Making Space for the Misfit: Disability and Access in Graduate Education in English

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From a Story of Misfit to a Study of Disability and Access

At the end of my graduate school experience, I felt like I was falling apart. Or, perhaps more accurately, I felt pulled apart by too many demands that my mind could not synthesize. I was finishing a dissertation; I was preparing for the job market; I had an infant; my dog was dying. I was overwhelmed, underslept, always anxious, and often depressed. As much as I was grateful for my graduate school experience, nearly every day I felt like I did not fit the graduate student mold. For instance, I struggled to keep up with fast-paced class discussion and to seamlessly connect dense readings and new ideas in the way my peers made look so easy. If I felt so misfitted for graduate school, maybe this path—my work, my future, my identity—was a mistake.

Though I was haunted by a heavy feeling that I was not the “right” kind of graduate student, I was not at that time aware of the concept of “misfit,” first theorized by disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and recently extended by Elisabeth Miller’s theory of “literate misfitting.” Garland-Thomson poses the misfit as a way to further acknowledge the entanglement of material and social constitutions of disability. She explains, “The discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is, produces fits and misfits” (593). Miller then brings the term more specifically into practices...
of reading and composing and describes *literate misfitting* as a definition that emerges from in-depth interviews with people experiencing aphasia: “the conflicts readers and writers encounter when their bodies and minds do not fit with the materials and expectations of ‘normal’ literate practice” (34–36). Literate misfitting proves a useful extension of the term for digging deeper into what is assumed and expected of graduate students in English, as graduate school is often a space where “normal literate practice” is understood quite rigidly by students and professors alike.

My struggles with my own literate misfit served as the initial impetus for this project, especially as I moved into a professorial path and began working with graduate students, all the while hoping they felt a fit that had once eluded me. Drawing from these experiences, this article shares insights from a small study of graduate students in an English MA program, using a disability studies methodology to analyze their responses to a survey. The survey focused on approaches, activities, and assignments in graduate courses, as well as how students’ experiences in graduate school may shape their own teaching. One emergent theme in the responses is what I call the *reverse accommodation*: graduate students insist they must adapt and adjust to all courses, professors, and demands. The reverse accommodation and related themes highlight norms that explicitly and implicitly shape graduate school in English, sometimes with harmful effects.

As one poignant survey response states:

> The monotonous class discussion becomes tiresome and often leads to zoning out . . . Because of this, as well as the “take it or leave it” attitude of professors, I feel as though my needs as a student are often disregarded. While they are English courses, and we are talking about texts, I feel as though a diverse approach to the material is necessary . . . Unfortunately, I feel as though many students eventually “leave it,” thinking that time and/or money are being wasted.

This comment raises fundamental questions about accessing graduate school: who pursues English as a graduate school path in the first place? Who is allowed to remain on that path? What bodies and minds are welcomed and centered? Who remains on the margins or never makes it through the door? I argue that we must attend to the voices of graduate students, listening to and trusting their experiences and expertise about how they learn, especially when these experiences produce a misfit with what is assumed or expected of them, when graduate students feel the only two options are fit in or get out, “take it or leave it.” Attentive listening and trust positions access as an ongoing process, and in this process, disability can be centered rather than bypassed, approached as generative rather than a problem to solve.
Disability Studies as Methodology

Amy Vidali, in her study of college admissions essays written by students with disabilities, describes disability studies as a field shifting focus away from disability as a “problem” and instead toward “issues of civil rights and social justice.” Vidali also highlights that theories and analyses in disability studies scholarship consider how disability affects “larger issues of autonomy, health, and embodiment that affect all people” (617). When connecting disability to larger issues affecting all people, education could be added to Vidali’s helpful list. In educational settings, disability is often approached as a diagnosis rigidly attached to specific accommodations, and these accommodations can “fix” the “problem” of disability. When disability is understood as problem in need of a solution, it is easy to assume disability is a topic to write about, but not necessarily through or with. In other words, disability is often assumed to be an object of study, but rarely approached as a culture that may enrich other people or situations. Disability studies aims to remedy this methodological issue, approaching disability as a complex yet generative identity, much more than a diagnosis and far from a problem.

To use disability studies as a methodology means that disability is centered as an area of inquiry, in the methods of a study, and in the theoretical concepts that guide analysis, all of which I will touch on in this section. Vidali, for instance, is writing about disability as it is disclosed in college admission essays, so she is writing about disability in a concrete way, but disability studies also serves as her guiding methodology, which moves her analysis in a different direction. She explains, “Quite differently, my analysis positions disability as an important topic and theoretical venture, suggesting that disability is a way of analyzing texts that challenges traditional theoretical and methodological approaches” (620). With disability studies as a methodology, throughout this article, I will bring to the forefront what I am learning from and with disability, highlighting moments when disability asks me to rethink my own assumptions and resist norms.

Because disability studies challenges common thinking about disability, a benefit of using disability studies methodology is that this study, though localized and focused on graduate education, is applicable far beyond one program or one group of students. The insights shared by graduate students in this article, and the important questions they raise, encourage readers to redefine and rethink access in relation to disability and across other intersections in any course they teach. For instance, for those teaching general education courses such as introductory composition or literature, access and inclusivity are increasingly set forth as institution-level commitments and are necessary values and practices to integrate when working with students who may not come to the course with
a vested interest in the topic or experience in English classes. Further, many of the themes that surface will likely resonate with instructors working with undergraduate English students who may want to pursue graduate work or seek professionalization in English. Experiences like senior seminars, undergraduate research, or other capstones like assistantships or internships sometimes overlap with common practices of graduate education, especially class discussion, essay writing, and mentoring, all of which are complicated by the graduate students’ perspectives offered in this study.

Access, Misfit, and Wonder as Guiding Concepts

It is, in fact, the graduate student perspectives that form a crucial piece of my disability studies methodology; I aimed to carefully listen to, trust, and amplify their voices, even when they challenge my own pedagogical practices. The discursive comments from the survey, which are the primary data for this article, were approached in the spirit of grounded theory (Glaser). Rather than coming to the comments with a list of preexisting codes, open coding the data guided me toward themes. A grounded theory approach honored the responses of the graduate students while teasing out more nuance, detail, and tension. While Vidali draws on freak show theory as her theoretical lens, the connected concepts of access, wonder, and misfit emerged from my data, creating the analytical framework. In particular, the survey data pointed toward the ways in which these concepts lean on one other. In other words, to pursue access in classrooms, we must wonder about pedagogical misfits.

I begin with access as the broad umbrella the other concepts fall under and, ideally, inform. Talking about access is complex, since it is a concept rooted in disability, but access also affects almost everyone and should be a collective commitment. Abled people often benefit from access measures for disabled people, such as closed captions, curb cuts, or reserved quiet rooms at busy events. When access is understood as benefiting all, it follows that the pursuit of access must be the collective responsibility of all. Disability justice activist Mia Mingus uses the term liberatory access to explain how access must be conceived of in more capacious ways, ways that view access as freeing rather than troublesome and that avoid putting all the onus for access entirely on disabled people. Mingus explains liberatory access as a radical revision of all interactions, with important emphasis on collaboration and interdependence: “It [liberatory access] demands that the responsibility for access shifts from being an individual responsibility to a collective responsibility. That access shifts... from burdensome to valuable... from rigid to creative.” A key finding in my study overlaps with Mingus’s vision of access; graduate school in English could be more accessible for nearly all students, some who have disabilities and others who might find themselves
on the periphery of learning for other reasons. At the same time, while recognizing the collective benefit and responsibility in access for all people, first and foremost, access comes from and is about disability. When access becomes too abstract or too big, sometimes disability-related needs are overlooked. While discussions and actions of access can and should emphasize cultural, social, and attitudinal shifts, thus making access useful for everyone, we must listen to the individualized voices and concerns of disabled people in the pursuit of liberatory access, or else well-intentioned platitudes and enthusiasm about meeting the access needs of everyone can erase or ignore disability as a valuable identity (Zdenek; Dolmage).

Since liberatory access is not the norm, there will always be misfits, environments, or actions that rub uncomfortably against bodies and minds. While I laid out the discrepancy and discomfort that I initially felt in my own graduate school misfit, Garland-Thomson and Miller reveal richness in misfitting. A misfit is not a bad thing; rather, a misfit just is. Misfit does not imply a problem with the environment nor with an individual. Instead, a misfit is a result of incongruence or “awkward” juxtaposition (Garland-Thomson 592). Even more, both Garland-Thomson and Miller, while acknowledging the difficulties and often discrimination that come with misfitting, locate power and creativity in the concept, especially in terms of appreciating interdependence and challenging assumptions about “correct” ways to be and do, and in Miller’s study, to read, write, and learn.

The power that both Garland-Thomson and Miller locate in misfitting draws attention to the ways in which graduate students in this study often felt forced to hide or deny their own struggles. Rather than finding creativity in a misfit or moving toward discussions about how graduate school in English might become more accessible, they were more likely to “take it or leave it.” This pervasive take-it-or-leave-it attitude led me to wonder, my final theoretical concept, which served as a lens both for reading the data and writing about it in this article. Specifically, I lean on Tanya Titchkosky’s description of “the politics of wonder” from her book *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*. Titchkosky suggests that we must resist either/or definitions of access; it is not a “we have it / we do not have it” sort of issue. Rather than a binary, she proposes wonder as a multipronged and exploratory orientation, requiring recursive observation and questions about access in both its presence and its absence. While wonder is similar, in some ways, to reflection, Titchkosky theorizes wondering about access as political:

Wonder, then, is a political act, a form of questioning oriented to the open-ended need to understand... Until we begin to approach this assumption of the problem of disability with wonder and begin to study how it is that these bodies, minds,
or senses have been made sense of as problems... the spaces in which we find ourselves will likely remain the same. (135)

To put it another way, wonder is outward-facing and change-focused, which also means wondering about access can be uncomfortable and challenging, as it may make people feel “wrong” about their approaches. But when binaries are avoided, access cannot be simply “right” or “wrong.” When I invoke and enact wonder throughout this article, I attempt to resist closure in conversations about access and disability, situating access as a process that will never be finished, and rethinking pedagogical misfits must be part of this ongoing pursuit. When English professors and their students wonder about disability and access, they move away from binaries positioning disability and misfits as problems to be solved, with access acting as an oversimplified savior. Wonder instead allows us to view access as systemic and networked, affecting everyone and thus the responsibility of all, continually flowing rather than finite, liberatory rather than solely the legal minimum.

Survey Design

I have outlined disability studies as a theoretical framework, allowing me to better understand graduate student insights that bring access, misfit, and wonder to the surface as connected concepts that challenge normative assumptions about graduate school. Beyond this framework, the survey itself as the tool for data collection is also a part of my disability studies methodology. The survey was open to all graduate students in the program. I did not ask participants to identify as disabled or disclose disability status, though some of them are disabled and did disclose in the process. Disclosure comes with material and emotional consequences, even in the space of an anonymous survey, which is still a document connected to the university and institutional power. As students volunteering to take the survey knew I was a professor in the program, my affiliation with the survey could cause discomfort or tension. In short, mandating disclosure of disability, in this case, would pose an immediate barrier for participation.

The complexity of disability disclosure increases for graduate students, who are navigating an in-between and frequently less-than-friendly space in terms of the profession and their disabilities. Angela M. Carter, R. Tina Catania, Sam Schmitt, and Amanda Swenson note in their autoethnography about disclosure as graduate students:

Graduate students with disabilities, therefore, encounter significant barriers to participation. Not quite “novice” and not quite “scholar,” disabled graduate students must navigate a complex web of power... the corporeality of our bodies present circumstances that are distinct from the struggles of disabled undergraduate students or disabled faculty members. (96)
Being “out” as a disabled graduate student poses specific risks, so the survey was designed to invite, value, and amplify the diverse knowledge graduate students possess about pedagogy, exploring the contours of access within graduate education in English, while avoiding pressure on participants to disclose disability or feel as if they were objectified or othered as subjects of a study rather than cocreators of theory.

The survey moved from multiple-choice and ranking questions into a variety of questions that allowed for open-ended, reflective commenting about graduate course pedagogy. The majority of the questions focus on how students learn in their graduate coursework in terms of in-class methods and assignments and how they perceive these approaches as meeting their learning needs. If applicable, the final several questions explore exposure to disability studies content and approaches and the influence disability studies might have on their teaching. I built the survey using Qualtrics software, which includes accessibility checks of design and offers suggested revisions based on those checks. Thirty-two graduate students responded to the survey.

Institutional Context

At the time of the study, there were about ninety-five graduate students enrolled in the English department: thirty MFA students and sixty-five MA students. The thirty-two students who participated in the survey are a sample of convenience from my own institution, a midsize regional public university. The English department at the university offers an MA and an MFA, and while these programs operate somewhat separately, both MA and MFA students enroll in many graduate seminars. For the MA, students opt for a literature or composition emphasis, though students with either emphasis take courses in both subdisciplines; the MFA program includes poetry and fiction foci. The MA program covers many roles, aiming to further the education of middle and secondary teachers in the region, prepare students to teach at local community colleges, and prepare students to enter PhD programs in English or related fields. The MFA program focuses on writing as craft from a few angles, offering writing workshops, seminars on craft, and editorial internships with a literary journal. Students in the MFA program produce a book-length thesis and often publish creative work as they pursue the degree and as alumni. Overall, there is considerable cross-listing and intermingling across all programs and emphasis areas due to faculty retirements over the last several years.

Many of the students in the graduate program work full-time in addition to pursuing graduate coursework. Accordingly, graduate courses are offered only during late-afternoon and evening time slots, allowing working students to enroll. The most common work pursued by students in this program is teaching
related. Some students are experienced English teachers at the secondary level and are pursuing master’s degrees in English for further professional development or as a requirement for maintaining certification or moving up the pay scale. Additionally, the department offers several teaching assistantships. Students awarded assistantships have a variety of options, depending on their interests and skills: they can tutor in the writing center; they can teach first-year composition; or they can do a combination of both during their two years as TAs. Typically, there are approximately ten to twelve graduate students holding assistantships. TAs teach the majority of first-year composition courses, and tutors work closely with the first-year composition program, as well. The department and program I describe might resemble one you work in, or it might be a very different context. It is, however, reflective of the configuration of many graduate programs in our field and so provides a familiar space for the centering of disability and access in an English studies context, especially when working with and living as graduate students.

From the Bypass to the Center: Conversations about Disability, Access, and Graduate Education

The Disability Bypass

Disability is all around campuses, though seldom acknowledged, sometimes actively avoided, and rarely valued or centered. College English has fostered meaningful conversations about disability over the last twenty-five years: critical literacy narratives written by professors (Brueggemann, “On (Almost) Passing”; Loewenstein; Mossman); essays that retheorize rhetoric, writing, and literacy through the lens of disabled people’s experiences (Davis; Miller; Rinaldi; Heilker and Yergeau); and discussions of disabled students’ experiences, in and out of the classroom (Vidali; Jurecic; Lewiecki-Wilson and Dolmage; Heilker). This wide-ranging work serves a crucial underlying purpose: it reminds the field that higher education is not exempt from disability. Yet the on-the-ground work at institutions often lags behind, continuing to ignore, minimize, or isolate disabled students and faculty. I call this the disability bypass: disability is present; most people at a university realize this in an abstract and distant way, maybe acknowledging it in concerns about student performance, meetings about diversity on campus, or in university mission statements that invoke access, equity, and inclusion as core values. Despite the undeniable there-ness (and everywhere-ness) of disability, somehow it is easy to bypass, turning efforts another way, closing down potential routes for access actions, or creating mazelike, ineffective routes to avoid looking too hard at what disability or access can offer to the academy.
Making Space for the Misfit

The bypass is also connected to the misfit. While Garland-Thomson and Miller emphasize the value in misfitting, the bypass mostly avoids or moves quickly past disability when it presents as too much of a squeaky wheel in the university machine. When disability does not fit smoothly into academic norms, expectations, practices, spaces, or budgets, rather than engaging, centering, or learning from disability and disabled people—embracing the misfit—many conversations and classrooms at universities bypass disability, making it invisible or impossible, or invoking it only as a metaphor or when convenient to highlight in diversity initiatives. If, as Jay Dolmage has consistently argued, universities create “steep steps” that are likely to cause students to stumble, fall, or give up as they push onward and upward in higher education, then this troubling trend of the disability bypass manifests even more intensely when working with graduate students (“Mapping Composition”; Academic Ableism). To put it another way, if disabled students are assumed nonexistent in undergraduate spaces, then they surely cannot enter the hallowed realm of graduate school in English.

Centering Disability and Access

To counter this ongoing bypass, disability studies–oriented scholars in English have long recognized and advocated for undergraduate curricula that center disability and access (Dunn; Wood; Brueggemann; Lewiecki-Wilson and Brueggeman; Dolmage, “Mapping Composition”; Womack; Kerschbaum, “Anecdotal Relations”; Cedillo; Simpkins; Butler; Garrett; Price, Mad at School; Browning; Wood, Dolmage, Price, Lewiecki-Wilson; Brewer, Selfe, Yergeau; Clegg; Wheeler; Nielsen; Hitt; Meloncon; Oswal; Selznick). My study builds on this lineage, bringing discussions about pedagogical access, and alongside it a meaningful acknowledgment of disability, firmly into discussions of graduate education in English. While access and disability in graduate education are seldom a topic in academic articles or monographs, voices of graduate students nonetheless rise, finding ways to draw attention to the fact that disability is very much present and informing their identities and their work. Powerful ways graduate students forward discussions about disability and their academic lives include social media and popular publications. In Dolmage’s recent book, Academic Ableism: Disability in Higher Education, he points out that the hashtag #academicableism was developed by a graduate student to highlight ableism in graduate school and is sustained by graduate students across the globe. Dolmage notes that this hashtag has a “terrifically long life” and “created a network and community of students and faculty, exposing much of the hypocrisy around, discrimination toward, and debasement of disability within higher education” (90). Alyssa Hillary’s recent Inside Higher Ed series “Disabled in Grad School” similarly explores hypocrisy around disability and offers structural critique
through both personal experiences and disability history and policies. Hillary asserts that the goal of the series is to offer a much-needed “focus on graduate school: problems we encounter, how we deal with them, and what you can do that will make things easier for fellow graduate students with disabilities.” Just as the reach of #academicableism is important on social media, Hillary’s work starts an important conversation in a venue where it can gain wide-ranging readership and build community among graduate students.

Graduate students should not be on the periphery when considering the intersections of disability and higher education; in fact, they are often the innovative leaders in this conversation. Yet there remains sparse published scholarship bridging disability and graduate school, in English or other fields. Two recent notable exceptions come in the form of collaboratively authored and conversational pieces, essays that serve as examples of the strength and creativity of misfitting, both relying on and reinventing the format and authorship expectations of “the scholarly essay.” Griffin Keedy and Amy Vidali, an advisee and advisor respectively, discuss their own disabled identities and how they affect graduate advising and the writing process. Their article takes an unexpected form, working from recordings of their weekly thesis meetings capturing “our typical routine, complete with big decisions, mis-starts, and disruptive blenders” (21). The second piece bringing attention to the overlap of graduate education and disability studies is the coauthored “Bodyminds Like Ours: An Autoethnographic Analysis of Graduate School, Disability, and the Politics of Disclosure.” A theme that emerges across individual commentary from each author is that graduate student status seems to preclude disability; the message received by most disabled graduate students, whether it comes from professors, from scholarship they read in their field, or even from offices of disability and access on their campuses, is that graduate student status and disability status cannot simultaneously exist (Carter et al. 101). While Keedy and Vidali openly discuss the ways their collaboration as advisor-advisee and coauthors challenge the norms of many writing relationships, they also illustrate the important innovative adaptations that emerge from disability and misfit, such as interdependence and crip humor. On the other hand, the authors of “Bodyminds like Ours” show how hard it can be to exist and be recognized as disabled graduate students.

While there has not been much research that addresses disability and access in graduate school, there is some recent work that ruminates on graduate education in English in general, focusing on how the field might make graduate education in English sustainable and ethical in the face of increasingly unjust labor conditions in universities. Leonard Cassuto has been at the forefront of this conversation, writing the monthly column “The Graduate Adviser” in The Chronicle of Higher Education, a book called The Graduate School Mess: What Caused
Making Space for the Misfit, and editing a special section in the journal Pedagogy, which features commentary on graduate studies in English, covering topics as wide ranging as the dissertation, the role of public scholarship, the graduate seminar, queer theory, the job market, and multimodality. A unifying thread through these essays is a focus on diversifying professionalization of graduate students in English, and though this conversation is different from my research questions, there are overlaps, as much of this work suggests faculty members interrogate norms and assumptions about who graduate students are, what they need, what they might do next, and how they learn. Cassuto in his introduction notes that research about graduate student teaching and learning is “remarkably sparse,” in part because everyone makes so many assumptions about it. He states,

Most academics, from graduate students to senior faculty and administrators, harbor assumptions about what graduate school is supposed to do and what graduate students are supposed to do within it. Few of us have examined those assumptions closely, partly because they’re usually interwoven with how we chose graduate study and then were socialized into the profession ourselves. (“Guest Editor’s Introduction” 13)

Responding to this call, this article provides an invitation for continued examinations of assumptions. The survey data, and the thematic wonderings that rise to the surface, provide commonplaces for such work.

**Thematic Wonderings: Survey Responses**

*Feeling the Misfit: Wondering about Class Discussions and Essays*

The first questions on the survey ask participants to identify, via multiple-choice-questions, the most common in-class approach and the most common assignment. Albeit not statistically significant, these responses will likely seem familiar to readers of *College English* from their own experiences as graduate students and mentors. Further, the numbers initiated my wonder about what stood out as dominant pedagogies in English graduate classes. Discussions were identified as the most common in-class activity (86 percent of responses) and academic essays were identified as the most common assignment, usually due at the end of the semester as a “final paper” (80 percent of responses). In the comments that followed up on these numbers, documenting how students reacted to assignments and in-class activities, two interconnected themes emerge. First, graduate students are keenly aware and sometimes critical of class discussion as the dominant in-class pedagogy and essays as the dominant assignment genre. Second, there is a perceived need or demand for graduate students to adapt to these dominant approaches.
My wondering deepens as I consider the graduate students’ reactions. Are graduate courses defined by discussions and essays? If so, why? Do these most common approaches work well for all (or most) students and in all (or most) scenarios? More than that, if students are, at times, literate misfits—that is, if their bodies and minds do not always fit into these most common practices—what do they do? How do they fit into graduate school if their literacy practices are outside of the “read it, discuss it, write an essay about it” paradigm? Peter Khost, Debra Rudder Lohe, and Chuck Sweetman wonder in a similar direction in their essay “Rethinking and Unthinking the Graduate Seminar.” The authors, all in English departments, state,

The seminar is the mainstay of graduate education. Its origins go back centuries (see Clark 2006). In it, expert faculty orchestrate conversations about texts, figures, periods, and methods . . . The culminating act, the seminar paper, asks students to demonstrate their learning by writing an argument that imitates the kinds of scholarship they have read. (20)

Khost, Lohe, and Sweetman recommend a rethinking of the seminar that would offer options beyond lecture, discussion, and scholarly essays. Comments about the dominance of essays and discussion from the graduate students who took this survey offer additional evidence that a wider variety of approaches to graduate education in English might improve outcomes for students.

Participants taking the survey were especially focused on class discussion, leading me to wonder whether class discussions are always the fit for graduate students that professors might assume. The overall tone of students’ comments about class discussion is both accepting of discussion as the norm while simultaneously concerned about their own ability to align with it, acknowledging the dominance of discussion while sometimes expressing fatigue or frustration with it. For instance, one student writes, “Almost all the teaching methods I’ve encountered are just lectures and/or whole class discussion.” Another student similarly notices a lack of variety in pedagogy but then is more specific about why such an approach is unfulfilling and even “intimidating”: “Weekly meetings are almost always whole class discussions about the assigned reading. Due to multiple reasons, discussions are often dominated by 2-3 people, which can be repetitive and even a bit intimidating for those not ‘in the loop.’” This student expresses a concern that is long supported by a variety of evidence. Sometimes classes may seem participatory and equitable in terms of voices heard, but participation easily becomes controlled by a few vocal students, often to the exclusion of women and students of color (Hall and Sandler; Julé; Critel; Dubisar and Palmeri).

Beyond noting discussion as the norm, along with the ways it might be marginalizing or intimidating, another concern within this theme is that class
discussion, though at times engaging, does not always connect to stated objectives for the course or the class period. While the presumed goal is for the discussion to elucidate some of the out-of-class-reading, this elucidation does not happen automatically nor without guidance. As one student concisely puts it: “Sometimes I do not understand the reading and hope classroom discussion will help, but it does not.” Another student writes, “When assigned reading and discussions don’t match up, I have a hard time because I have difficulty participating in discussions I don’t feel fully prepared for.” This student expresses a frustrating position of feeling well-prepared for class, but then class discussion is disconnected from that work, making participation difficult and nullifying their effort. Another student follows a similar line of concern but takes it to the level of course design: “I am generally unsure of the course objectives, not only as a whole, but also week-to-week. Class discussions are often unstructured and random, and I’m never entirely sure how the discussions fit into the larger themes of the course/material, as well as my future goals as a teacher.” On one hand, in these comments, graduate students note that whole-class discussion is the most common way to teach in a grad course: “read the book or articles, and now we talk about it” is the formula, one they have successfully worked with thus far. At the same time, they question whether this approach to learning always works for them or whether it is the most fitting for every course or class session.

The tension in the responses about discussion—students accept it, often do well at it, yet also critique it and question how much they are learning—makes me wonder if graduate students are acquiescing to the process but reacting to a subtext that surrounds graduate courses in English: discuss or you are not fit to be here. Such a binary message puts a Darwinian twist on misfitting, in which a misfit with discussion renders students unfit, unable to “survive” graduate school, unable to qualify among “the fittest” and most-deserving or high-achieving. How, then, might over-reliance on class discussion align with an ableist ideology? Perhaps it is so ingrained and so enjoyable for those of us who teach highly engaged graduate seminars that it is easy to overlook that it might not work for everyone nor in all contexts. With disability and access and mind, the theme of wondering about class discussion is salient, especially if we keep in mind that discussions, though they may feel low-stakes and fun to a professor and some students, are also a primary example of what Margaret Price calls “kairotic space,” “less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged” (Mad at School 60). Price details how the impromptu nature, strong social elements, and high-stakes “feel” of kairotic spaces render them difficult to navigate and unwelcoming for disabled people, and many others, in fact (Mad at School 88–102). Feminist scholars have similarly advocated other ways of knowing and making meaning outside of speech, noting that silence
can be powerful, rhetorical, and necessary, even when working against best-laid plans and expectations in the classroom (Ratcliffe; Glenn; Brueggemann, *Lend Me Your Ear*; Waite). In many ways, the very notion of participation in class, especially when that participation is defined as oral contributions to face-to-face discussion, is ableist in its roots (Reda; Price; Critel). Yet graduate students are often, implicitly or explicitly, asked to perform in loosely structured class discussions, and while they may perform quite masterfully, the participants in this study call into question whether fast-paced class discussion is necessarily indicative of superior learning.

Beyond the pressures that kairotic space may present, I suggest that what professors perceive as success in classroom discussion can also be an example of graduate students viewing, and then performing, the most prized and rewarded literacy practices of English departments, a prime example of literate misfitting for some of them. To be “right” or “normal” as a graduate student in English means to seamlessly integrate your (oral) voice into classroom discussion and to spontaneously speak. But what if oral participation is a literate misfit? In the context of the comments offered in this study, the conflict creating the misfit is the multifarious ways graduate students make meaning versus the norms of classroom discussion, a dominant in-class activity. So graduate students recognize insightful, extemporaneous, and seemingly unguided class discussion as a desired modality of graduate school, and they adapt accordingly, even when it is a misfit. While Miller advocates for literate misfitting as valuable and generative, leading to “productive practices” all people could learn from for a fuller understanding of the “body itself as a technology of literacy,” she also notes that literate misfitting operates within social and material structures that constrain and limit its potential (36). Miller explains,

> As they work through literate misfits, individuals develop and share insights about the material and mental ‘processes’ of writing . . . However, in spite of these insights and individuals’ effectiveness, many people with aphasia compare themselves to various ideals of literacy. That is, they often see themselves as irrevocably unable to read or write in the right way. (49)

This self-recrimination, Miller explains, resonates with graduate students who also express a struggle with misfits and “ideals of literacy.” Even when discussion does not feel like a fit for learning, graduate students will participate and hope for the best, and often professors are never the wiser to the misfit, missing both the conflict and the potential for innovation on the part of student and professor.

Class discussion may work for some graduate students some of the time. There are good reasons that discussion is a common practice in English, and it is undeniably a meaningful piece of social and collaborative knowledge-building.
At the same time, professors must consider other possibilities that may meet the same goals. There are other “productive practices” that could be welcomed into the space of the graduate classroom, even if they at first feel awkward, ill-fitting, or “abnormal” to students and professors alike. If we acknowledged and centered the potential misfitting of graduate students, could it, as Miller puts it, “offer vital insights into the social and material aspects of literacy”? (37) How might misfitting carve unexpected paths of making meaning, perhaps through discussion as part of this process, but also other modes, mediums, and engagements with content? I wonder how the graduate classroom could extend possibilities, spaces, and practices of literacy, allowing for the generative possibilities of misfitting, especially as it relates to class discussion and participation more broadly? With generative misfits in mind, some activities I have recently experimented with to expand practices in my own courses include in-class writing to lead into discussion; small group activities to parse dense texts; playful methods that use surprising materials like crayons or Play-Doh; reimagining an assigned reading as a new genre, like a script or children’s book; and starting class with a show-and-tell of moments or items students have stumbled across that connect with the course. These are a few small examples of how I try to make space for the misfit, to embrace the varied ways of being, knowing, and doing that graduate students bring to my classroom.

Class discussion emerged as the most heavily critiqued practice in the survey responses, with students simultaneously accepting discussion as the way to do graduate school in English while also expressing frustration with its dominance and noting moments of misfit with oral participation. But there was also a strong focus on essays as the dominant assignment genre, with 80 percent of the students ranking the essay as the most common assignment. Khost, Lohe, and Sweetman note that graduate seminars are often full of content, but there is little discussion about how people learn that content, and this is perhaps especially true of writing. Even though writing in graduate school is supposed to be “more,” and certainly much of it is assigned, there is often little explicit instruction about what that means or support in how to get there. Khost, Lohr, and Sweetman state, “[T]he more one reads, and writes, the more one ‘learns’ to read and write for the profession, or so the logic goes” (20). But those authors ultimately find this logic does not hold up, and they suggest that writing instruction (or lack thereof)—the obsession with “the essay,” in particular—is one of the central aspects of graduate education in English that must be revised.

The graduate students’ comments about essays were more observational rather than calling for an intensive overhaul. For example: “Most of the classes asked for essays and research papers,” “Assignments are almost always weekly
writings with a larger writing project at the end,” and “I think the standard, traditional essay assignment is still the most common assignment.” Compared to the critique of classroom discussion, these comments are neutral in tone. Essays are “standard” and “traditional.” At the same time, some of the same concerns I raised about discussion as the norm could be raised about essays, too, especially because words like standard and traditional carry their own baggage about what “good” English is. How do these words invoke decades of normative assumptions and, of course, ongoing debates about these very assumptions that happen in many subdisciplines in English? How does the emphasis on “standard” essays affect students who struggle with writing, especially when it is high-stakes? If writing is the primary way students are encouraged to engage with course material in a sustained way outside the classroom, what happens when graduate students feel a misfit with writing but receive little or no support? How do students adapt? How might English as a discipline be more welcoming of such adaptations and innovations? Moreover, how might professors envision other assignments that could meet the same objectives?

The survey responses about essays also orient wonder in another direction, focusing on how students would react to assignments that supplemented or moved away from essays. When comments move beyond observational, they indicate a deeply enculturated essay allegiance. As one respondent writes, “English is given to essay assignments simply because of the material we study; few other assignments demonstrate the skills we need to show.” This student implies a hierarchy in ways of consuming and producing knowledge. “Essay assignments,” for this student, are the superior way, maybe even the only way, to “demonstrate the skills we need to know.” Of course, many years of research in digital composition and digital humanities indicate that this is not the case; multimodal avenues for consumption and production are part of English as a twenty-first-century discipline. I wonder how this student’s comment may shed light on ideologies among graduate students in English. Is the essay understood by graduate students as the only, or at least the most important, mode for the expression of knowledge? Have other possibilities been ignored or overlooked as a result of years of essay writing and print-based literacy? This may be connected to literate misfitting yet again. Miller states, “social pressures from what individuals understand as ‘real’ reading and writing push back on and sometimes limit individuals’ new strategies and, in turn, their literate potential” (36). Because of the dominance of the essay in English, and especially its scholarly currency, indeed a currency I am relying on and reinforcing as I write this article, it makes sense that graduate students would understand the essay as the most “real” form of writing they could do.
While essays alone drew more observation than ire on the survey, one comment sums up the disenchantment with the discussion and essay as the one-two punch of graduate courses in English: “Essays and usually uninspired discussions are the norm in every English department everywhere.” This comment resonates with me for a few reasons. First, the student acknowledges English curriculum as driven by norms and traditions of what has come before and what happens elsewhere; for most professors of English, discussions and essays were at the center of their educational experience, so this is perpetuated and “passed down.” Second, the adjective *uninspired* is an important choice, as it works against assumptions that discussions are almost always exciting, engaging, and useful for graduate students. In particular, *uninspired* challenges what I think of as the “Hollywood Teaching Moment”: a classroom full of lively students discussing important topics and participating equally, likely with little interjection or guidance from their teacher beyond an ebullient shout of joy or dramatic slow clap, maybe, if students are feeling bold, standing on a desk, inspired by an iconic teacher like John Keating in *Dead Poet’s Society*. These Hollywood Teaching Moments represent a desirable (if unattainable) ideal, a world in which students engage simply because this is what people in English classes do; students are constantly inspired and thus participatory. In other words, an inspired discussant embodies a “good English major.” Finally, the use of the word *every* in this comment is important, as it comes up twice: “every class” and “everywhere.” This element of the comment indicates that this student, perhaps from experience at other institutions or gleaned from conversations with peers, understands that these are local conditions, but they go beyond one course or one place. Discussions and essays are deeply ingrained, long-standing pedagogies for English courses, which graduate students readily observe, critique, misfit, and sometimes (perhaps quietly) resist.

*The Reverse Accommodation: Wondering about the Onus of Access*

While graduate students reflectively critique discussions and essays, a related trend that invoked wonder for me was the ways in which graduate students, in these reflections, would downplay or dismiss their own needs as learners. When reading their critiques, my binary thinking made me assume that the next logical step in their commentary would be to suggest professors “fix” these issues; participants would demand change and make pointed suggestions about diversifying pedagogy in graduate courses. But an eye toward a “fix” was not the case in these responses. Instead, graduate students continually emphasized that, though their needs are often not met in their courses, it is “not that big of a deal.” Comments emerged in response to multiple questions that highlight the graduate students’ adaptability. These students, likely through years of relative
success in the classroom, view any issues with learning material through the usual class discussion and essay writing as their job to figure out and work through. Discussions and essays are simply what graduate school is supposed to be about, and they signed on for this, right?

Another layer at work in these responses is that graduate students are unwilling to draw too much attention to literate misfitting. Calling for a “fix” or imagining what else could happen in graduate courses in English is admitting that they do not fit in with “business as usual,” and there is, as I recall from my own experience and still sometimes feel as a professor who struggles to keep up with discussions in classes or at professional conferences or meetings, shame in claiming that misfit. The well-established norms of graduate school in English are so woven into their perceptions of themselves and their schooling processes that they may struggle to find welcoming space, in their classes or in themselves, to engage less “normal” literacy practices. Literate misfitting, rife with transformative potential for people who feel the discomfort of that misfit, as well as others around them like peers and professors, is constrained by the context of graduate coursework. In Miller’s theory of literate misfitting, she is especially focused on the ways in which technologies of literacy, be it a pen that presumes a particular grasp or keyboard that presumes hands that type with ease, create scenarios of literate misfitting for disabled people. That is, for the misfit, it is the environment of literacy that can be the most disabling, and that environment is partially material. At the same time, as Miller’s study reveals, when disabled people experience misfits, they adapt. They often use literacy materials as prostheses of sorts to perform literate tasks, using features like speech-to-text to read books or increasing the size of text they read or write with on laptops. Miller identifies great creativity and new directions for literacy in such strategies, and I agree; they provide a fuller understanding of the wide array of literacy practices that exist and when they can be most beneficial.

At the same time, while Miller highlights literacy as materially shaped, in both its constraints and innovations, she also discovers the influence of social contexts of literacy when it comes to how people view their own moments of misfitting. Disabled people are shaped by what they understand as “normal literacy,” and they may restrict or harshly judge their own practices if they do not live up to these standards. In the survey data, these moments of restriction and self-judgment, along with subsequent acceptance or adaptation, are often articulated as part of the graduate experience, too, and these are moments that provoke wonder in the pursuit of liberatory access. First, students’ emphases on the dominance of discussions and essays rise again in these comments, though the comments now point to a justification of their ability to learn and succeed, or sometimes briefly lament when the respondent tries to force a misfit to be
a fit. One student writes, “I have a more autodidact learning style, so as long as the texts provided for the class are relevant to discussions, I usually feel like I’ve been able to learn something regardless of how well or poorly discussions/lectures are done in class.” Another student asserts, “There’s a perception that when you’re in grad school, you just read and write papers. It’s up to the student to make sure they figure out how to succeed, and most of us just muddle through and figure it out on our own.” In these comments, though a sense of misfit arises, I wonder about how graduate students respond to or express that misfit? In line with Miller’s discussion of self-judgment and adaptation, a theme among respondents was a firm assertion that they can handle anything.

Other comments offer a similar sense of resilience, and students also use disability-related language to make their points, emphasizing their own ability, adaptation, and flexibility, despite a lack of accommodations within the course. One student writes, “I consider myself a pretty flexible and/or adaptable learner, meaning I think I can generally adjust to whatever the class format is, but I do wish sometimes that there was more variety, integration of technology, etc.” Another student explains, “I am very able at teaching myself and accommodating my needs as a student, so even though my courses don’t seem to make many accommodations or offer a diverse range of assignments or activities, they still meet my own needs.” These two comments, very gently, express that the students sometimes want more, or want something different, from their experiences in graduate courses. After all, many students taking this particular survey are currently teaching or aspiring in that direction, so they have some expertise or experience with course design, activities, and assignments. But rather than assert their own pedagogical knowledge or experience, they offer a variation of: “I’m an adaptable learner, so I can handle it.” Generally, these remarks align with the common refrain echoed by the first survey comment I shared in my introduction: graduate students can “take it or leave it” when it comes to how they are taught. They must accept instruction as offered, and if that approach does not work well, then graduate students might need to consider another option. Perhaps graduate work in English is not meant for them, and this leads to a sense of misfit as mistake. Other work on graduate education in English identifies in this “I can handle it” acceptance a misplaced assumption that graduate students are good learners and should thus “teach themselves” or learn by “osmosis” (Cassuto; Khost et al). Cassuto challenges this assumption that all graduate students can or want to learn independently:

[M]ost graduate students are treated like weeds most of the time. We let them take root in the educational backyard and live on whatever rain may fall . . . Graduate school should not disadvantage those who may not learn as smoothly, or as easily, at certain stages of their studies. (Cassuto, “Guest Editor’s Introduction” 16)
Cassuto’s insight implicitly nods toward ableism as a force shaping graduate education, isolating and excluding less “smooth” or “easy” students in the process.

The “I can handle it” discourse among graduate students is what I have termed the reverse accommodation, which is located in moments when students assume that they must adapt to the professor, when the mechanism of accommodations for disability indicates that circumstances outside the student should change, be it through adaptive course materials, additional time on assignments, or assistance with note-taking, to name a few. But with a reverse accommodation, nothing outside of the student changes; the onus is on them to figure it out and make it work. Students often flex and adapt without mentioning a struggle or a misfit, and their access to the content is assumed to happen smoothly. There is little to no flexibility or change in the class itself since students have not directly disclosed an issue or concern. In other words, no news is good news, and graduate courses move along as they have always been taught. This is the quiet danger of the reverse accommodation: everything seems fine, even when it is not.

To further explore the dangers with reverse accommodation, I also need to wonder about accommodations overall and their role in higher education in particular. What is generally the goal of accommodations? Are accommodations meant to provide access? Are accommodations and access interchangeable terms, as they are often used? Accommodations are widely known and accepted in classrooms, usually because professors receive documentation from their campus disability services office that explains accommodations students need in their course. Accommodations, in this way, sometimes seem on the periphery of the work professors do; they are decided elsewhere and defined by someone else. They are then delivered to professors, and maybe discussed, but often not, and are rarely revisited unless a problem arises. The accommodations then merely exist, ever-present and legally mandated, but they can be put aside and then added on when (or if) needed, usually when taking a test or quiz. This is the disability bypass concretized in practice; disability is present and known, but it need not be meaningfully centered or integrated into individual classes and certainly not into the institution as a whole. Dolmage, guided by this idea of an accommodation as a prescribed add-in from an outside source or expert, describes accommodations as a “retrofit,” or a well-intended but often unsuccessful effort to make a class fit a student only after the class has been designed to work in a specific way. Dolmage emphasizes that accommodations, as necessary as they may be, are not access: “Too many retrofits do not actually increase access. Further, we must work to decouple the presence of accommodations from the notion of access. Accommodations are accommodations: they cannot promise anything like actual, real access” (Academic Ableism 79). Oftentimes, accommodations offer a “bare minimum,” and many instructors of English especially might see
accommodations and interpret them as not relevant to their class. For instance, extended time on tests and quizzes is a common accommodation, and it is hard to see how this might be part of a class that is writing intensive and does not include exams. However, instead of stopping at a mandated minimum, the “accommodations talk” might instead be an invitation for further conversation and reflection about what an instructor can do to support a student in a specific class, rather than assuming the accommodation “does not apply” (75).

I will use myself as an example here. As an English professor, teaching writing and rhetoric courses to undergraduate and graduate students, I frequently have an initial accommodations talk with students when they share with me their documentation from our disability services office. This talk usually involves the student looking at the syllabus, realizing that the class mainly involves discussions, small-group activities, and writing, and then the student, often with relief, insists the accommodations will not apply to my class in the same way they might in a large lecture course or a course heavy on exams or quizzes. Unfortunately, even as someone who puts access at the forefront of my teaching, I usually let the conversation stop there rather than using this as a jumping off point for discussions of access more widely or strategizing other ways to make the class accessible for the student. It is also worth noting that though I teach graduate students every semester who disclose disabilities to me, especially because I teach graduate courses with disability studies as part of the content, these students have never shared an “official” accommodations document with me, and from conversations with them, it is rare that they are registered with our campus disability services office. They are, to use the language of the survey responses, muddling through and adapting.

With these insights about accommodation in mind, it becomes clear why a reverse accommodation, though professors do not even realize they are asking for it, is troubling. The “accommodations talk” that students must have with professors each semester is frequently noted as a discussion that requires a great deal of emotional labor from students, resulting in what Annika Konrad describes as “access fatigue.” One of the major issues with accommodations (vs. access) is that accommodations are adaptive measures that usually put the onus on the student to disclose disability and often relieve the professor (or the institution) from making a wider change. Neil Simpkins discusses a related concept, culled from his interview-based research with disabled student writers, that he calls “the accommodation transfer,” a process that involves learning rhetorical skills to negotiate accommodations for academic writing across various courses and professors. As Simpkins explains, “[D]isabled students frequently have to adapt to the perspectives of each individual instructor’s perception—or lack thereof—of disability.” Though the participants in Simpkins’s study show impressive rhetori-
cal adaptability and demonstrate the value of misfitting writing processes, what cannot be ignored is all the extra work they undertake to educate their professors and then understand and negotiate writing demands. The reverse accommodation, then, becomes part of this labor-intensive process for graduate students, as they try to recreate themselves and perform in acceptable ways for each class they take. Graduate students often cannot disclose or claim disability meaningfully, and they certainly do not frequently see it centered in course content nor in the pedagogies of their classes. So while the labor and fatigue might sometimes come from disclosing disability itself and navigating access discussions, for graduate students, this fatigue may intensify around an inability to be seen, to be heard, to fit. Or, to put it another way, there is fatigue when one cannot claim or make a productive misfit. Instead, to return to the survey comments again, graduate students articulate a need, and, of course, they emphasize, an ability, to “adjust,” “adapt,” be “very able,” “accommodate” themselves, “learn something regardless,” or “muddle through . . . and figure it out.” These words belie the invisible but substantial labor of the reverse accommodation for graduate students. The painful irony, then, is that the invisible labor behind the reverse accommodation makes disability and difference itself increasingly invisible as well. Graduate students work so hard to accommodate whatever is taking place in their courses that everyone seems to be doing well enough, leading to the conclusion that graduate courses in English are accessible for all.

The reverse accommodation, the ways it can erase disability, and its effect on access in graduate courses make wonder, in a self-reflexive way, about conversations around proverbial departmental water coolers, ones I know I have participated in through the years: “This is grad school,” we insist, “they should have that figured out by now.” While I might agree that rhetorical performances of being a “good student” can be useful at times, I also urge faculty—and remind myself—to trouble ableist assumptions about who is in graduate school and how graduate education in English is supposed to work. Norms of “rigorous” education, especially at the highest level, run deep. However, as Anne-Marie Womack points out in her discussion of universally designing syllabuses, access and rigor are not opposing values but instead complementary. Womack states, “Inclusion and rigor are only incompatible opposites when rigor is defined as exclusion and inflexibility. When rigor is defined as difficulty, they are complementary values. The way to teach difficult material well is always to make it more accessible” (497). Only through accessible instruction can complex content be communicated, integrated, and understood. This reminder from Womack applies to graduate education, a site in which complexity and difficulty is assumed and a deep level of engagement with the content is the goal. But while difficulty, complexity, and engagement are assumptions, what about access? I
wonder how (if?) professors consider ways to make course content and courses themselves more accessible for graduate students? How can shifting norms toward access shape activities and assignments, as well as course policies and procedures, and one-on-one interactions and communications?

While most of my wonder thus far focuses on what graduate programs can do to center disability and access, working closely with students who might grapple with reverse accommodation or literate misfitting, larger questions linger beneath the surface of this survey data, questions that circle around the very purpose and commitments of graduate programs in the field. Does English really want to be accessible or inclusive in meaningful ways when it comes to graduate education? Is liberatory access, and the changes in pedagogy necessary to work toward it, be it in one-on-one interactions or classrooms, really desirable at the level of graduate education? Or is graduate school in English, by nature of steeper steps students must climb even to begin graduate work, in the business of working with a particular kind of student with a particular kind of body-mind, adept with lots of dense content, fast-paced discussions, and linear, well-paced research and argument? To bring it back to the reverse accommodation, characterized by constant, if often unspoken and unrealized, pressure on students to adapt and learn in all circumstances, is this simply what advanced study in English entails, so take it or leave it?

At this point, some readers might think, “Yes, this is simply what advanced study in English entails.” Some programs might need to accept “take it or leave it” as an ongoing reality. At the same time, this article aims to find even small cracks and fissures into which wonder can seep, wonder about mainstays like discussions and essays. Perhaps such wonder might start a conversation about access where disability was once bypassed or welcome a graduate student to discuss the pressures of reverse accommodation or misfit or encourage someone to try a new assignment or activity in their course, even if it seems somehow not “rigorous.” Titchkosky’s politics of wonder as methodology, after all, is by nature slow, thoughtful, and even messy, emphasizing that providing quick solutions to disability “problems” may close down the very conversations that need to happen around access. I have raised many questions in this article, but I am wary to rush toward too many solutions. Those should instead be ongoing, happening in collaboration with graduate students, and based in the local context. Nonetheless, as a way to conclude, I want to wonder about one final overriding question that might gesture toward tentative answers: why and how do disability and access matter as part of graduate education in English?
One short answer to this question is that they matter because disability and access as topics and processes shape graduate students as teachers themselves. The concluding part of this survey asked questions of people who were not only graduate students, but also teachers; about half the survey respondents fell into this group. Some of the students who took the survey were teaching college writing as TAs, others adjuncting locally, and others teaching writing and literature at the secondary level. Most of these respondents indicated that they had, at some point, learned at least a bit about the field of disability studies or about disability and access more generally in their own coursework. When asked to comment on how that content affected their pedagogy, powerful themes emerged as they wrote about how they define and apply concepts, theories, and practices. The most frequent kinds of responses about how disability- and access-oriented content affected their teaching include: responses focused on awareness, responses focused on difference or diversity, and responses focused on self-reflection and revision. All of these responses, though at different depths and in different ways, conceptualize disability and access as an open-ended process, focusing on changing how teaching works, and continually so, rather than forcing students to change.

Several comments put awareness at the center. One generally focused on the existence of disability: “Disability status is very important but does not get enough attention.” All of the other comments turned to teaching and working with students: “Disability studies made me more aware of how my teaching should accommodate students with a diversity of needs”; “Disability studies affected my pedagogy by making me more aware when crafting lesson plans”; “Being aware from the very beginning of building a syllabus is key”; “I would say it has made me generally more aware of different learning styles, different modes of communication, different ways to make lessons more broadly accessible.”

While awareness does not necessarily lead to change, most of these responses do link awareness to specific pedagogical action. There is acknowledgment that disability is often overlooked, even in progressive discussions surrounding difference and diversity; there is a connection to specific practices, like lesson planning and syllabus or course design; and there is an emphasis on the need to bring disability to the forefront of pedagogical preparation— “the very beginning of building a syllabus.” Perhaps most importantly, in these responses, the onus for change shifts at least partially to the teacher, and sometimes onto the educational system. Phrases like “my teaching should accommodate,” “make lessons more broadly accessible,” and “disability status . . . does not get enough attention” stand out as productive ways to shift pedagogy, positioning disability as generative rather than deficit, at the center and often intersected with other identities, rather than isolated and bypassed.
Notably, the awareness and pedagogical shifts represented in the responses about their own teaching stand in contrast to the reverse accommodation graduate students describe in their coursework, where they must adapt to the professor and fall into the dangerous access binary of “take it or leave it” in relation to their pursuit of graduate studies. When commenting on their own experiences as learners, the respondents emphasized how they must adapt, accommodate, and be flexible. But the comments about teaching resist reverse accommodation as the graduate students who are also teachers focus on designing courses as accessible from the beginning rather than retrofitting accommodations. While these comments, of course, do not show a full picture of their teaching, they do allow for optimistic wondering: how does integrating content about disability and access, as well as modeling and perhaps discussing varied pedagogical approaches, affect the teaching graduate students undertake? How might knowledge and practices that honor disability and strive for access circulate and network throughout varied levels of teaching English? How can a practice as ingrained and invisible as reverse accommodation be made visible, and then questioned and resisted, as English as a field comes to discuss and enact access in more liberatory ways? In what ways does the struggle of the misfit perhaps become valuable and innovative to graduate students’ own pedagogical pursuits?

The awareness and pedagogical innovation reflected in some of these responses, while heartening on its own, further connects to responses that network disability and access to broader conversations around difference and diversity. A sampling of these responses includes: “Disability Studies has caused me to examine myself to find out what other forms of diversity and difference I might be ignoring or undervaluing” and

Those of us who earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees in humanities and social science fields often focus on issues of diversity and difference, and we hold these values in high regard. However, we tend to define these concepts too narrowly. While issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are crucially important and should never be devalued, we must also remember that a full appreciation of diversity and difference means recognizing many other groups and many other identities, too.

These responses, along with some that fall more squarely into the theme of awareness, are important because they indicate the ways in which disability does not stand alone; disability is complexly intersected in discourses and embodied experiences of difference and, often, marginalization (Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined* and “Coming to Claim Crip”; Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts*; Bell; Moore; Cedillo; Brown; Mingus). While disability can be a meaningful identity to claim for many people, and, as other responses indicate, it is frequently one that is forgotten or presumed nonexistent, especially in higher
education, disability as identity does not solely define a person. More than that, disability is claimed or rejected for many reasons, and it affects people differently across race, class, gender, and sexuality. The ways in which disability overlaps with other identity categories cannot be forgotten, and discussions about disability experiences, even central disability studies concepts like the social construction of disability, can never be assumed to be universal nor removed from individualized lived experiences. Nirmala Erevelles, for instance, studies disability globally and highlights how claiming disability as an empowering identity has different resonance and repercussions when a person is disabled through an act of state-sanctioned violence or when ableism and racism overlap. As Erevelles succinctly puts it, “identities clatter against each other in oppressive spaces” (“Thinking with Disability Studies”). When graduate students taking this survey became more aware of the insight of disability, it simultaneously heightened their awareness about, to quote one response, “other forms of diversity and difference I might be ignoring.” I hope that this indicates a commitment toward an increasingly intersectional approach to disability and access as graduate students move forward in their own work (Crenshaw). After all, ableism is even more pernicious and oppresses with even more intensity when it is layered with racism, observable historically and in the present-day, individually and systemically, and in overt ways and more commonly accepted ways. (Dolmage “Framing Disability”; Cedillo; Ferri and Connor).

Finally, increasing awareness of disability while also being mindful of the “clatter” of identities is difficult and ongoing work, so it makes sense that a final theme in the survey data, less frequent but still important, is critical self-reflection and revision in relation to pedagogy. The responses about difference and diversity already allude to this self-reflection and revision, and I share one other powerful comment: “[Disability studies] pushed me to question myself constantly in terms of goals I want my students to reach, ways I can continually be better, etc.” The theme of critical reflection is intriguing because it again showed an interest in changing how we teach rather than changing the student or perceiving disability as deficit or problem to solve. Instead, an interest emerges in constantly reflecting on one’s teaching and making changes accordingly, recognizing that accessible teaching, much like writing itself, is a flexible process and never a discrete, perfected product. This theme of reflection and revision, then, continues to push beyond the access binary. While graduate students see the importance of reflection in the ways that their own pedagogy can center disability and access, there are applications here, too, for professors who teach and mentor graduate students. More specifically, I wonder if it is through an active and mindful process of reflection and revision that the misfit can find more of a place in graduate courses and pedagogical shifts? In purposefully
spending time questioning ourselves and our goals for students as a field and in our individual teaching lives, can we be more aware of—and then work to push against and do better than—issues like the disability bypass and reverse accommodation? While liberatory access will never be “done,” while we can never check all the access boxes, graduate students are often the ones professors learn the most from working with and listening to. And, if faculty and the field learns and grows from graduate students’ insights, why not reflect, revise, and make space for the misfit?

It is undertaking this study that has finally forced me to reckon with these hard questions and norms myself, after many years of shame surrounding a misfit in my own learning and teaching. This brings me back to where I started, to my own story of graduate school, a time during which I so heavily felt a misfit but saw no way to make that misfit meaningful. In fact, I mostly hid the misfit and enacted my own reverse accommodation. For example, I set a painful minimum of trying to talk in classes at least two times, even when it did not feel helpful (to anyone). I went to any and all meetings requested of me, without ever asking for alternative dates or ways to meet, even when attending such meetings sometimes presented significant mental and material barriers. I share these examples because they are formative to how I now think about the kairotic space that is all of graduate school. Even more, I share them because I see a thematic reverberation with commentary from the graduate students who participated in this study. That is: First, I felt a misfit, which was painful in various ways. Then, rather than finding a way to lean into this misfit, I tried instead to force a fit, engaging in silence and nondisclosure around my own mental disability and access needs. Finally, I participated in a reverse accommodation, performing (and arguably successfully so, though not to my benefit) a flexibility and adaptation that meant the status quo of graduate school need not change.

But who does the status quo of graduate school benefit? How could disability and the productive possibilities of misfitting shift that status quo? Another way to ask this: could there be a better place to be a misfit, or to encourage misfitting, than graduate school? Garland-Thomson, in her original theory of misfitting, emphasizes that while misfitting may involve a discomfiting lack of fit, it is also revolutionary, rebellious, and resistant (603–4). When misfitting is centered and respected, when those of us who are misfits realize we can exist in graduate courses, sometimes loudly and proudly, sometimes silently but thoughtfully, we can “better approach social justice” by bringing disability into existing understandings and approaches, and we may “more fully recognize interdependence rather than independence becoming more aware that all people rely on one another” (603). Disability, flexible understanding of access as a process, and an embrace of misfitting can make graduate studies in English more interesting,
intellectually exciting, and welcoming to marginalized identities, offering paths to “take it” rather than “leave it.”

Works Cited


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