands a particular kind of disabled self.

Vulnerability within power relationships

The rhetorical act of seeking access also can involve negotiating vulnerability within a power relationship. The power relationship exists between a person seeking access and the person who may or may not have the capacity to provide or participate in co-constructing access. While many interlocutors may not know how to provide access, or may not be able to provide access given the resources available to them, as was demonstrated in many examples throughout the preceding chapters, the fact of being sighted holds power. Normative ways of relating and functioning are structured around certain capacities, vision being one of them. Having access to those normative structures is a form of power. This power relationship creates vulnerability for the disabled person because the situation often involves an immediate material or social need. Access requests involve making one's self vulnerable to someone else who ostensibly has power to access normative modes of being. Because the situation often involves an immediate need, the disabled rhetor depends on the interlocutor to participate in co-constructing access. While there are many ways that disabled rhetors exercise agency in these situations, as was demonstrated throughout the preceding chapters, the fact that there is often an immediate need makes the rhetorical act of seeking access one that involves moments of vulnerability.

For example, when a visually impaired person asks, "Can I get an electronic copy of your slides ahead of time?" power lies with the addressee who holds the material thing the speaker needs and can decide to participate in co-constructing access or not. If the speaker does not receive the slides in advance and the addressee says, "Oh sorry! I didn't finish my presentation until the last second. Can I send them to you afterwards?" the speaker is disempowered even further because their rhetorical efforts did not have their intended effects, which means they will not be able to fully participate in the event. In this way, seeking access is typically a 'looking to' someone else who can use their power to help, a move that requires a moment of vulnerability. It is only when access is achieved that the speaker might feel once again in control of their ability to fully participate. But that momentary lapse of power involves vulnerability.

Many participants echoed each other by saying, “Even after all these years, I know I have to do it, but I hate asking for help.” While I argue for a structure of interdependent relationality that would not involve binary relationships between dependents and independents, the present reality is that being able to participate in the dominant mode of relationality is power. As was demonstrated in chapter four, while many participants aim to teach interdependence, each individual moment of negotiating access has immediate consequences, and while an individual may have a larger pedagogical agenda of teaching interdependence, these individual moments of vulnerability and dependence that are rooted in unequal power relationships build up and have impacts on individuals. Abigail described a common situation she encounters and how it affects her:

> I still to this day have to ask and remind folks ‘need it electronically ahead of time’ ‘need it electronically ahead of time’ ‘still need it electronically ahead of time.’ And I would say over time, number one I've gotten it more often when I've pestered for it ahead of time, but there's still those ‘oh sorry I didn't do this until two minutes before the meeting, so’ and the one that I really dislike is ‘well we'll read it out loud because of you, Abigail,’ and I think ‘no we're reading it out loud because you didn't think to do your homework ahead of time.’ Or somebody will be showing PowerPoints or something and will say, ‘Well I won't insult you all by reading it out loud because you all can read,’ at which point what the heck am I supposed to say? ‘Actually, not so much when you're showing it on the screen.’ So that is not where it should be still.

Abigail points out that situations like these place her in a position of vulnerability for several reasons. First, she cannot participate unless her interlocutor follows through with what she asks for (access to materials ahead of time). And second, while she does receive what she asks for most of the time, she continues to face situations in which the interlocutor makes what is likely considered an acceptable excuse for not providing access. Titchkosky argues that disabled people are "justifiably excludable" (78) and inaccessibility is often justified by arguments about cost, the quantification of bodies, the expansion and contraction of 'access for all,' and structural barriers that cause the literal disappearance of disabled bodies. Because accessibility is often a justifiable contingency, disabled rhetors are placed in a relatively powerless position in which their participation in civic and community life depends on the participation of others, which is often casually excused. This constant sense of vulnerability can make people reluctant to ask for access. Louise said,

> My biggest problem always was asking for help. And I have finally learned that it's okay. It probably took me oh a good thirty years to learn it…Because I was always told that I could, so I assumed I could do anything by myself and independence is a fine line and I had to reinvent my definition of independence over the years…I finally got to the point where it's okay to ask for rides and ask for help but that was the hardest thing I ever had to do is ask for help. And it doesn't matter how much training and how independent and how good your skills are. If you can't ask for help then I don't think you're independent because that gives you the power. Independence is giving you power over your life rather than someone making choices for you and I just wish I had figured that out a lot sooner in my life.

Louise “flips the script” of independence by articulating that the act of asking for help gives her power. After thirty years, Louise redefined her notion of independence to include dependence as a tool for empowerment. While Louise articulates exactly the type of interdependent relationality that I argue for in chapter four, here it is notable that it took her thirty years to become comfortable with asking for help and to develop a transformed notion of independence, and she wishes she had come to this realization earlier in life. While Louise eventually found empowerment in the rhetorical act of access, her journey was long and involved confronting deficit discourses that perpetuate the myth of independence. Many participants echoed each other in saying they know they have to do it, but they hate asking for help. Discourses of independence make asking for help a moment of vulnerability.

Deficit discourses that structure how people think about disability, autonomy, and ability shape rhetorical encounters around access and cause vulnerability for the disabled rhetor. The orientation and mobility specialist I interviewed noted that from his perspective having spent his career helping blind and visually impaired people learn how to navigate the world, disclosure always involves vulnerability because it opens disabled rhetors to audience reactions:

> It's [disclosure is] certainly personal, on the part of the person with the vision impairment. You make yourself vulnerable. You open up about, you don't know what this person is going to do with the information. And most people care. And there's a perception, it's a perception that you have something to lose by the person with the impairment talking about it. Then there's the whole reaction thing. I'm thinking I'm looking at you [referring to the researcher] how you deal with it. If you say I'm visually impaired to somebody, they're not going to believe you. And you're confronted with that. If you came up with a dog or something and the dark glasses and the short hair and all the stereotypical images, there's

> nothing to open up about. But you've got to reveal something personal, it makes you vulnerable anytime you do that. You don't know what their reaction is going to be and you will have to deal with it whatever it is. It doesn't just move on from there effortlessly. So a few of those would make you just shut up and say I'd rather take their ignorance or stupidity or have them just point where the cottage cheese is and I'll figure it out rather than have to go through this again.

Stating that "it doesn't just move on from there effortlessly," he points out what it is about disability disclosure that makes people feel so vulnerable. Disabled rhetors do not know how audiences are going to react, and regardless of how audiences do react, disabled rhetors have to then deal with those reactions. This constant, recursive relationship between internal and external dimensions of everyday rhetorical labor of disability, which necessarily involves vulnerability within a power relationship, is part of what makes the rhetorical work of seeking access so fatiguing.

Repetition

The rhetorical labor of access is also repetitive. Sometimes people encounter the same rhetorical situation over and over again. And sometimes they find themselves repeating their access requests to the same audience. As Abigail mentioned through her above example ('still need it electronically ahead of time') everyday rhetorical labor of access can be irritatingly repetitive. My choice of the word "everyday" is intended to signal the repetitive, daily demands placed on disabled people to explain their situation and advocate for their own access. The orientation and mobility specialist I interviewed described the following hypothetical situation based on his experiences of providing rehabilitation skills to people who are blind and visually impaired. This situation demonstrates the kind of repetitive, constant demand placed on disabled people to educate their interlocutors about how to participate in access and it demonstrates how much work goes into a seemingly simple task of, in this example, finding cottage cheese in the grocery store. He described the kind of communicative work that such an interaction might involve:

> When you say, ‘Where's the cottage cheese?’ ‘It's right over there.’ ‘I'm sorry I have macular degeneration and I can't see where you’re pointing, could you walk with me?’ State the problem and then identify what the solution is going to be for them. You really have to spoon feed it almost if you want an instant answer and you do. Because you don't want to spend all day getting the cottage cheese. Or they give you back a lot of change or there's a lot of paper money, ‘Sorry I have macular degeneration, could you count that back for me?’ And then they won't know what that means. ‘Show me which ones are the ones, which ones the five, which ones the ten.’ So you can fold those and then put them away. It's a lot of work. I [stressed voice here, sighs] I don't envy people who have to, I was saying ‘have to do it,’ nobody has to do it. Theoretically life would be better if you did do it. It could be just a theory. It's a lot of work. There's got to be plenty of hours in any given day where you go, ‘Screw it. I just don't want to do this. I'm not going to, this is just my dental hygienist, I'll probably never see him or her again. They turn over here so fast.’ You got to go through a value, a rating system, how much is this worth?

In this example, the repetitive nature of the rhetorical act of access stems from not only having to repeat the same access requests over and over but from having to constantly disclose and explain why they need something done differently, which constantly involves teaching an entirely different way of interacting or performing a task. Activities like purchasing cottage cheese in a grocery store becomes an interaction that involves disclosure, invitation, and rhetorical pedagogy. As is described in chapter four, participants know that the more rhetorically savvy approach is to teach and solidify behavior so that they don't have to repeat themselves, but teaching behavior that sticks and solidifies requires practice, dedication, and a complex reframing of norms and belief systems. It is possible, but it too is fatiguing.

Value exchange

Other participants commented on how they have to "pick battles" (Roberto) and "figure out which battles to fight" (Nadine). As the orientation and mobility instructor noted above, interacting around access involves a value exchange ("You got to go through a value, a rating system, how much is this worth?"). My use of the term "labor" is intended to signal how value exchange is inherent to the rhetorical act of access. Participants have to make decisions about whether an interaction is worth their time and energy to gain access to the things they need. Nadine explained that she negotiates a value exchange when she is interacting with someone who is participating in access with her by helping her get food in buffet line or providing her a ride home, but in doing so, the interlocutor says something ignorant:

> And I sometimes have to figure out which battles to fight. Because I'll find people who are very helpful to me with certain things related to my disability, with helping me get around, get my food at a buffet, but I also will hear some of those individuals say some things that are just really racially insensitive or just ignorant and that they just don't have a good grasp of. And figuring out which one of those things do you deal with. And so that can be challenging, and again it's unfortunate but trying to discern do you challenge and potentially get into an argument or do you ensure that you're going to get home safely tonight? Which one do you want to deal with today?

While Lisa articulated the importance of managing her own self representation to the world, like Nadine, she noted that she does have to protect herself by placing a limit on how much effort she will put toward dealing with audiences' discomfort with her disability:

> On a regular basis I can feel people's discomfort arise. I see so many different people a year and some of them only for a day or two days and it's just fascinating to watch them walk through their discomfort. I'm like well I'm not going to save you from your discomfort either, that's yours. I'm going to do what I need to do to be gracious to you and take good care of me but if you're experiencing a lot of discomfort that's yours to work on.

Similarly, Nadine commented that she's come to approach audience reactions by protecting herself from taking on "other people's baggage" and instead serving as a model for how to have a mutually respectful interaction:

> And my cousin, she's working on her doctorate degree and she focuses on these issues and one thing she told me she said, 'Well listen it's not your responsibility to educate every single person who is ignorant in this world.' And she's a teacher, she's a professor. And she says, 'Listen at some point it is their own responsibility to grow and to learn and if you want to contribute to that process, great, but it is not something you have to do. It is not a mandate. It is not a requirement. And you don't walk around carrying that baggage, that is theirs, you leave it at their doorstep and you walk away. But you don't claim someone else's baggage.' And that's huge, you know not claiming someone else's baggage and again it comes to light with me reacting, me basing, the way people react to me and me figuring that out, because you may have this reaction that you have to deal with or interact with people with disabilities in a certain way, that's your problem, that's not mine. What I can tell you is that listen, I am who I am and that's not going to be the way that you and I interact. So I'm

> not sure what your previous experiences have been, but I try to show this in my demeanor and I try to show this in the way that I communicate with people that our interaction is going to be a bit more different but it's going to be mutually respectful whereby we both recognize that we are human, we are going to treat each other with some dignity and some respect, however short may it be a pleasurable connection, and a pleasant connection. So that's the operating system I now have.

While many participants described specific pedagogical goals (described in chapter four), the rhetorical act of access can involve negotiating a value exchange. Because it often requires a presentation of self, as Nadine describes, sometimes gaining access is not worth the value exchange that the rhetorical act requires.

A "dynamic loop" of feedback

The rhetorical act of access also involves a feedback loop between external self-presentations and internal sense of self. If access depends on disabled rhetors' own self-presentations to the world, then their internal selves are at risk. Nadine described a time when an audience reaction to her blindness affected her self-perception and prevented her from being rhetorical. This example demonstrates how internal and external dimensions of everyday rhetorical labor of disability exist in a constant back and forth or "dynamic loop," as Lisa put it. Nadine described an experience in college when she entered the cafeteria and heard someone refer to her as "the blind girl":

> I was in my freshman—my very first year of college. I stopped going to the cafeteria for months because one time I walked in and there was a woman there who would always help me…and I stepped into the cafeteria one day and I swiped my card to pay for my meal and I could hear one of the guys in the back say, 'Hey, the blind girl is here.' And it

> just threw me so hard I don't even think I ate my dinner after that, or my lunch. I just, it hit me so hard, like a ton of bricks. And at the time I was still kind of hiding it, you know, but you didn't really know, and because I was no longer in high school like you don't know everyone here, this is not a small, there's you know thousands of kids cycling in and out. It was just such a blow to me and I didn't go back to that cafeteria for some time.

This example demonstrates how a rhetorical encounter in which an interlocutor identified Nadine solely by her blindness caused her to retreat and avoid entering that situation again. This narrative provides a visceral example of the consequences of rhetorical encounters in which individuals are identified as less than human—Nadine did not return to that location which affected her ability to eat and caused her to try to rearrange how she acquires food and groceries. Nadine went on to explain that in this situation she ended up drawing upon her mother's advocacy because it completely shut down her own ability to perform everyday rhetorical labor of disability:

> And I told my mom this, and she must've known that I was requesting to go to the grocery store more often, because you know you have your mini-fridge like in college, and she must've noticed that or something and so somehow it came out and I go back to my mom then as an advocate and she got on the phone and she said, 'Listen, her name is Nadine, you can call her [nickname], but you will recognize her name. She is not 'the blind girl' she has a name and she will be called by her name. Because I didn't have the strength to do that when you just have so much other stuff going on.

Nadine went on to explain the sheer amount of effort that being a blind person requires and how this experience hindered her ability to be a self-advocate:

> People always—you know, people think that this thing is easy. Now because I'm more comfortable with it now people think that it's easy, but when you have so many different things that you're trying to fight—you're trying to stay on track in classes, you're trying to stay on track with your whatever extracurricular activities that you're doing because you understand how those things work together, you can't just be good in classes and not have any experience to back it up. You want to be in line with the rest of, so you're fighting battles on so many different fronts, and sometimes the smallest battle is the one you don't have energy for, simply eating. Simply eating and nourishing your body and getting a well-balanced meal as opposed to whatever you can fit in a little mini-fridge in your dorm. Sometimes the simplest battle is sometimes the one that rocks you the most. But to have my mom step back in and so now I am very quick to tell someone, "Hi my name is Nadine" so you recognize my name and you give me the respect of knowing that I am more than, it's just like I would be extremely offended if you said, hey the black girl is here. Or hey the lesbian is here. Or hey the girl is here. I would be offended on any of those fronts, so just to recognize and single out only one aspect of me is not okay. And so it took me a while to get to that point but that's another reason why it's a part of my spiel, to be clear on what my name is, when it's necessary, if I'm just walking into a door with an Uber driver it's not that serious, but for the most part I tend to make it very clear.

The recursive relationship between internal and external dimensions of everyday rhetorical labor of disability is something that Lisa described as a “dynamic loop.” To explain how this dynamic loop works, she recalled an experience she had in college when she could not figure out how to navigate back to dormitory:

> We got to the Frederick building and he's like, ‘Do you think you can get home from here?’ Because I lived in the south dorms and I'm like oh, because now I'm feeling really confident I did this I was all over this campus I'm like yeah I'm all good. So I walk out of the Frederick Building by myself and I'm like I have no idea how to get back! So I'm just standing there just dazed and pretty close to tears and looking for the towers for [another dorm name] when it was still there and I remember asking somebody for directions to the south dorms and they're like they're right over, the infamous ‘right over there,’ which is so not useful. And you know just at that point I was like so undone and so tired and so overwhelmed the usual thing I would say is, ‘well can you please, can you describe that to me because I don't see where you're pointing.’ I couldn't even do it. I was like okay I'll figure out I'll go in that general direction I'll figure it out. So I started kind of walking and I did see the towers but I was really aware that the more fatigued I am or feeling unconfident or whatever else is going on when I ask for help and someone doesn't give good directions then it's just like now it's another layer of having to ask and sometimes it's just like forget it. I'll figure it out. Back to that old thing because it's now more exhausting to ask you for more directions than it is to just figure it out.

Lisa explained that over time she’s realized that because these relationships exist in a “dynamic loop” she needs to practice self-acceptance and self-compassion, informed by mindfulness, in order to project a self that will help her effectively communicate with the external world:

> I think one of the things that feels really important is as much as I want the outside world to be more accepting and accessible, there's so much internal work that is also required on really learning self-acceptance and self-compassion and really being mindful about how I am in the world and self-advocacy without that edgy I deserve this kind of push. I

> think that is part of what makes a difference for me in the world is just that willingness to hunker in and that's why I loved your questions so much because I knew what they were getting at, it's like wow we're shaped by disability so early and those patterns get so entrenched and what helps us live differently in the world, some of it is external forces, but some of it is really hunkering into and doing that hard internal work.

Lisa points to the fact that people with disabilities themselves are shaped by external forces that influence their own internal sense of self, so while everyday rhetorical labor of disability exists in a feedback loop in which disabled rhetors present themselves to the world and audiences react, both disabled rhetors and their audiences are shaped by discourses of deficit and normativity that construct how everyone, disabled people included, thinks about disability and its place within our world. This is why the rhetorical labor of seeking access, which requires participation from everyone, is so fatiguing.

Limitations of the Study

The findings presented in this study are not meant to be representative of all disabled people’s experiences. This study is focused on a small sample of people who are blind and visually impaired, limiting the kinds of disability experiences included. Even within the blind and visually impaired community, there are a diversity of experiences that are not a part of the method of analysis in this study. Other elements of social experience like gender, race, social class, age, sexuality, and linguistic background do surface throughout participant narratives, but they are not formally accounted for in the method of analysis at this time. There are also significant differences in experience between congenital blindness and acquired blindness, as well as significant differences between rapid and gradual vision loss and between total and partial blindness. My method of analysis does not account for these differences, but the participants included in the study represent a range of ages and experiences with blindness (see Appendix B). Given the focus of this study on the rhetorical experiences of participants across the lifespan, variations in moment of diagnosis or pace of prognosis did not seem to significantly impact differences in personal experiences with communication. Whether blind since birth or experiencing gradual vision loss, all participants described life-long journeys of learning how to be rhetorical with the sighted world.

This study also does not account for the influences of civil rights legislation, particularly the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, on participant experiences of self-advocacy. While many participants describe experiences prior to 1990, this study does not account for shifts in participant experiences resulting from the passing of the ADA. While some participants noted slight differences in experience before and after ADA, all participants, whether born before or after ADA, described lifelong journeys of understanding and learning how to use rhetoric to exercise their civil rights. No participants described significant differences in their communication experience after the passing of the ADA.

Given the method of qualitative interviewing, this study was not designed to access the perspectives of multiple people involved in rhetorical situations of access. Further investigation into the perspectives of multiple interlocutors could reveal additional or different discourses and norms that shape interactions around disability. This study also does not account for participant use of disability advocacy resources. Future researchers should expand their attention to additional agents involved in interactions around disability to deepen understanding of how ableist assumptions shape these interactions.

Finally, the method of analysis used for this study does not explicitly account for the development of rhetorical and literate experiences over the course of lifespan. While the interview protocol does allow for such a form of analysis, the method of analysis of grounded theory chosen for this project did not involve analysis of the development of rhetorical strategy over individual participants' lifespans. The data available for this study does lend itself to such an analysis, and future stages of this project might involve an analysis that examines the development of rhetorical strategy over participant lifespans.

Implications for Research in Composition and Rhetoric

This project makes a methodological contribution at the intersections of disability studies, public rhetoric, and community engagement. By designing a rhetorical life history interview protocol focused specifically on disability experiences, I was able to elicit participant narratives that illuminate the relationships between public rhetoric and lived experience. As was described at the beginning of this chapter, a large portion of participant narratives focused on the internal dimensions and repercussions of external rhetorical experiences. Without an interview protocol that elicited rhetorical experiences and their connection to mental, social, and emotional experiences, this study would not have been able to make contributions to the field's understanding of access as rhetorical activity. Additionally, this project contributes an understanding of difference as lived rhetorical activity, demonstrating how the experience of embodied difference is highly rhetorical and that our existing structures and norms for access and inclusion depend on individuals' own rhetorical efforts. While the community writing dimension of this project is not the central object of study at this time, this project also demonstrates how community writing, public rhetoric, and qualitative research can be used in tandem to examine how individuals and communities use public writing and rhetoric for social change.

Implications for Pedagogy in Composition and Rhetoric

A rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence

This project offers a rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence that can be used in composition and rhetoric classrooms. Rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence offers a new framework for thinking about how to construct accessible and inclusive communities. A rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence offers a method for being in community with other people that displaces independence and autonomy from the center of human relationality. Within the context of composition pedagogy, which has a long history of placing students at the center of the classroom and structuring knowledge-making around collaboration, a rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence offers a method for being in community in a way that distributes responsibility for interacting and communicating across differences. In a rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence, people are responsive to and responsible for one another's access, and the labor for cultivating access and inclusion is distributed. A pedagogy of interdependence offers people the rhetorical skills they need to read a situation, understand how one person relates to another, assess what their needs are, and participate in meeting each other's needs.

While this pedagogical approach remains theoretical at this point, I have piloted aspects of such a pedagogy in my own teaching by placing access at the center of our classroom community and curriculum. By placing access at the center of the pedagogy in theory and practice, students become responsible for and responsive to one another and their learning. By positioning access as a lens for learning about writing and rhetoric, students begin to see questions of rhetoric as inseparable from the work of access. In other words, by making access part of the fabric of the rhetorical situation, a rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence asks individuals to analyze rhetorical situations through attunement to relationships among people, tools, bodies, minds, and modes in space and time. Interdependence as rhetorical pedagogy offers a more inclusive approach to a student-centered classroom by placing collective access at the center and making students responsible to and for one another.

Community writing, public rhetoric, and qualitative research

In addition to a rhetorical pedagogy of interdependence, this project contributes a model for classroom learning about composition and rhetoric that engages community writing, public rhetoric, and ethnographic research. Through community writing, public rhetoric, and qualitative research methods, this project provides a model for how to examine and engage lived rhetorical realities of difference. Engaging participants in community writing while eliciting personal narratives about rhetoric of public engagement offers a model for how to engage students in composition and rhetoric in a way that exposes them to the lived realities of rhetoric and writing for individuals and communities. Through community engagement, students in composition and rhetoric courses can investigate writing about difference for public audiences, developing skills in critical inquiry, communicating across difference, rhetorical analysis, and attunement to the relationship between language and difference.

Conclusion

It is not surprising to me now that I spent almost a decade communicating with no one about my vision impairment. It is not surprising that I resisted the label of “disability” and that it took me many, many attempts to figure out how to talk to my students and colleagues about my disability. No one ever told me how to do it, and now I know that none of the twenty other blind and visually impaired people I interviewed were told how to do it either. Many of us have stumbled and tried different rhetorical strategies in different situations at different moments, and some of us have developed clear rhetorical agendas for teaching people about how to be in the world with us. But this is not the majority. There are many, many people who are experiencing blindness, or another form of physical or mental disability, who have not figured out how to communicate about it, who are hiding, who are resisting identification, and who are internalizing deficit. They are not wrong in doing so. Their responses are realistic and valid because we live in a world in which having a different body or mind is not valued, and talking openly about disability is uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and uncommon.

I'd be lying if I ended this project by claiming that I've overcome all my internalized deficit and my uncertainty about how to be in this world with a visual disability. I labor every day to figure out how I will get from point A to point B, how I will access a certain text, what I will do if I lose more vision and can't read a screen, what I will do if I can no longer ride my bike, what I will do if I have to move somewhere that's not walkable, how I will safely hike the rugged terrain of the Faroe Islands, how I will be a mother with a disability, how I will keep track of my children at the playground, and most of all, how I will manage what people who don't already know me think about me and my abilities.

In part, this project served as a way for me to begin communicating with the world more openly about my disability. I needed this intellectual framework in order to better understand it and become more comfortable with it. This project has taught me that there is much to be gained by communicating with the world about disability. As I hope the preceding pages show, engaging disability as a way of being calls us to rethink and reimagine how we do things and relate to one another. It forces us to re-see why we do what we do and how we do it. It calls us to examine our own assumptions and biases about what it means to be a worker, a learner, a friend, a stranger, and above all, what it means to be human. I'm not sure I would know this in such a deeply embodied and visceral way if I had not conducted this study.

At the same time that I was conducting research for this study, I was exploring what it means to center access in my public and professional life as a leader, teacher, and writer. While teaching, I began using my own disability disclosure as a way to open space for students to think and communicate about their own access needs. After teaching undergraduate Writing Fellows about the relationship between access and writing, they taught me about how access should be a lens for everything that we do in relation with one another. In collaboration with Writing Fellows, I began to learn about what it means to put access at the center of our community and our relations with one another. While giving presentations at national and local conferences and in the community, I've spoken out about access and made my access work transparent and apparent. In local community groups, I've facilitated conversations about strategies for communicating with the world about disability and continued to learn from community members. On the academic job market, I've centered access by disclosing my own disability and modeling what it looks like to share responsibility for access in the space of a job market presentation. In all these contexts, this work does feel risky. I don't know what people will think and as this project has shown, there are real material, social, and emotional consequences of everyday rhetorical labor of disability. More than anything, though, this project has taught me that I am a leader, a writer, a teacher and a speaker, and I have the opportunity to reshape the way people think about access and disability, and while I never imagined myself in this position, this is where I found my voice.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

PART I

Demographic information

Tell me about yourself.
Date of birth
Place of birth
Place where you grew up
Gender/race:
Type of household (childhood)
Type of household (current)
Parents'/guardians' schooling and occupations if known
Names and locations of all schools attended
Other training
Degrees, dates, of graduation, size of graduating class
Past/current/future occupation

Disability Life History

Early Childhood Through Teenage Years

General relationship to disability

Tell me about your early childhood and your relationship to your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Tell me about the moment when you first learned about your impairment.
- Tell me about the first time you realized the role of your impairment in your life.
- Tell me about the first time you received blindness education or rehabilitation.
- Tell me about a time when your personal view/attitude toward your impairment developed or changed.
- Tell me about a time when you had a difficult time accepting your impairment.
- Tell me about a time when you felt especially comfortable with your impairment.

School

Tell me about your early school experiences and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Describe your earliest memory of reading and writing at school
- Tell me about the first time you disclosed your impairment in school
- Tell me about a time you requested accommodations in school
- Tell me about a time you received accommodations in school
- Tell me about your experience of using assistive technologies for reading and writing in school
- How has your impairment influenced your uses of reading and writing over time?

Family

Tell me about your early family life and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Describe your family's relationship to your impairment.
- Tell me about a time when you communicated with a family member about your impairment
- Tell me about a time when a family member communicated about your impairment with someone else
- Describe the influence of your impairment on your family

Medical Contexts

Tell me about your early experiences in medical settings. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Tell me about the first time you received your medical diagnosis.
- Tell me about a time when you received news about your impairment from a medical professional.
- Tell me about a time you communicated needs to your medical professional.
- Tell me about a time you asked your medical professional questions.
- Tell me about a time you needed information from a medical professional.

Social Life / Leisure

Tell me about your early social experiences and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Tell me about a time when you experienced other people's perceptions of your impairment (stigma, stereotyping, discrimination)
- Tell me about a time you felt excluded because of your impairment
- Tell me about a time you felt included.
- Tell me about a time when you communicated with friends about your impairment.
- Tell me about what you did in your free time

Mid-Life (College-age through early adulthood)

General relationship to disability

Tell me about your early adulthood and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

- Tell me about a time when your personal view/attitude toward your impairment developed or changed.
- Tell me about a time when you had a difficult time accepting your impairment.
- Tell me about a time when you felt especially comfortable with your impairment.

School (if applicable)

Tell me about your experiences in college and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Describe any changes in the ways your impairment influenced your schooling.
- Describe a memory of reading and writing at school
- Describe a memory of reading and writing outside of school
- Tell me about a time you requested accommodations in school
- Tell me about a time you received accommodations in school

- Tell me about your experience of using assistive technologies for reading and writing in school

Work

Tell me about your first work experiences and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Tell me about your experiences applying for jobs, disclosure
- Tell me about your first job
- Tell me about the first time you disclosed your impairment to an employer
- Tell me about a time you did not disclose your impairment to an employer
- Tell me about a time when you disclosed impairment to your coworkers
- Tell me about a time you requested accommodations in the workplace.
- Describe the ways you use reading and writing in your current job
- Describe your experience of using assistive technologies in the workplace
- Tell me about a time when you had a conversation with an employer about your impairment
    - A successful time
    - A not so successful time

Family

Tell me about your family and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Describe any changes/developments in your family's relationship to your impairment.
- Tell me about a time when you communicated with a family member about your impairment
- Tell me about a time when a family member communicated about your impairment with someone else
- Describe the influence of your impairment on your family

Social Life / Leisure

Tell me about your social life and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Tell me about a time when you communicated with friends about your impairment.
- Tell me about a time when you experienced other people's perceptions of your impairment (stigma, stereotyping, discrimination)
- Tell me about a time you felt excluded because of your impairment
- Tell me about a time you felt included
- Tell me about what you do for fun in your free time

Community

Tell me about your relationship to the blindness community or the community at large. What memories stand out to you?

- Tell me about the first time you participated in a state, federal, or non-profit organization for blind and visually impaired individuals
- Tell me about a time you participated in support groups or volunteer projects around blindness
- How has your involvement in the blind/low vision community shaped your approach to communication?

Medical Contexts

Tell me about your early experiences in medical settings. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Tell me about the first time you received your medical diagnosis.
- Tell me about a time when you received news about your impairment from a medical professional.
- Tell me about a time you communicated needs to your medical professional.
- Tell me about a time you asked your medical professional questions.
- Tell me about a time you needed information from a medical professional.

Social/Political advocacy

Tell me about your involvement in social or political advocacy. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Tell me about a time you decided to take social or political action.
- Tell me about a time you took steps to change a policy or law (in any context).
- Tell me about a time you used reading/writing to take political/social action.

Middle Adulthood through Later Adulthood

General Relationship to Disability

Tell me about your middle to late adulthood and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

- Tell me about a time when your personal view/attitude toward your impairment developed or changed.
- Tell me about a time when you had a difficult time accepting your impairment.
- Tell me about a time when you felt especially comfortable with your impairment.

Reading and Writing

Tell me about the role of reading and writing in your later adulthood. What memories stand out to you?

- Describe the role of reading and writing in your later adulthood.
- Tell me about the influence of your impairment on your relationship to reading and writing in your later adulthood.

Work

Tell me about your work experiences in middle and later adulthood and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?

More specific questions:

- Tell me about your experiences applying for jobs
- Tell me about your first job
- Tell me about the first time you disclosed your impairment to an employer
- Tell me about a time when you disclosed impairment to your coworkers
- Tell me about a time you requested accommodations in the workplace.
- Describe the ways you use reading and writing in your current job
- Describe your experience of using assistive technologies in the workplace
- Tell me about a time when you had a conversation with an employer about your impairment
    - A successful time
    - A not so successful time

Family

Tell me about your family and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?
More specific questions:

- Describe any changes/developments in your family's relationship to your impairment.
- Tell me about a time when you communicated with a family member about your impairment
- Tell me about a time when a family member communicated about your impairment with someone else
- Describe the influence of your impairment on your family

Social Life / Leisure

Tell me about your social life and the role of your impairment. What memories stand out to you?
More specific questions:

- Tell me about a time when you communicated with friends about your impairment.
- Tell me about a time when you experienced other people's perceptions of your impairment (stigma, stereotyping, discrimination)
- Tell me about a time you felt excluded because of your impairment
- Tell me about a time you felt included
- Tell me about what you do for fun in your free time

Community

Tell me about your relationship to the blindness community or the community at large. What memories stand out to you?

- Tell me about the first time you participated in a state, federal, or non-profit organization for blind and visually impaired individuals
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Medical Contexts

Tell me about your early experiences in medical settings. What memories stand out to you?
More specific questions:

- Tell me about the first time you received your medical diagnosis.
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- Tell me about a time you asked your medical professional questions.
- Tell me about a time you needed information from a medical professional.

Social/Political advocacy

Tell me about your involvement in social or political advocacy. What memories stand out to you?
More specific questions:

- Tell me about a time you decided to take social or political action.
- Tell me about a time you took steps to change a policy or law (in any context).
- Tell me about a time you used reading/writing to take political or social action.

More focused communication questions

- How would you describe your approach to communicating about your impairment/disability?
- What's difficult about communicating about blindness?
- What strategies have you developed for communicating about blindness?
- What helps you communicate about your disability?
- Do you find it difficult to ask for help?
- Tell me about a time when you felt that your communication efforts were unsuccessful.
- Tell me about a time when you thought your communication efforts were successful.
- How do you break social barriers?
- How do you make arguments for your abilities?
- How does your personal relationship to your disability influence how you communicate about it?
- What theories of disability or ideas about disability help you communicate about it?
- Tell me about a time when you found yourself instructing people about your disability.

PART II (if applicable)

Participation in The Outlook From Here
Reasons for joining
Had you written about disability before joining the group?
Personal goals
Your vision of the project's purpose
Your writing process
    How do you select topics?
    What do you hope to accomplish with your writing?
    What messages do you hope to send?
    Who is your audience?
    What is your purpose?
    How do you make sure your writing sends the message you want it to send?
    What challenges do you face?
    What is difficult about writing about disability?
    What is easy about writing about disability?
    What have you gained from the experience?
    What responses have you gotten to your writing?
    Has writing about disability changed / developed your own relationship to or understanding of disability?
Writer-specific questions (discuss a piece or two of their writing)
    Questions about the writers' specific published works
        Purpose
        Audience
        Form
        Argument
        Examples
        Challenges
        Process

FOR PROFESSIONALS IN THE FIELD:

General information about the nature of the work

Tell me about your career.
Describe a typical day in the life of an O&M instructor/vision rehab teacher/vision teacher
How did you get involved with people with vision impairments?
Who do you typically work with?
Where do you typically work with them?
What skills do you teach?
What does your curriculum include?
What other training/guidance do your students/clients receive?
What drives you in doing this kind of work?

Communication situations/skills

What observations have you made about the role of communication in the lives of people with vision impairments?
What communication skills do you teach to people with vision impairments?
In what situations does communication come up in the training you provide?
From your perspective, what is challenging about communicating around/with disability?
From what you have observed, what helps people communicate around/with disability?
What guidance/advice/training do you give to people on how to use communication to meet their goals in different situations?

General observations as an instructor

From your observations, what are the biggest challenges facing people with vision impairments?
From your observations, why are people with vision impairments still largely unemployed or underemployed?

Appendix B: List of Participants and Relevant Demographic Information

Name	**Age at time of interview**	**Congenital or acquired blindness**	**Gender Identification**	**Disability Identification**
Indira	40s	Childhood/adolescence	Female	Visually Impaired
Abigail	60s	Birth	Female	Blind
Roberto	60s	Childhood/adolescence	Male	Blind
Louise	40s	Childhood/Adolescence	Female	Blind
Tracy	n/a	Parent of a blind child	Female	n/a
Mary Kathleen	60s	childhood/adolescence	Female	Low vision
Candace	30s	Birth	Female	Blind
Jackson	40s	Childhood/adolescence	Male	Visually Impaired
Thomas	30s	Adulthood	Male	Vision and hearing impaired
Ethan	60s	Childhood/adolescence	Male	Visually Impaired
Curtis	40s	Adulthood	Male	Blind
Nadine	20s	Childhood/Adolescence	Female	Blind
Marigold	60s	Adulthood	Female	Blind
Lee	70s	Adulthood	Male	Blind
Ropo	40s	Childhood/Adolescence	Male	Blind
Jenny	30s	Adulthood	Female	Visually Impaired
Scott	20s	Birth	Male	Legally blind
Walter	n/a	Orientation and Mobility Specialist	n/a	n/a
Henry	70s	Birth	Male	Blind
Lisa	50s	Childhood/Adolescence	Female	Low vision
Maureen	30s	Childhood/Adolescence	Female	Visually impaired