Constructing Disability
Creating a Keyword Portfolio

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Abstract

Many upper-level courses introduce students to specialized terminology and discipline-specific theoretical concepts. This Keyword Portfolio assignment invites students to explore their understanding of new concepts and to recognize disciplinary terms as rhetorically structured and evolving rather than as merely static definitions. Situated in a course about disability rhetoric, students complete the Keyword Portfolio project by writing a series of keyword entries in which they first explain the chosen disability concept, then present and explain an example of the concept drawn from texts or their lives. After composing their entries across the semester, students write an introductory, reflective cover letter where they describe their chosen audience for the portfolio and explain their composing choices and organization. Students' reflective letters evidence the success of this assignment as it supports students in gaining experience with new concepts and with developing important explanatory and analytical writing skills. The portfolio illustrates how students have gained broader knowledge of key disability concepts and their interrelationships, as it shows the myriad connections among terms that students can explain at the end of the semester.

Introduction: Description and Rationale for Assigning a Keyword Portfolio

How can upper-level and graduate course instructors introduce students to concepts and theories for their discipline, without causing students to view disciplinary terms and jargon as discrete knowledge? Raymond William, publishing his pivotal *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* in 1975, emphasizes not only that keywords describe what is "essential" within a discourse for practitioners to know, but that keywords cannot be understood merely as fixed knowledge (Patterson, 2004, p. 66). To help students recognize how concepts evolve and a discipline's knowledge proliferates, The Keyword Portfolio (KWP) is a writing-to-learn assignment that spans the entire semester. Situated in a mixed graduate and undergraduate special topics English course[1] on disability rhetoric, the KWP both introduces students to disability terminology and also helps them to reflectively trace their understanding across the semester. Focusing upon terminology is particularly appropriate, as rhetorical study has long been sensitive to how language is used to construct all aspects of our reality from beliefs and values to spaces and bodies. Rhetorical projects thus seek to understand how language, communication practices, and power are connected.[2] Whereas students have often faced learning new terminology as a comprehension exercise, the KWP requires students to engage with nuances of how language structures their understanding and, further, how the meanings of terms evolve as the discipline produces new knowledge.

Students in the Topics in Writing and Rhetoric: Disability Rhetoric course are not expected to have prior knowledge about disability. Rather, the course is designed to introduce students to disability concepts and how to apply rhetorical lenses to investigate the role of disability in everyday culture and life. As a field, Disability Studies draws upon examinations of disability in history, policy, ethics, art, and literature to better understand the lived experiences of persons

with disabilities and to critically examine sociocultural elements that shape disability experiences. Disability Studies has proliferated in the last 30 years, especially within the humanities (Wood et al., 2014), as interest and needed knowledge about disability has increased after the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990. University students are increasingly interested in learning about disability, as suggested through the growing number of programs appearing in many institutions (Simon, 2013). This interest itself, though, reflects the growing presence of disabled students in higher education. A 2016 report by the National Center for Education Statistics states that as many as 19% of undergraduate students in the United States have a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). This disability rhetoric course seeks to help students broaden their knowledge of disability and to learn to recognize common tropes that circulate and reproduce social, economic, and political inequality. Students develop and demonstrate this knowledge via analytical projects that apply theoretical concepts to guide their critical interpretations of texts or artifacts, thus examining disability already present in their lives.

In order to help students reach these insights, the KWP spans all 15 weeks of the semester and is composed of two parts: a selection of keyword entries and a reflective cover letter. In their entries, students identify disability terms or concepts that are of particular significance to them, then explain the term/concept, supplying an example as they do so. Further, because students practice explaining concepts via real-world examples that they encounter in their everyday life (from personal experiences to newspaper or social media posts, to examples in advertising, TV, movies, or books), composing these entries also ensures that students connect their new disability knowledge to their lives and become more critically aware of the presence of disability. At the end of the semester, students create a reflective cover letter where they address their learning of disability concepts and describe a purposeful organization and audience for their portfolio. Drafting the cover letter helps them to identify and explain common threads among entries that showcase their interests or personal relationship to disability. Lastly, the KWP encourages students to practice their skills in accessibly designing Microsoft Word documents. Students are asked to apply tenets of accessible document design including using style headings to create e-reader-friendly documents, explaining images, and using plain language practices.

The Work of Keywords and the Motivation for this Assignment

Disciplines are built around questions, not around static knowledge. As Pamela Saunders (2018) describes as part of her review of two collections of keywords, texts that trace the terms most important to a community represent "discipline-building projects" (n.p.). Students need to understand keyword entries as providing insight into the specific resonance within a particular community. Mastering the complexities of using terms that have interlocking and evolving meanings is a display of expertise and membership (e.g. Dryer, 2019, p. 249). To participate in this discipline-building ethos, keyword entries must avoid an "encyclopedic, alphabetized structure and didactic tone" (Saunders, 2018, n.p.). Thus, entries should not be merely didactic, but must address concepts and tensions that a discourse initiate needs to gain familiarity with.

As a relatively new discipline, Disability Studies benefits from tracing the intersections among important terms in the manner that keyword collections entail. In fact, a 2015 text by Rachel Adam, Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, *Keywords for Disability Studies*, takes as its project identifying and "revisit[ing] the categories, concepts, and assumptions that define disability and the experiences of people with disabilities more broadly" (p. 1) especially by "question[ing] fundamental terms and concepts that may seem settled in order to understand how and why they were used in the first place and how they might evolve in the future" (p. 1). While the short entries offered in this book provide newcomers with a "basic definition" (Adam et al.,

2015, p. 2), the authors also describe their hopes that the focus upon "highlight[ing] debates and differences" (p. 2) within the field will help initiates to better recognize connections between terms as well as interdisciplinary linkages.

I developed the KWP because students needed support with understanding the new and varied terminology used to describe disability experiences, and they also needed practice in analyzing the ways in which disability is constructed socioculturally. Because terminology for disability is constantly changing and the use of different terms can indicate the user's ideological position, it is important for novices entering the field both to recognize terminological complexity and nuance, and also to gain familiarity and comfort with terms so that they can engage in discussions of disability experiences. The purpose of the portfolio also aligns with a longer history of instructional techniques for teaching about disability that involve asking students to think critically about and reflect on the significance of language (see Woiak and Lang, 2016). As the assignment spans the semester, the KWP offers students a space for reflecting upon their learning in the course as their knowledge and understanding of disability grows. Students' keyword portfolios thus intersect with the disciplinary-building projects of all keyword collections (see Adams et al., 2015; Patterson, 2004). However, this iteration also highlights the more personal interests of the student as a learner—a goal particularly appropriate and important for emphasizing the student's individual positionality.

Supporting Students in Drafting Keyword Entries

Students' KWP entries, composed throughout the semester, consist of two parts: first, an explanation of the concept in the students' own language and words; and secondly, an example. In composing their entries, students can draw upon the course readings for terminology. However, students are also encouraged to develop their own keywords or to make an entry for a concise phrase using popular sources or even taking inspiration from daily language use. For example, several students have researched and included the acronym *TAB*, which stands for temporarily able bodied, after hearing this term used in class. Often, students describe choosing terms because, when they first learned the concept, they immediately could think of an example from a favorite TV show, an advertisement or social media, or another pop culture moment; in these cases, the student may work backwards from the example to broaden their understanding through analysis. At other times, students' choices are more analytical or motivated by curiosity—students may begin to explore a term's meaning by reading laterally across online sources as they develop their understanding of the concept, and then choose an example they want to discuss further.

As part of introducing the KWP, the instructor provides students with an example entry which models the expected rhetorical moves (see supplemental file "Example Keyword Entries" for instructor-created entries). Following a group discussion of the genre and its discourse moves, students draft their first entry. On the due date of that preliminary entry draft (approximately Week 3), students complete a short free-write on the experience of composing their first entry.[3] They also reflect on questions or issues experienced as they drafted, what they learned from the experience, and what they might want to try to do differently in their next entry drafts. After class discussion of these experiences, students review the goals for a keyword entry and then engage in a brief peer review activity where they practiced reading and giving feedback on a sample entry once again. Only after this preparation do students split into peer review groups to share entry drafts. During peer review, students focus broadly upon determining, first, if the draft is meeting the goals of an entry where the term or concept is explained and easily understandable; and second, if the example helps to further illuminate how the concept works. In both written and spoken comments in their groups, students provide constructive,

reader-response based commentary which focuses upon concepts and the work the entry is "doing" rather than upon stylistic or grammatical issues—an appropriate level of review for a first draft.

Students compose the portfolio across the semester. By the end of the term, undergraduate students need to complete at least seven entries, and graduate students must complete at least eleven entries. Students do not have to follow a strict schedule for completing entries, although suggested due dates are listed on the syllabus. Periodically, the class writes a check-in note on portfolio progress, and students also participate in several flexible workshop days. In these workshops, students choose to either participate in peer review on drafts of entries, meet with the instructor to discuss their progress or questions, or continue to draft entries individually. Sprinkling these workshop days and due dates across the semester helps students to pace their progress on this assignment and prevents students from writing all their entries in a compressed timeline just before the assignment is due.

Reflecting on Their Learning and Their Writing Choices: The Cover Letter

Several weeks before the end of the semester—when students should have completed most of their required entries—the class discusses and starts to create the Cover Letter. In their cover letter, students describe why they chose their terms and reflect upon the learning that the portfolio evidences. This document asks students to think carefully about rhetorical considerations of their portfolio: What is their purpose? Who is their audience? How have they chosen to order terms to help that audience and achieve that purpose? As part of this consideration, students must identify the audience they imagine for the portfolio. Students should be able to specify audience characteristics such as the context (in a class, or part of a community, organization), the age range, the level of experience or prior knowledge with disability, etc.

In addition to describing rhetorical considerations of audience and purpose in their cover letter, students can also reflect upon process challenges. For example, they might identify what terms were most difficult or which required the most research. They can also choose to ponder what they learned about writing in the new genre of keyword entries—uniting their learning by reading entries from *Keywords in Disability Studies* during the semester with their own goals for writing entries in their portfolio. Lastly, students are also asked to think about creating access via these portfolios: What kinds of users with disabilities did they imagine? What were the access needs of audience members? Although students compose the documents in Microsoft Word (which has limited design capabilities), they are asked to use elements like a table of contents, accessible image descriptions, and to practice composing an accessible document.[4] Thus, students also experience composing accessibility, including the learning curve of considering new audience needs and of wrestling with new technology aspects, as they complete this assignment.

Preparing to Teach the Keyword Portfolio

In preparing to use the KWP with students, it is important that instructors anticipate a few issues that students may experience. First, because of the nature of the assignment as a series of entries, instructors should expect to discuss with students how to handle the inclusion of a disability slur as an entry. As a course centering a minority group that is beset by a range of slurs—both recently recognized as in the case of "retard"[5] but also often historically obscured as shown in the history of the term "idiot"[6]—this project allows students to investigate terminology and to better understand how language works and is used to position groups in society. It is

important that students be allowed to investigate terms even if they are slurs, and to recognize why and how the slur has been used. However, students may need additional guidance in how they write about the use of a slur in relationship to audience. For example, if a student has chosen an audience of K-6 educators and is discussing a term like "special" (in phrases such as "special needs," "special education," etc.), they will need to think about the common resonances and uses of the term in that community to critically address its use.

A second common issue that has impacted student success with the portfolio is how students understand the purpose and genre of keyword entries. The keyword entry genre is not primarily definitional, but rather smooths the user's understanding of an appropriate application of important terms (Saunders, 2018). Further, the concise and accessible explanations that students practice in their entries also support larger goals in learning academic writing skills related to close reading and theoretical analysis. Students practice application-based analysis in the entries, which is a key writing practice for English and humanities-based research projects. Encouraging students to focus upon using their own language to guide their explanation (rather than relying upon quotation of scholarly sources or definitions) also helps students to avoid merely reproducing definitions of terms, thus creating entries that define concepts statically. Rather, entries should help to showcase the rhetorical positioning that such terms support in everyday life.

Finally, when creating their cover letters, students need guidance in thinking about how to capitalize upon and discuss the common theme(s) that organize their entry inclusion. Often, students perform reflection as a kind of confirmation to an instructor that they have successfully learned something; however, the cover letter requires them to find and articulate patterns in that learning and to address how this learning might be useful to an audience. For example, one student, who was particularly interested in learning about disabilities with a goal of applying access principles in her future work as an educator, organized her terms into two themes of *personal* and *social.* As part of explaining the (inter)personal connections between disabled and able-bodied people, she included terms like *normal, freak, infantilize, staring,* and *micro-aggression;* her social keywords, which emphasized the relationship between the person with a disability and cultural or structural forces, included terms like *eugenics, person-first vs. identity-first language, equity,* and *accessibility.* Yet another student focused her portfolio on highlighting intersections between disability studies and Black and Queer studies by selecting terms like *passing, crip,* and *intersectionality*; her reflection on the field included a critique of the prevalence of white scholars, and often, the hidden influences of Queer and Black and brown community ideas on disability concepts. A chart showing the frequency of popular terms in the class and some additional notes on term-choice is included in a supplemental file.

Future Development

In future iterations of this disability rhetoric class, devoting time to presenting, sharing, and discussing the work of the portfolios and how each student's portfolio has different goals would be useful. This inquiry could take different forms based on time and the environments available— from all portfolios being published to a course website, to a science-fair styled evening of reading and discussing with printed or digital copies (or both) of each portfolio available to readers, to dividing the students into "portfolio reading groups" and guiding them in a discussion, to a traditional, formal presentation by each author. Even after the portfolios are complete, students can benefit from reading each other's projects and providing feedback on their reading experience. Often, in writing classes, we read only early drafts of each other's work and rarely get to celebrate the finished product. Thus, such a celebration of the final product would also help students to celebrate their learning rather than only see the assignment as something to

get done. Further, discussing the different terms and versions—as well as the overlapping and popular terms—might present different visions of the course and learning for the instructor to learn about as well. In noticing the differences that might emerge between how students have treated the same terms, this sharing of keyword portfolios can also reinforce the ways that keywords are rhetorical, rather than static. Further, reflecting upon differences in positioning can only better help students to appreciate how carefully examining language use can showcase how the user or speaker or writer is connected to a community.

ASSIGNMENT
Disability Keywords Portfolio

Background

In order to track the new vocabulary and the new concepts we are learning, you will create a Portfolio where you introduce keywords and concepts. One of our class texts, *Keywords in Disability Studies*, presents an example of one approach to these kinds of resources that identify key terminology/vocabulary and provide context to explain the term and some of the historical context around its importance. Our version takes its inspiration from this, but is intended to chart your own (growing) understanding of Disability Studies and important concepts.

What the Portfolio Should Look like and Include

1. **Reflective Cover-Letter**: A one-page (single-spaced) introduction to the Portfolio and a description of why you chose these keywords. (We will discuss what and how to produce your introductory cover letter, later in the semester after you've gotten a grasp on the portfolio entries.)

2. **Keyword Entries**: Each Keyword/Term entry should appear on its own page, single-spaced. Each entry must have at least two paragraphs and include an Explanation & an Example.

   - *Explanation of term*: explain the concept and its importance/use for disability studies; you should rely upon your own language as much as possible (use summary primarily, although paraphrase & some quotation is acceptable for phrasing from sources that you feel needs to be reproduced; please make sure to ethically cite your sources.)
   - *Example of Concept/Term*: You should provide an example that helps to explain/unpack the concept; this can come from any resources you find to be appropriate—from YouTube or a TV show, a movie, book, sign on campus, etc. Introduce the example and explain how your reader should be able to see the term at work through it; this brief analysis should help to deepen your reader's understanding of the concept in action.
   - *References*: Each entry should have its work-cited information included; you can include images (especially as used for examples) but please make sure to cite them as well.

A Note: Sources

You may find that while you are first introduced to the term via our shared course readings, you need to do a bit more research (on Google, using other readings than those assigned in our shared course texts, or library research) to create your full explanation. Your research can use scholarly, popular, and even credible sources from social media. For example, a TikTok video from a disabled person explaining their use of identity-first language might be an excellent

source to use to explain identity-first language.

A Note: Style

Your explanation and example should be written in accessible language; please use complete sentences, but you can write informally provided that this choice supports your goal of explaining the concept/term and reflects your chosen audience.

Additional Guidelines

- Use a readable font/size; please number each page
- Make sure the keyword appears and stands-out easily at the top of the page (I suggest that you use a header)
- Practice accessible writing; include a Table of Contents
- Practice ethical citations: for each entry, please include references used. You may use APA or MLA as you prefer.

Undergraduate Portfolios: must include a minimum of 7 terms;
Graduate Student Portfolios: must include a minimum of 11 terms
The Keyword Portfolio assignment is worth 20% of your course grade.

Accessible Writing Guidelines

Creating *more* accessible documents includes a range of practices. In your portfolio, you should follow best practices for accessible document design (which we will discuss in class).

- Describe images and use captions for charts/images.
- Use MS Word style headings (which e-readers work better with).
- Use simple fonts like Arial, Helvetica. Avoid stylized fonts (e.g. Comic Sans).
- Practice plain language that is appropriate for your chosen audience (use shorter, more concise paragraphs; avoid jargon; break up text into digestible pieces; use active voice often; clearly organize the document and use headings to help the reader follow that organization).
- Use white space in the document: create 'visual breath' in how the entry appears. Think about paragraphing and image placement (if used in an entry).
- Check your 'readability' score on entries; we all have different audiences, so consider if the level is appropriate to your chosen audience.

Approximate Semester Schedule for Drafting Entries and the Portfolio

Week 2   Introduce assignment and discuss example entry ("Inspiration Porn")

Week 3   Draft 1 entry; bring two copies to class for peer review

Week 4   During class, free-write to check in on progress

Week 5   25-minute workshop period during a class

Week 6   Strongly recommended: you should have drafted 25% of your expected entries (for undergrads, at least 3 entries; for grads, at least 4 entries)

Week 9   Strongly recommended: at least 2/3 of entries should be completed. Another 25-minute workshop period during class; introduce Example #2 ("Crip Time") and the showing/telling/analyzing color-coding activity

Week 11   Draft of Portfolio entries (strongly recommended, at least 80% of entries are done); Reflective Cover Letter explained

Week 13   25-minute workshop period during class; recommend that interested students set up a conference during Week 13-15 on Portfolios

Week 15   Portfolio due (Final Copy)

Notes

[1] ENGL 495/595 is the designated course number for special topics in rhetorical and composition courses at Salisbury University; other examples of topics taught under this number include the rhetoric of true crime and environmental rhetoric.

[2] Jay Dolmage (2014) defines rhetoric as "use uses of language for persuasive ends" which is better understood as "an operational, discursive means of shaping identity, community, cultural processes and institutions, and our every-day being in the world" (p. 2).

[3] A suggested schedule by approximate week is appended to the end of the assignment prompt.

[4] Creating accessible documents is a complex and situated writing task; however, students discuss several readings and examples to help facilitate their attention to access needs, including the Microsoft "Support" page's "Make your Word documents accessible to people with disabilities". Students also review *The Composing Access* project's website and "How to Create Accessible Content."

[5] See Downes (2013). In this editorial article, Downes briefly reminds that "retard" was originally a medical label. He highlights the campaign to end the casual use of the term ("Spread the Word to End the Word").

[6] See Dolmage (2017, p. 64). Dolmage shows how the term 'idiot' was used as part of a hierarchy of mental deficiencies and for eugenic purposes. Specifically, idiot was the lowest step on this hierarchy.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v8i1.158.

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