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Following the North Star

Movement Toward Universal Writing Assessment

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Abstract: Pursuing universal writing assessments is a paradox. Universal writing assessments need to be designed for all students, and yet there is no one-size-fits-all method or practice that will work equally for all students. Therefore, universal writing assessment requires flexibility and the acknowledgement of difference. Universal writing assessment means that students won't necessarily be doing the same things and being evaluated in the same ways, which is steeped into foundational notions of fairness, ranking, and comparison in assessment. Educators have also been lulled into a false sense of security, believing that our current approaches are sufficiently inclusive, but that is not the case. We still adopt ableist or accommodationist approaches to writing assessment even when we know universal writing assessment would be better for all involved. The extent to which universal writing assessment is possible will be largely dependent on local contexts and situations. In many ways it's an impossibility, and yet one worth pursuing.

Keywords: universal design, writing assessment, flexibility, reflection, inclusivity

Many valid writing assessments do not require uniformity. In fact, educators may often be inclined to sacrifice professional judgment and flexibility because they feel compelled toward a type of fairness that emphasizes sameness and consistency. Consider the following hypothetical scenarios:

Scenario 1: In a college composition course, students read articles and view media sources on environmentalism. They are then assigned to conduct additional research before producing a text about a specific environmental issue that affects their local community. One student might choose to write an analytical essay using peer reviewed academic articles to support their claim about local, renewable energy sources. Another student might create a digital video that includes information from secondary sources along with interviews and images about a local policy on tree protection. Another student might design a website that includes photos, maps, and visualizations educating people in their community on threats to local freshwater springs. Each student engages in reading, research, and writing in meaningful ways, and yet their final products look quite different. How important is it that they are assessed the same?

Scenario 2: In an upper-level writing course for majors, students are asked to examine how language choices reflect and shape personal, community, and cultural identities. In response to this assignment, one student might write a paper that follows standard academic English language and citation conventions analyzing differences between code-switching and code-meshing in academic publications. Another student might compose a personal literacy narrative that demonstrates translingualism, shifting back and forth between English and Spanish as evidence of how multiple languages inform her identity. Both students engage with the course content, but their projects represent different approaches to grammar and standardized language use. How important is it that they are assessed the same?

Scenario 3: In a graduate seminar on contemporary educational pedagogies, students read current research and best practices in online writing instruction. They are given various options for a culminating project. One student might compose a conference presentation with slides, notes, and a handout that includes pedagogical examples and a bibliography to share with her audience. Another student might develop a research proposal on various teaching modalities with a literature review and methodology. Another student might create an undergraduate course syllabus that integrates multimodal alternatives to traditional written assignments in an asynchronous online course. Each project requires engagement with unit content, relevant scholarship, critical analysis, and their own ideas, yet the various genres serve different professional purposes. How important is it that they are assessed the same?

Equity in academic writing is less about requiring students to complete identical tasks and more about giving them equal opportunities to pursue their interests and demonstrate their knowledge. This same principle can apply to writing assessments. Equitable assessment doesn't mean evaluating all students' work the same but rather evaluating each person with equal care and consideration while accounting for their individual abilities, needs, and goals. In this approach, assessment becomes a responsive process that honors the diversity of student ability, experiences, and perspectives. Rather than enforcing set standards or uniform criteria, educators create equitable, inclusive environments when students are allowed to engage with course materials in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them. This philosophy aligns with universal design for learning (UDL) principles (Dolmage, 2015, 2017; Rose et al., 2006), emphasizing proactive strategies that anticipate and accommodate a wide range of abilities and backgrounds. By shifting

the focus from sameness to responsiveness, instructors can foster a sense of belonging for every learner, ultimately moving toward a more equitable and inclusive model of writing assessment that recognizes and celebrates individual strengths and contributions. However, implementing UDL principles remains challenging, particularly in writing assessment. Even courses built on UDL commitments often fall short of their inclusive goals (Sanger, 2020). This gap is especially challenging in writing assessment because the strong culture of uniformity that underlies it, which directly conflicts with diverse student abilities, needs, and goals. Because of this tension, writing assessment represents an important area where UDL principles have great potential for promoting inclusivity, but only if we can adopt a different mindset and approaches that put these principles into practice. Universal writing assessment as a methodology of evaluation works toward equity for all students without requiring that they be evaluated with the same criteria in the same ways.

Ironically, a primary obstacle to implementing universal design are the accommodations that are firmly entrenched at most institutions as the de facto "solution" to students with disabilities. The very policies and practices designed to promote accessibility might actually be the most difficult obstacle to overcome in enacting universal writing assessments. Educational accommodations are modifications made to standard curricular or pedagogical practices that provide specific students with alternatives to fulfill course learning objectives or outcomes. As such, accommodations are detrimental because they are selective, they require prejudicial diagnosis and documentation, and they don't address a full range of disabilities (Brewer et al., 2014; Dolmage, 2008; Yergeau, 2013). This accommodationist construction of disability is reductive. Even as it excludes many types of disabilities, it shifts the burden of proof to students so that they are required to self-identify, document their disability, and request modifications. This model is reactive with changes only being implemented after a process of institutional validation. Universal design, by contrast, proactively designs courses, assignments, and assessments in ways that anticipate and include a broad spectrum of student abilities and experiences from the outset. By relying on accommodations as the primary means of addressing disability, institutions inadvertently reinforce that disabled students are exceptions to the norm rather than valued members with diverse needs. This mindset undermines students' sense of belonging and should compel educators to move beyond accommodationist practices toward a more universally designed system that emphasizes inclusivity and equity.

While principles of universal design are widely touted by most institutions, they are often implemented inconsistently or not followed at all. It's easier to post these principles on a university website or syllabus than integrate them in classroom practice. The disconnect between the principles and practice shows up in many ways, but its application to writing assessment receives even less attention than many other areas that have been developed more fully, such as syllabus development (Womack, 2017), course delivery (Sanger, 2020), lesson planning (Rao & Meo, 2016), attendance and participation (Price, 2013), peer groups (Corbett, 2015), collaboration (Cecil-Lemkin, 2022), and classroom interactions (Burgstahler, 2015). Universal design is often left out of writing assessments because of deep roots in institutional practices and their history of prioritizing uniformity and fairness. These entrenched norms are resistant to change and make it difficult for instructors to shift from rigid, one-size-fits-all criteria to more flexible and responsive approaches, which in turn inadvertently exclude or disadvantage students whose needs do not fit conventional norms. As a result, meaningful progress toward universally designed writing assessments requires institutional commitment as well as instructors to reimagine established values, question inherited practices, and advocate for systems that prioritize inclusivity and adaptability from the outset.

When universal principles are applied to writing assessment, they often feel superficial: "Universal Design approaches take a cognitive and materialist approach to inclusion, which are likely to draw focus to making changes to the configuration rather than the substance of the assessment task" (Tai et al., 2024, p. 1938). Surface level adjustments might appear to respond various needs, but often the core measures aren't fundamentally changed. In short, there are a variety of systemic and distinct challenges to imagine and implement universal writing assessment practices that work equally well for all students.

In educational settings, it's natural to look for methods, tools, or technologies that work equally well for all students. Writing assessments are no exception as there have been many methods and instruments that imply universality across contexts. Analytic rubrics, holistic scoring, portfolios, directed self-placement (DSP), automated essay scoring, and most recently labor-based grading contracts (LBGC) have each been widely promoted, suggesting they work equally well for all students. Yet, the reality is that while each may be based on solid principles in their implementation, they often work better for some students in some contexts than others. In fact, we often discover that many of these assessment methods inadvertently further marginalize students who are already disenfranchised within traditional educational settings. Thus, pursuing universal writing assessments is a paradox of sorts. Universal writing assessments need to be designed for all students, and yet there is no one-size-fits-all method or practice that will work equally for all students. Therefore, instead of universal writing assessment being a method or instrument, it's a mindset that acknowledges differences and promotes flexibility from the outset. Universal writing assessment means students may not complete identical assignments or be evaluated by the same criteria, but rather that they offer students multiple ways to demonstrate their understanding, skills, and personal growth in relation to the learning objectives. This approach shifts the emphasis from measuring conformity to recognizing meaningful engagement and progress, allowing for different representations of student learning.

While this sounds attractive, it poses serious challenges within educational systems that have long used writing assessment for ranking and comparison. This shift in mindset and practice is especially difficult at a time in which educators are facing increasing surveillance and standardization amid growing distrust. To implement classroom-based universal writing assessments, instructors need the expertise, agency, and time to design inclusive methods that are responsive to students' various abilities, needs, and goals. Universal writing assessments require instructors to navigate significant instructional, structural, pedagogical, and even personal obstacles. I've often felt overwhelmed, unprepared, and even frustrated at my own limitations and failures when it comes to inclusive teaching practices despite my values and best intentions. As a writing instructor and sometimes administrator, I'm often faced with a troubling disconnect between what I believe about inclusivity and my own classroom practices. At a time when I was particularly frustrated by this disparity, I came across a description of universal design as "a way to move" (Dolmage, 2008, p. 24), which resonated with me in that moment and gave me a new way to think. In that short description, Dolmage emphasizes that universal design is a continual and purposeful process rather than a fixed outcome or endpoint. When universal design is seen as a destination or something to be attained, it is daunting and intimidating. Understanding universal design as an ongoing process allows educators to embrace growth and acknowledge failure rather than feeling the pressure of perfection. This mindset changed universal design for me from a rigid set of benchmarks I'd likely never achieve into guiding principles that promote care, flexibility, and

responsiveness. It relieves the anxiety of unmet ideals and motivates us to keep trying, learning, and growing. When I developed a mindset that reframes universal writing assessment as direction rather than destination, as an ongoing process that invites me to stay in motion, to continue learning and adapting new strategies, and to pursue students with their abilities and needs in mind, it resolved many of the tensions and insecurities that I felt around universal design.

Universal writing assessment compels me to move, to improve, and to continue the journey even, or perhaps especially, when I fall short of universally inclusive values. To that end, I've adopted two metaphors for universal design that help me visualize this assessment methodology. The first is a gravitational pull, something that no matter where I am pulls me toward core values such as care, individualism, inclusivity, and flexibility. The other, which I like even more and is thus the title of this article, is the north star, something that guides and directs my movement in a meaningful way toward those same values. One doesn't arrive at the north star. Instead, universal writing assessment is a beacon or guiding light that reminds us to intentionally move toward treating all students as unique individuals. Much like the north star, universal writing assessment offers an orientation that keeps educators focused on the ongoing journey of fostering inclusion and equity without suggesting there is a final destination to reach. Rather than feeling pressured to arrive, instructors can look toward universal writing assessment as a direction for continued growth, change, and reflection, always focused on the varied abilities, needs, and goals of their students. In doing so, universal writing assessment becomes less about standards and benchmarks and more about classroom environments and practices where all learners are valued and supported in their individual journeys.

The False Promises of Accommodations

Accommodationist approaches to disability are deeply embedded in most educational institutions and are presented as being sufficient to address various needs, which disincentivizes coming up with more universal approaches to learning. Accommodations can take many forms (e.g., additional time on tests, alternative attendance expectations, different assignments, or supplementary support structures that other students do not receive), each of which signals that disabled students are abnormal. As Brewer et al. (2014) point out, while accommodation sounds promising on its surface, frequently it offers little more than empty gestures. They argue that we need to see accessibility as more than merely rehabilitation and inclusion as more than increased consumerism (Brewer et al., 2014, p. 151). Accommodations treat students with disabilities as exceptional cases that can/should be documented by a centralized administrative body and that these students should be treated differently than other students in the class. Yergeau (2013) notes that framing accommodations as extra provisions creates an environment of shame for those who seek them:

> I was trained to be shameful of my need for special requests, trained to be ashamed for the ways in which I communicate, process, and create meaning. In short, I was trained to believe that what I needed in order to learn was not reasonable—to accommodate me would distort the geography of an otherwise humming, happy university. ("Accommodating" section, para. 4)

In accommodationist approaches, students with disabilities are required to self-identify and provide documentation, such as medical diagnoses, to receive academic modifications. In the accommodationist model, the burden lies on students to document their disabilities, thus self-

identifying as disabled to the institutions, their instructors, and often to other students in the class to receive accommodations. Diagnoses and disclosure can violate privacy (Gaeta, 2024) and put students and faculty in vulnerable positions that are unfair and could have serious negative repercussions (Kerschbaum, 2019).

Even when students can document disabilities with their institution, the available accommodations are often limited, inadequate, and/or stigmatize students' presence in the academy. Accommodationist models require retrofitting, which has been critiqued by many scholars. Dolmage's (2008) "Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door" defines retrofitting as "add[ing] a component or accessory to something that has already been manufactured or built. This retrofit does not necessarily make the product function, does not necessarily fix a faulty product, but it acts as a sort of correction" (p. 20). A classic illustration on most college campuses are the buildings with wheelchair access ramps that are clearly an afterthought, often around the side or back of the building. In classrooms, it might look like a separate desk or chair, different from the others that are often in tightly packed rooms accessed by narrow hallways and doors with little to no room to maneuver. Even though these accommodations are implemented to comply with accessibility rules, it's clear that the spaces were originally imagined for able-bodied students, communicating that they are central to the mission and vision of our educational spaces and that students with disabilities are an afterthought less welcome in these same spaces.

Retrofitting doesn't just apply to the design of buildings and class spaces. In our classes, it might look like adjusting assignments, activities, and interactions for individual students based on disability, communicating to them that they are an afterthought in the course's curriculum and pedagogy. Consider, for example, a sight-impaired student enrolled in a college composition course that relies on real-time peer review where students exchange, read, and respond to each other's work in class. How might that student access peers' drafts, share their own work, or give and receive feedback in a form that works for them? Accommodations can be made, but as is often the case, these accommodations draw attention to the students with disabilities and may result in them doing something differently from the rest of the class. Such retrofitting in classroom practice reinforces exclusion since accommodations often become an afterthought based on a need that the instructor didn't anticipate during the course design. When modifications are made after the curriculum or pedagogy is set, students with disabilities may feel singled out or marginalized, and the underlying message is that their needs are secondary to the course's original framework. Moving beyond retrofitting requires shifting our mindset from making individual adjustments for some students to a course design where diverse abilities are anticipated and valued.

Accommodations are incongruous with accessibility since they suggest disabilities can be precisely identified, documented, treated, and addressed, ignoring the wide range of disabilities that are less defined (e.g., anxiety, bipolar, ADHD, chronic fatigue, migraines) let alone the complexities and distinctions within neurodiversity. Institutions often require documentation that is more attainable for some disabilities than others and almost always privilege students with medical access and the ability to pay for and navigate complex health systems. Not surprisingly, this is far more likely for students with ample financial resources, insurance, and strong advocates who can secure the type of documentation that institutions require. Some disabilities simply have clearer diagnoses and accommodations than others. To draw on my earlier example, some forms of blindness or sight disabilities can be diagnosed and documented in order to secure modifications such as materials converted to Braille or large print, audio recording of class texts, screen reading

software, note-taking assistance, assistive technologies for testing, etc. However, other disabilities may not have such clear diagnoses or accommodations. For example, students with depression (reports indicate that 44% of college students reported depression symptoms) or anxiety (37% reported anxiety disorders) are more challenging to diagnose, document, and accommodate (Healthy Minds Network, 2023). How often would a student need to experience symptoms of depression or anxiety before they receive a diagnosis? How severe would those symptoms need to be to receive an accommodation? How would the institution or classroom instructor confirm needs? Since depression, anxiety, and other less-bounded disabilities are often stigmatized and misunderstood, students with these disabilities may remain unaware, undiagnosed, and untreated for years. Even when students seek medical care, the nature of healthcare is such that it can take months or years to receive diagnoses and find effective treatments. In the meantime, these students live in a liminal space with a disability that is often stigmatized, misrepresented, and/or misunderstood by their families, friends, co-workers, classmates, teachers, and even themselves. Identifying, diagnosing, treating, affording, and accommodating certain disabilities can be challenging if not impossible in many academic settings, demonstrating the limitations of an accommodation model that most institutions adopt.

Ultimately, accommodationist approaches to disability are inadequate. Since institutions are slow to change, it's not difficult to understand why accommodationist approaches still dominate the higher education landscape. And again, while these approaches are well-intended, the presence of these accommodation policies suggests to administrators, instructors, and students that they are adequate for the task. Most administrators and instructors don't perceive the urgency of the problems we currently face because they assume that the policies in place adequately address the current challenges. While I tend to believe that most administrators and faculty are caring and would be surprised to learn that accommodationist policies and practices marginalize many disabled and neurodiverse students, it doesn't relieve us of the negative consequences these systems perpetuate. Even if accommodations defined disability more broadly, they still require documentation and disclosure of those already in a precarious position to self-identify as different, less than, or abnormal. Despite these clear limitations of accommodationist approaches, they remain the most common way that educational institutions address disability.

The ways in which educational accommodations function can mask the need for universal writing assessments. Accommodationist models fail to signal to students and instructors that there are potential problems with the very methods we use to assess writing, whether that be in what we assess, how we communicate that assessment with students, or what our expectations are for students to do with the assessments we provide. Since accommodationist models of disability focus so heavily on spaces, time constraints, and embodied experience, they don't often clearly connect with the ways that we understand writing assessment and thus they are not on our radar as something we need to consider along the lines of accessibility. Accommodations such as extra time on tests don't adequately address the curricula and pedagogies of many writing classes that don't have timed writing. Writing classes are often interactive, participatory, and productive, which is to say that they present unique obstacles for students with disabilities. Margaret Price (2013) in *Mad at School* challenges us to rethink what presence and participation mean and how they privilege certain ways of knowing and being in interactive classrooms. While these factors can have significant bearings on the grades students receive since many college classes count participation and attendance into their grading policies, they don't directly address the feedback

and grading systems we have for writing. Certainly, few, if any, institutional accommodations account for the ways in which the wide range of student disabilities should be factored into the design and implementation of assessment methods and practices in smaller, interactive, process-based writing classrooms. Thus, the impetus on designing accessible writing assessments can't be deferred to the institutional offices that don't imagine classes like ours when they are developing their policies and procedures.

Universal Writing Assessment: Equity and Flexibility

Universal design provides an important shift from the mindset of accommodating disabilities to creating approaches that are equally accessible to all people from the start. Universal design has seven principles that have been defined and widely distributed:

- equitable use
- flexibility in use
- simple and intuitive use
- perceptible information
- tolerance for error
- low physical effort
- space and size for approach and use (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2025).

These principles are capacious, which can be both a strength and weakness. They are general enough that they can apply across a large range of contexts and situations, but they can also seem overwhelming, and some might actually seem to be in opposition to one another. As a case in point, the first two principles—equitable use and flexible use—can lead to significantly different approaches within educational settings. A subpoint under equitable use suggests that identical use is preferrable to equivalency (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 2025), which can lead to the desire I described earlier of finding a single method, approach, tool, or technology that works perfectly for all people. Defining equity as sameness may mislead educators into seeking and implementing methods that operate identically for all students, such as we see in large-scale standardized testing or grading rubrics, which are contrary to the principles of universal design. While the equitable use principle acknowledges that identical treatment isn't always possible with the caveat that equivalency can be substituted for the identical when needed, its preference for sameness compels us to prioritize identical assessments that work for all, which fails to recognize and appreciate the diverse backgrounds students contribute to their work and the various methods through which learning can occur and be demonstrated. However, equity and flexibility, working together, are key components to developing universal writing assessments.

Too often, writing assessments are introduced and implemented in ways that assume equity for all users without considering their ableist underpinnings. They imply, if not directly state, that they work equally well for all students, and their fallback position is one of accommodation for certain students. This approach fails to recognize that true equity requires flexibility, and meaningful flexibility must be grounded in equitable access for all learners. As mentioned earlier, this desire to find an assessment tool or practice that works equally well for everyone could be illustrated through any number of examples—analytic rubrics, holistic scoring, portfolios, DSP—but labor-based contract grading (LBCG) provides a current and relevant example, given recent scholarly interest and ongoing conversations in the field.

While contract grading is a known writing assessment practice that has existed for at least forty years if not more (Combs, 1976), it has been reintroduced recently within writing studies as an approach that encourages metacognition (Inman & Powell, 2018) and most notably to combat anti-racist language practices (Inoue, 2015, 2019). Inoue (2019) argues that to evaluate student writing is to participate in White language supremacy and violence against students of color:

> It takes conditions of White language supremacy to make our judgments about logic, clarity, organization, and conventions a hand grenade, with the pin pulled. All we have to do is give them to another and let go of the hammer. (p. 358)

Inoue isn't the first to denounce inequities and biases in writing assessments (Elbow, 1973; Heard, 2014; Kohn, 1993, 2011; Potts, 2010; Shor, 1996; Sommers, 1982; Ubbesen et al., 2024; Zak, 1990), but his argument equates writing assessment with physical violence and even murder, establishing an exigence for new approaches to assessment at a time of heightened awareness of violence against racial minorities by those in authority.

Within this context and commitments to anti-racist educational practices, Inoue (2022) and others reintroduce contract grading (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Diab, 2024; Inman & Powell, 2018; Litterio, 2016; Medina & Walker, 2018) and advocate for it as an anti-racist approach that avoids evaluation and its inherent White language supremacy. According to Inoue (2022), contract grading avoids evaluating writing, instead measuring effort, process, and completion. While the evaluation criteria in contract grading varies from instructor to instructor, typical benchmarks include participation in class discussion, group work, peer workshops, and teacher conferences as well as process-based milestones such as drafting, revision, reflections, and timely submission of assignments. Many in the field have taken up this approach. DasBender et al. (2023) indicate that contract grading lowers students' anxiety and encourages students to develop healthier attitudes and writing habits. O'Meara (2022) shows how these contracts look in practice by providing an assignment structure that includes ten baseline expectations agreed upon by students and the instructor. Kostelich and Cowan (2023) describe how they integrated LBGC in a conservative state where diversity, equity, and inclusivity (DEI) approaches would have been banned. Their goal was to improve communication and foster innovation within their teaching community. Other advocates like Diab (2024) note the challenges in implementing LBCG, especially for minoritized, non-tenure track faculty who like her may not receive administrative support if a student should appeal a grade based on labor (p. 97). As most assessment methods evolve, so has LBCG. Since some of the language around what is evaluated in LBCG has become contested, "meaningful engagement" (Graves, 2023) has recently surfaced as an alternative measure to labor (Gomes et al., 2020; O'Meara, 2024).

However, not all responses to LBCG are equally favorable with critics suggesting that students with disabilities (Carillo, 2021; Craig, 2021; Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020), international students (Gabor, 2024), and underrepresented groups (Wolfe, 2024) could be at a disadvantage by this type of assessment. Recent research into LBCG have produced mixed results. Larson (2024) notes that while some students respond favorably to this method, others don't, demonstrating that the method isn't a universal solution to issues of equity and inclusivity. Studies and critiques such as these reveal how good intentions are not enough to determine if a particular assessment method matches up with its stated values. Just like with accommodations, well-intended attempts at equitable practices don't necessarily produce the results we expect. Shifting from an assessment of textual products to criteria such as classroom engagement, participation, assignment

completion, draft submissions, or the effort and time invested by students may inadvertently uphold colonialist, masculinist, or ableist biases in academic labor. Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) note that LBCGs are biased toward White, middle-class, and neurotypical students who are more proficient at completing traditional academic work within traditional academic constraints (p. 6). Similarly, Carillo (2021) argues that labor-based contract grading upholds writing and academic work expectations that privilege mainstream cultural values and exclude neurodivergent and non-dominant perspectives. Emphasizing time, engagement, productivity, and meeting regular deadlines can be particularly challenging for students with conditions that are unpredictable or that worsen under pressure, as the contract model itself may create additional cognitive load and anxiety for students who need more flexibility in how they demonstrate learning. Inoue (2023) responds to these and other related concerns in *Cripping Labor-Based Grading for More Equity in Literacy Courses* by asking disability scholars to participate in redesigning rather than dismissing LBCG to prioritize inclusivity.

What I find most promising about LBCG is not the alternative criteria used by instructors to evaluate student writing, but rather the way in which Inoue (2022) and others position it as an assessment method that is adaptable to students' individual abilities, needs, and goals. This adaptability represents the integration of equity and flexibility that universal design requires. If students define the assessment criteria themselves or in consultation with the instructor, they have the agency and investment to establish a set of criteria that works for their abilities and needs. This approach recognizes that flexibility in universal design is based on principles such as learner variability that acknowledges all students have unique learning styles and goals (Rao & Meo, 2016); individualized learning plans for customized assignments and assessments (Rose et al., 2018); and self-reflective learning that encourages agency, metacognitive thinking, and self-assessment (Zhang et al., 2021). Carillo (2021) expresses concern about this part of the negotiation process because it requires students to disclose their abilities and adapt the assessment accordingly, essentially replicating the accommodationist model. However, this concern assumes predetermined, standardized criteria that only some students can modify. A universal writing assessment model can respond to individual students through a negotiated process in which all students articulate their goals, strengths and weaknesses, linguistic backgrounds, personal identities, and abilities. Without predetermined, standardized criteria, all students would be guided through a process of defining the assessment criteria for themselves. Instead of an accommodation for select students, this process enables all students to consider their abilities, goals, and needs so that no students would be singled out to self-identify as disabled and/or ask for accommodations.

In this model, all students, not just those with disabilities, choose how they approach assignments and receive assessments. By centering the evaluation criteria on areas identified by students with diverse backgrounds, students could determine how to approach such potentially challenging areas as participation, due dates, genre expectations, language formality, grammars, modalities, and other aspects that might otherwise require accommodations. Students, for example, with aspirations for graduate or professional school beyond their undergraduate studies might choose to compose and be evaluated on more traditional academic texts to prepare for graduate admissions. Other students who have different goals and abilities might align the assignments and assessments with their needs. For example, students who might be more entrepreneurial might choose to focus on writing a business proposal, create a website, or design marketing materials. At the same time, this individualized determination of criteria allows students to determine that

they might choose evaluation on such things as traditional academic language, grammar, and genre standards. To deny students the chance to receive traditional evaluation if that's what they determine they need to help them achieve their desired educational, professional, and personal goals seems paternalistic and might not be in their best interests.

Despite a resurgent push toward standardized curricula, learning objectives, and the inflexible methods developed by educational bureaucracies, writing instructors have long supported curricular and pedagogical flexibility that complements student agency (Adsanatham, 2012). When students are given meaningful choices about their writing, they become more invested in their processes as well as what they produce. Those values in turn need to be reflected in the assessment practices, where flexibility enables equity to function meaningfully for all learners. Ultimately, equity in universal writing assessment means that all students are equally authorized to make decisions about the texts they produce and how they will be evaluated. In this way, no student is singled out and no student would be put in a situation to self-disclose disabilities or ask for accommodations. All students would be given this same option, which allows equity to align with flexibility as interdependent attributes of a universal writing assessment model. If all students have this level of agency, the assessment must allow for flexibility for all in its original design.

Universal Writing Assessment in Practice: A Model for Equity and Flexibility

To understand how equity and flexibility function together in universal writing assessment, I'll return to the scenarios presented at the beginning of this article: the environmental advocacy projects in first-year composition, the language identity explorations in advanced writing, and the digital literacy applications in a graduate seminar. These each can illustrate how universal design might move beyond accommodationist models to create assessment frameworks that have equal flexibility for all learners built into the design from the outset, showing that meaningful learning can be assessed in different ways and still meet stated course goals. These scenarios could work because they are on individualized criteria and reflective practice. Rather than retrofitting assignments and making accommodations for different learners, this approach begins with the assumption that all students bring varied abilities, goals, and contexts that should shape their evaluation from the beginning.

In each of the scenarios, students would engage in a process to establish evaluation criteria that align their abilities, needs, and goals with the learning objectives stated for the class or assignment. This negotiation could happen in several ways, but I've found guided reflections to be a good mechanism for students to consider their strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations to develop personalized criteria for assessment. Many of us in the field first encountered reflection through portfolio assessment, where it provides a space for students to explain the choices they made as writers, how they understand their work, how the pieces in the portfolio function individually and relate to one another, and how they might see their work projecting toward for future goals (Yancey & Weiser, 1997; Yancey, 1998). In addition to the role reflection plays in portfolio assessment, it's also a well-documented tool for self-assessment, providing an opportunity for students to articulate evaluative criteria and apply them to their own work, which can promote independent learning and critical thinking (Smith & Yancey, 2000). Perhaps most significantly, reflection builds metacognitive awareness by encouraging students to analyze their thinking processes, learning strategies, and decision-making patterns to promote learning transfer (Yancey et al., 2014). The

kind of reflection I'm advocating for here is deeply woven into the fabric of the class with guided questions scaffolded throughout the project.

For an assignment like the environmental project in first-year composition, students would need to consider course criteria such as (a) integrating source materials with their ideas, (b) deciding what effective persuasion looks like in their chosen medium, (c) shaping their text in light of genre and audience expectations, and (d) connecting their idea to local contexts. Students would individually articulate how their goals align with their needs and interests, which would help shape the criteria for the assessment. For example, one student might be targeting peers in a short video project, which would in turn help determine the level of language formality, the use of persuasive audio and visual, and leveraging humor. Another student's project might look very different. They might be writing a proposal for university administrators that would use more formal language and traditionally cited research sources to appeal to their audience. Having students articulate the criteria for their assessment through guided reflection heuristics could allow for both equity (each student has the same set of questions to consider) as well as flexibility (each student might have different expectations based on their responses to those questions). Even though these assessment criteria would look different student-to-student and class-to-class, they all have the same opportunities and responsibilities.

For the advanced writing course with an assignment on language identity exploration, students would work from common criteria such as (a) analyzing the relationship between language practices and identity formation, (b) examining power dynamics and ideological assumptions embedded in language use, (c) reflecting critically on their own linguistic abilities and choices, and (d) demonstrating awareness of how language functions in specific social and rhetorical contexts. Through guided reflection, students would articulate how they plan to meet these criteria, even if in different ways, based on their individual linguistic backgrounds and goals. A student who composes a multilingual text that weaves English and Spanish together in a code-meshed academic essay uses their own translingual literacies as the subject and method of their project. In this case, they could direct the assessment criteria to how they demonstrate code meshing, how they position themselves simultaneously within and against academic language and genre expectations, and how they make an argument about language and power. Another student taking a very different approach might conduct interviews with speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in their community and compose an analysis of how these speakers navigate between home and academic languages. This student might direct the criteria for assessment to focus on the strength of the examples they use from the interview, how ethically they represent the language practices, and how they connect their linguistic examples to rhetorical strategies discussed in class. While each student's project differs in form, language use, and approach, they are both engaging with the same core course goals through individualized assessment criteria established through their reflective process.

One final example. In the graduate seminar on digital literacies, students might complete different-looking projects as well that equally meet course or assignment objectives such as (a) demonstrating course theories with digital productions, (b) connecting their projects to online literacies outside of academic contexts, (c) developing praxis-based pedagogical applications, and (d) contributing to scholarly conversations about digital and networked writing. Once again, these students would lean heavily into scaffolded, structured reflection throughout the assignment to articulate how their specific projects fulfill these shared goals. One student might design a lesson

plan for teaching multimodal composition in high school English, creating assignment sheets, scoring guidelines, and sample responses to student work. Their reflective criteria would focus on how they ground their pedagogical decisions in course readings, how they anticipate and address challenges students might face with the technologies, and how their assessment design reflects course discussions about digital access. Another student might conduct a discourse analysis of a Reddit community, examining how users establish authority and build knowledge collaboratively. This student could develop assessment criteria that would emphasize their application of course texts about online literacy practices, their ethical consideration of researching online spaces, and their analysis of how interfaces shape literate activity. A third student might develop a research proposal for a potential thesis about how algorithms are shaping circulation with various audiences. They might ask to be assessed on the framing of their literature review, the potential for their ideas to contribute to the scholarly conversations on digital writing, and the strength of their potential case studies to support their claims. Once again, despite the differences in project type and final products, the students would be connected to the same assignment objectives, but they could choose their own path toward demonstrating them. This flexibility would be offered to all students, who could make their own choices based on any number of factors, whether they relate to ability, needs, interests, and/or goals. All students in the class are given the same opportunities to approach the assignment differently and thus can be assessed on different criteria.

In universal writing assessment contexts, guided reflective writing provides the space for students to articulate their abilities, needs, and goals that can be used to acknowledge their unique learning abilities and needs. This universal approach pushes back against uniformity and standardized expectations by embracing flexibility. Central to this model is ongoing reflection that encourages metacognitive awareness. Students would engage in structured reflection at multiple stages, beginning with initial goal setting, where they articulate their learning objectives, identify their intentions for the project, and consider how the assignment connects to their broader educational and professional goals. This reflection informs the assessment criteria and signals to students that they can take ownership of their learning. Throughout the project, students would document their decisions, challenges, changes, and strategies, which all help to develop an awareness of their choices and decisions. When they complete their projects, students would prepare a meta-reflection where they map their processes, analyze what they learned, note how their work evolved, and explain how they might apply what they learned about the topic and writing in future contexts. This meta-reflection is the last thing that the instructor reads before commenting on and evaluating the project so that the students' ideas are central to the assessment. Through reflections, instructors can create individualized evaluation criteria that honor student agency, acknowledge diverse abilities, and promote student engagement. This flexible approach provides multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression while addressing course or assignment outcomes. Recognizing this as part of the writing process, instructors need to facilitate students' self-awareness and articulation of their needs by building in ongoing opportunities for reflective practice and dialogue throughout the course, such as guided prompts, peer discussions, conferences, and formative feedback. By scaffolding these reflective moments and modeling how to assess strengths and challenges, educators create supportive environments where students gradually build awareness and confidence in identifying and expressing their learning abilities and needs. Over time, this approach encourages students to take ownership of their learning, leading

to deeper engagement and more meaningful negotiation of assessment criteria that reflect their evolving goals and abilities.

Universal writing assessment provides flexibility in areas related to abilities, needs, and learning goals while maintaining consistency around common course goals and outcomes. A reasonable concern in applying these universalist values is finding the appropriate balance between flexibility and course expectations, ensuring that classes serve their intended functions. This balance depends largely on local contexts (e.g., our positionality, departments, institutions, and educational environments). A commitment to flexibility and individualization means that not all students do the same work or get assessed in the same way, something that could receive serious pushback in some educational contexts. At a time when political pressures often push toward surveillance and standardization that de-professionalizes our work, we must consider the risks and consequences of various flexibility strategies. As writing instructors have less disciplinary training or institutional autonomy within bureaucratic educational structures, those teaching writing courses may or may not be trusted to make decisions within their local environments. Treating all students as unique learners can be challenging in educational climates that distrust students and instructors, making it difficult to assert professional expertise that would allow students to represent their learning in different ways. Universal writing assessments can only be effectively implemented when educators are treated like knowledgeable professionals and given the authority to adjust on behalf of students' individualized abilities, needs, and goals.

Consider, for example, our previous example in a first-year composition course that might have a learning outcome requiring students to "construct evidence-based arguments for academic audiences." The traditional approach would be for students to produce only alphabetic texts such as research essays. In the more universally designed approach, students are allowed to meet this outcome through various modalities. The risk is that if composition loses its focus on developing written literacies, students might not be prepared for the text-heavy demands of academic work across campus. The universally designed course may also face less support from institutional administrators who expect a sole focus on writing. At the same time, though, opening courses to multimodal options could enhance their relevance since many contemporary contexts for professional communication compose across platforms, integrating visual, audio, and textual elements to reach diverse audiences. The challenge here is in designing assessments flexible enough to honor diverse forms of meaning-making while still being recognizable in their focus to ensure students develop the literacies the course was designed to foster.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that while some students appreciate assessment flexibility, others want and need more directive guidelines. One of the most common critiques I hear from students is that while some appreciate the flexibility of the course, others want and need more guidelines and direction, which is completely understandable. Recognizing this, it's important to negotiate a healthy balance between providing opportunities for student choice and self-advocacy while also providing clear, structured guidance for those who want it. Offering a range of support can allow for both student agency and directed guidance, hoping to meet the needs of students who thrive with more explicit expectations as well. Ultimately, universal writing assessment only fosters inclusivity if it addresses this range of abilities and needs. In other cases, equitable flexibility presents fewer obstacles. Attendance policies and project deadlines can be detached from assessment criteria, allowing any student to request extensions by communicating their needs and setting new deadlines based on their circumstances, working styles, or life

situations. Similarly, language formality and grammar choices can be evaluated according to student decisions about multilingual practices, disciplinary conventions, or stylistic variations, as long as students consider and communicate their choices and needs.

Universal design principles include not only the criteria by which students are assessed, but also the methods through which feedback and support are communicated. Most of my assessments are in the form of written feedback, though I do conference and hold office hours for students. Anson (1997, 2000, 2018; see also Anson et al., 2016) has long advocated for audio feedback for students, an idea that I have tinkered with but have never consistently adopted, reminding me that there are always more ways that I can attempt to enact the universal values that I believe. I need to keep moving toward that north star. There are many ways to further explore valuing sensory differences in feedback if we are open to hearing from students about how they learn and how they would like us to communicate with them. In the past, for example, I have done things like color-coded comments, provided combinations of spoken and written feedback, and drawn visuals in response to student requests. These things may be small adjustments, but they can make a big difference in how students receive and process feedback. The possibilities of how we provide feedback are limited only by our creativity and imagination. Ultimately, the goal is for the assessment design to allow all learners to equally access feedback regardless of ability, experience, or needs, which might mean delivering it in different formats, at different times, and through different channels based on students' abilities and preferences. All students get that same individualized treatment, not just those with disabilities.

Rather than designing singular writing assessments and then retrofitting them for diverse learners, instructors implementing universal writing assessment begin with the assumption that meaningful learning can be demonstrated through multiple pathways. However, implementation requires us to consider our institutional contexts and the potential risks of this flexible approach. In this universalist model equity means providing all students with equal authority to make decisions about their learning and assessment, while flexibility ensures meaningful options that accommodate diverse learning abilities, styles, and goals. This universal writing assessment might mean that students have varied experiences in classes and that not all assessment will be based on the same criteria, but if those experiences equally meet their individualized needs, goals, and abilities, I'm pleased to offer that equitable flexibility. While there might be pushback to some of this flexibility in assignments and assessments, I believe many writing instructors already exercise this individually to some degree in our assessment practices. The question is how much flexibility we can offer, in what areas, and how transparent we can be about it, which will depend largely on our individual contexts and situations.

Conclusions

Universal writing assessment doesn't require a new digital tool or method. Instead, it returns us to foundational principles in writing and its assessment that have guided best practices for decades, though these established values are increasingly difficult to enact in today's managed university. At the core of universal writing assessment is acknowledging that all students—including but not limited to those who are disabled—are unique and represent learning in different ways and for different purposes. This approach pushes back against rigid systems that assume students can and will learn in a standardized way, at the same pace, and with the same support structures. When these assumptions guide educational practice, they create a harmful distinction

between those who are "typical" and able to succeed within normal parameters, and those who are "atypical" and thus require accommodation or risk exclusion altogether.

The accommodationist model that dominates higher education, while well-intentioned, perpetuates this binary by retrofitting courses for select students rather than designing inclusive approaches from the outset. Universal writing assessment offers all students the opportunity to make choices and articulate their needs within the learning context, considering factors such as disability, learning styles, educational backgrounds, and personal and professional goals. This shift from retrofitting to individualized design represents more than pedagogical preference. It demonstrates a commitment to equity that affirms differences rather than positioning them as a deficit.

The practical implementation of universal writing assessment relies on presenting students with meaningful options for demonstrating their learning, guided by the understanding that no single method will work equally well for all students in all contexts. Instead of looking for one method or tool that suits everyone equally, we should focus on creating flexible models of assessment that help students recognize and articulate their unique abilities, needs, and goals. Such approaches will likely meet resistance in some educational contexts where writing instructors are not treated as professionals and students are not valued for having distinct learning needs. It may also challenge instructors who find universal design daunting in its demands for expertise, time, and individualized attention. However, those are challenges we have to address so that our assessment practices can live up to the inclusive values we espouse. Recognizing diverse student abilities and acknowledging inequality in traditional assessments makes universal writing assessment ethically necessary. The current range of student disabilities and learning differences far exceeds what accommodationist models can adequately address, creating an immediate exigence for change, even if that change is difficult to enact.

An important starting place is to acknowledge that we all fall short of our stated values when it comes to inclusivity and accessibility, and writing assessment is an area where it is very difficult to consistently practice universal design. But perfection isn't the goal. It's not even attainable. Rather, principles of universal design, especially those associated with equitable flexibility, are the direction we want to be moving in. At this point in my journey as an educator, I would rather err on the side of too much individualization than too-rigid treatments of students due to some misguided notion of fairness. The north star metaphor remains central to my thinking that universal writing assessment isn't a destination but a direction, and moving toward these values, even imperfectly, creates more equitable learning environments than remaining still or retreating toward standardization. The path toward universal writing assessment requires both individual commitment and institutional support. Writing instructors need the resources and academic freedom to implement equitably flexible assessment practices, and institutions need to recognize that their accommodationist policies can undermine the very students they were created to support. Students need opportunities to develop self-advocacy skills and metacognitive awareness within supportive environments that value their unique abilities and diverse approaches to learning. Universal writing assessment asks us to extend our commitments to inclusivity into our assessment practices, creating consistency between our values and our evaluation practices. The promise of universal writing assessment is that because not all students are the same, they should all have equal opportunity to demonstrate their learning in flexible ways that meet their unique abilities, goals, and needs.

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