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Disability and Accessibility in the Workplace: Some Exemplars and a Research Agenda for Business and Professional Communication

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Disability and Accessibility in the Workplace: Some Exemplars and a Research Agenda for Business and Professional Communication

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The March 2018 special issue of *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* (BPCQ), “Enabling Workplaces, Classrooms, and Pedagogies: Bringing Disability Theory and Accessibility to Business and Professional Communication,” can provide a crash course on disability and accessibility theory and a chockfull of creative and constructive ideas for designing business and professional communication assignments and courses that embrace accessibility while enriching the diversity of our core curriculum and offers students with sophisticated insights into the complexities of accessibility in workplace communication. The issue left off with Annika Konrad’s fieldwork-based scholarly article about the rhetorical experiences of people who are blind and visually impaired. The author used rhetorical theory of commonplaces to analyze participant accounts of workplace interactions, revealing how what the author has termed “normative workplace commonplaces” shape interactions with disabled workers, structuring claims about work and working bodies. In the current issue, we focus on research in the workplace with three additional models for what can be done to advance knowledge about accessibility and disability in the context of business and professional communication. The three articles in our Feature Topic focus on research in the United States, but we believe the methods employed will be useful for scholars in other countries.

Our feature topic begins with an overview of the disability and accessibility laws that govern the information economy of websites in the United States. The scholarly thrust of this article is on these laws’ interpretation by the U.S. courts during the past quarter of a century and the authors demonstrate how the judicial decisions of this period have consistently kept the language of these disability laws fluid through competing definitions of key legal terms and by limiting the scope and applicability of these laws to the whole domain of online information, particularly in the commercial and education sectors of interest to disabled users. The article also highlights the gap that exists between the ethical standards and principles of equal access to online information and interaction and the legal environment in the United States that is supposed to support this equal access. The authors clarify many complexities of these laws through their analyses of these court decisions and present a sobering assessment of their impact on

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various constituencies that might include students with disabilities, university faculty, and institutions of higher education. Through a further review of precedence created by litigation surrounding the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the authors point out not only the advances made toward ensuring universal website accessibility but also the setbacks toward this goal that are rooted in legal loopholes and the legislative inaction on behalf of the U.S. Congress to patch these holes. The authors conclude that business and professional communication students can be more effective advocates of website accessibility as they enter the workforce when they are aware of the intricacies of the current legal environment.

While the first article in this feature topic focuses on legal obligations for delivery of accessible web content from the perspective of disability laws and related judicial decisions from the U.S. courts, second article advocates for awareness for social or spatial considerations in the design of campus digital maps. Employing accessibility audit and content analysis methods, the author analyzes a selection of interactive maps from Texas colleges for their accessibility features and outlines the challenges they pose for disabled members of the campus community. As the coverage of this topic in professional communication journals is rare, this research on the accessibility of these digital maps for disabled users makes a novel contribution to the growing disability and accessibility literature in the fields of professional, technical, and business communication. The article's disciplinary value for professional communication scholarship lies in the author's demonstration of how interaction design reflects organizational values; their exhortation to universities for developing in-house knowledge and practical expertise for communicating business, professional, and physical environments; and their call for expanded accessibility metrics for web content. She makes the case for improved accessibility of online maps with the premise that students with disabilities depend on environmental information to navigate the barriers they face on campuses. We might mention that the same is just as relevant for disabled faculty and staff members who might spend their entire career on a single university campus and might need access to many more campus locations, facilities, and environments than any student might require during their stay for a college degree.

The third and last article in this feature topic is a case study of the accessibility of 116 websites of the U.S. Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VAMC). With a large number of active military duty students and recently retired veterans on U.S. campuses, the topic should interest faculty, staff, and students equally. The authors begin with two research questions: How well do VAMC websites meet federal accessibility mandates? "How prepared are VAMC websites for the adoption of WCAG 2.0 guidelines? Their findings—which are based on data from the analysis performed by automated checkers used for doing machine-based accessibility testing—suggest that all the VAMC websites have accessibility errors although the rate of errors in these sites is relatively low. While the authors report that the accessibility problems identified by the machine tests were not widespread, their description of the various scattered problems indicates that the large number of blind veterans—many of whom are elderly, require health information routinely, and more often do not have expert knowledge of advance-level keyboard commands for using the screen reader—might have difficulty navigating the pages of these VAMC websites. Business and professional communication faculty teaching web design in their classes find that the addition of an automated checker-

based component for testing accessibility can make their design assignments more sophisticated and also promote the diversity goals of their courses. Developing pedagogical projects that intersect technology and accessibility for disabled users also offers students with opportunities to acquire knowhow about new adaptive and assistive technologies—screen readers in this case—and this article can spark interest among students for such projects of their own. Both automated software tools and screen readers are now available online, and many do not require a subscription fee.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said, ““Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.” The authors included in this feature section on disability and accessibility have put this motto to practice by assimilating the insights from the growing scholarship of accessibility studies in their contributions to the pedagogy and practice of business and professional communication. Each of the authors follows this pattern of assimilation and introduces *BPCQ* readers to one or more aspects of disability and accessibility theory, shows how this knowledge can be shared pedagogically with our students, and then demonstrates the implications and applications of this knowledge to the practice and research of the field. We encourage our readers to propose article-length projects about the disability and accessibility work you are doing in your business and professional communication classes and workplace practice so that we could make this disability access dialogue sustainable within the covers of this journal, our classrooms, and our professional practice. We conclude this editorial by previewing a potential scholarly area thus far neglected in the business and professional communication field.

Having presented these featured articles with our attention concentrated on disability, which affects at least 15% of the world’s population (World Health Organization, 2018), we propose an ambitious research agenda whereby business and professional communication scholars and practitioners become immersed in interdisciplinary scholarship on disability and accessibility. Just as the last century was the century of drawing territorial boundaries in the academy and slicing human knowledge into disciplines and professions, the 21st century appears to be the century of putting the fragmented practices of these disciplines back into interdisciplinary wholes, if not one single whole. We can already see how disciplines are scrambling to forge epistemological and ontological connections outside their disciplines’ boundaries. For example, medical doctors are interested in narrative medicine, and scientists are performing storytelling (Charon, 2001). Architects and designers are engaging in idealational thinking (Jonson, 2005), and anthropologists can be seen performing visual scans for participant selection with global positioning system technology (Ecks, 2008; Wampler, Rediske, & Molla, 2013).

Take, for example, the field of information and communication technology and development (ICTD)—the *development* here stands for socioeconomic development—and the *ICT* work is intrinsically interdisciplinary. It involves local-level problem solving, which can consist of approaching local people to understand their rural or urban periphery problems, developing social networks with the help of these local stakeholders, directly and indirectly engaging in their activities for acquiring resources to purchase required technology essentials, and advocating for policy change. ICTD projects are as much a business transaction as they are technology transfer, and they can provide a shared research platform for business and professional communication

scholars. We look forward to continuing this conversation in 2019, and we anticipate publishing additional articles on disability and accessibility.

Also in this issue are two additional articles that show the diverse perspectives possible for our field. In the first of these, the authors studied the perception and recognition of errors in a population of practitioners and academics in professional and technical communication with some surprising results compared to previous claims. Errors appeared to bother practitioners more than academics, with one exception: sentence fragments. Age and gender also played a statistically significant roles in botheration levels related to grammar. Clearly, as the authors point out, students should understand the importance of context and how assessment of error can be applied inconsistently.

Our final article in this issue is the first we have published on crowdfunding. The author describes a research project that can teach students how to write in this genre. Crowdfunding platforms have rapidly evolved into an important means for both profit and nonprofit organizations to fund events, programs, and services, and they also provide the means to help establish long-term relationships between funders and sponsors. The author argues that business and professional communication students can benefit from acquiring the skills necessary to produce successful crowdfunding copy.

This issue is the last one in Volume 81, so it is time to thank all those who have contributed to our success. As we close Volume 81, I would like to thank those who have made our journal so successful: Martha Avtandilian (Publisher), Julianne Candio Sekel (Editorial Assistant), Lenny Grant (who concludes his term as Book Review Editor with this issue), Joel Whalen (Convener and Editor of the My Favorite Assignment collections), and Association for Business Communication (ABC) headquarters and SAGE editorial and production staff. We would also like to offer special thanks to our dedicated Editorial Review Board members and ad hoc reviewers, who have continued to provide the excellent feedback for which *BPCQ* is known.

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