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“It would be simpler to see success without dominating discourse of ability”

Neurodivergent Communicators in Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

This paper centers the experiences of college students/graduates who type to communicate, chronicled through ongoing conversations in an inquiry group focused on understanding experiences in higher education. Grounded in a disability studies in education framework, this work draws on narrative inquiry and qualitative analysis of discussions over three years in a co-constructed digital interspace. Key findings include: the role of mentorship and connection, navigating the system, controlling the narrative, and traversing new methodological and relational landscapes. Together, these conversations about neurodivergent communicative experiences in higher education tell stories of agency, friendship, affiliation, and advocacy against a backdrop of ableism. Through illustrative dialogic moments, we grapple with the complexities of presence as resistance in higher educational spaces. This work highlights collaborative research methods that center communicative diversity and relationality in inquiry, as well as how process can inform dialogue in and about the academy.



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“Congratulations! You’ve Been Accepted...” These are some thoughts I have collected about the college experience for me. Perhaps some might be helpful. I do remember being of excellent excitement after being accepted to University...

This inquiry hinges on collected thoughts and illustrative conversational moments. Grounded in a disability studies in education (DSE) framework, this work draws on narrative inquiry and DSE-informed qualitative methods to analyze discussions about college experiences of neurodivergent students who type to communicate. As co-inquirers with varied relationships to the academy, we gathered regularly using the chat function of Google Hangouts™ over three years. Our conversations about neurodivergent communicative experiences in higher education tell stories of agency, friendship, affiliation, and advocacy against a backdrop of ableism. Through dialogic moments, we grapple with complexities of presence as resistance in higher education. This work also highlights the methodological process of research centering communicative diversity and relationality, and illustrates how that process informs dialogue about the academy. The following questions frame our inquiry: What are the postsecondary experiences of neurodivergent students/graduates who type to communicate? What does participation look/sound/feel like when centering multimodal communicative methods? What does dialoguing across time and space reveal about the status and possibilities of rethinking higher education contexts?

Literature Review

Autism, Neurodiversity, and Neurodivergent Communication

We prioritize communication and inclusion as fundamental human rights (UN General Assembly, 2007), honoring the multi-faceted, intersecting, and embodied experiences of people who communicate in non-normative ways in a world that privileges speech (Ashby & Woodfield, 2019). While our inquiry group includes members who are inside and outside of autistic experiences and claim those identities in various ways, we share common perspectives on the value of neurodiversity (Walker, 2014). Autism has historically been constructed by neurotypical professionals as deficit, mirroring the ways disability has been pathologized (Biklen, 2005). In this paradigm, individuals with autism who type to communicate,¹ and receive communication, regulation, and organizational supports to do so, face unique challenges related to questions of authorship and, thus, competence (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012; Biklen & Burke, 2006; Peña, 2019). Presumptions of incompetence, grounded in the ableist assumption that thinking is dependent on speaking, have contributed to inequitable educational opportunities and perpetuated restrictive notions of intelligence (Biklen & Burke, 2006; Taylor, 2018).

The work and experiences of autistic scholars, authors, and activists committed to the larger neurodiversity movement are shifting the narrative about autism. Of particular relevance to our

¹ We had significant discussions regarding language used to describe ourselves, one another, and communication modalities. We use the phrase “typing to communicate” to refer to communication modality used by the authors who do not rely on speech, as well as “multimodal” to capture the fluidity of communication modalities. We alternate between person-first and identity-first language to reflect the range of terminology employed throughout the project, honoring individual preferences with regards to self-representation.

inquiry are the stories of individuals with autism who have learned to type to communicate who call for a widened lens on what constitutes “communication” (Savarese, 2019). Primary accounts captured in books, (Biklen, 2005; Higashida, 2013; Sequenzia & Grace, 2015; Peña, 2019), blogs ([ASAN](#); [Ido in Autismland](#); [Radical Neurodivergence Speaking](#)) documentary films (Biklen & Wurtzburg, 2010; Savarese & Rooy, 2017; Wurtzburg, 2004) and qualitative research (Bacon, Orsati, Khater & Floyd, 2017; Broderick & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2006; Rubin et al. 2001) serve as resistance to the pathological perspective. These works put forth counternarratives of lived experiences with neurodivergence and multimodal communication, and model inclusivity in representation. Aptly, the field has begun to acknowledge that sensory and motor experiences, long described by autistic people, create barriers to communication and engagement (Donnellan, Hill, & Leary, 2013; Savarese, 2013; Torres et al., 2013). Such work lends additional credence to the ways that autism has been socioculturally constructed, and the challenges that autistic people experience with *performance* (Kliwer, Biklen & Petersen, 2015). This body of scholarship points to the urgency and power of presuming competence in constructing opportunities for autistic and neurodivergent people to actively contribute across multimodal forms of communication (Ashby & Woodfield, 2019; Biklen & Burke, 2006). It also reflects the continued need for (re)centering the disability rights mantra, “nothing about us, without us” (Charlton, 1998), particularly in research.

Communicative Ableism in the Academy: A Disability Studies in Education Lens

Students with disabilities, including those on the autism spectrum, represent a growing population in higher education (NCES, 2010). With data from over 100,000 participants, the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (2009) reports that only about 30% of students on the autism spectrum access some form of postsecondary education (Newman, et. al, 2009). Statistics are less clear about autistic students who use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012; Zisk & Dalton, 2019). There is also an identified need for faculty professional development on autism, communication, and inclusive pedagogy grounded in Universal Design for Learning (Austin, Pena & Brennan, 2017). Nonspeaking or unreliably speaking autistic college students who type to communicate face barriers to inclusion such as: presumptions of incompetence, questions of authorship based on mode of communication, and tenuous access to support (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012). They also report a dearth of visibility and mentorship from similarly situated peers who have navigated higher education (Capozzi, Barmache, Cladis, Peña & Kocur, 2019).

Acknowledging this gap in research and practice, we embarked on this inquiry with lessons learned from our previous work and a commitment to resisting ableist forces that continue to render the presence of autistic students who type to communicate in college anomalously. This inquiry employs a disability studies in education (DSE) framework through which we make meaning of ableism in higher education. DSE scholars turn a critical eye to universal expectations of performance. For instance, college students are often expected to demonstrate knowledge through oral participation, a communication modality predicated on an ableist presumption of speech as present and preferential (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012; Hehir, 2005). Participation of students and faculty who type to communicate necessitates that higher education spaces shift to make room for communicative diversity and highlights consequences when such individuals are left out (Ashby & Woodfield, 2019). Thus, presence of neurodivergent communicators counters socially and culturally reproduced space in the academy. As Dolmage (2017) notes, “we have

focused on very few literacies and modes for expression for far too long. It follows that students who think and communicate differently have been suppressed and silenced through our teaching (p. 111).” Our project aims to disrupt that pattern.

Methods

This research draws on narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Kim, 2016) and DSE-informed qualitative methods to co-construct and analyze conversations about college over the course of three years as an inquiry group (Myers, 2019; Woodfield, 2016). Narrative inquiry is a relational methodology in which researchers and participants coexist in the midst of each other’s lives as co-inquirers; relationships shape the landscapes of inquiries. Paired with disability studies-informed work on centering and reclaiming disability in qualitative research (Kershbaum & Price, 2017; Lester & Nusbaum, 2017), our methodological choices are guided by and contribute to storied experiences and conversations.

The Co-inquirers

As co-inquirers, we wear multiple hats of mentor, colleague, friend and coauthor. We are united by the origins of our relationships as members of a training and technical assistance institute doing work around communication and inclusion. In Table 1, we represent ourselves as communicators, contextualize our current relationships to the academy, and detail our roles in this project.

Table 1. The Co-inquirers

Name	Communicative characteristics	Recent/Relevant degree	Current relationship to academy	Project role
Sujit	Non-speaking person who types to communicate	A.S. Business Administration	Trainer, presenter, and advocate	Conversational Co-inquirer
Jamie	Speaker and typer having challenges utilizing only one system of seeing the ability to intelligent communication	B.A. Religion and Society	Consultant, trainer, presenter, and advocate	Conversational Co-inquirer
Jenn	Non-verbal individual with autism	M.S. in Cultural Foundations of Ed. C.A.S. Disability Studies BA, Psychology	Consultant, trainer, presenter and advocate	Conversational Co-inquirer
Katherine	Non-autistic speaking person	Ph.D., Cultural Foundations of Ed., CAS Disability Studies	Educational non-profit inclusion facilitator	Conversational Co-inquirer; Logistical facilitator of inquiry group

Name	Communicative characteristics	Recent/Relevant degree	Current relationship to academy	Project role
Casey	Non-autistic speaking person	Ph.D., Special and Inclusive Education, C.A.S Disability Studies	Assistant Professor	Conversational Co-inquirer; Facilitator of inquiry group
Christy	Non-autistic speaking person	Ph.D., Special and Inclusive Education; C.A.S, Disability Studies	Associate Professor; Director of institute	Co-Inquirer with a focus on design and analysis
Brianna	Neurodivergent multimodal communicator	M.S., Special Education; CAS, Disability Studies; Ph.D., Special and Inclusive Education in process	Doctoral student	Co-Inquirer with a focus on design, analysis and ongoing conversation about inquiry group

We cannot ignore discrepancies of power and privilege among us, particularly regarding primary communication modalities and connections to the academy. While our inquiry aims to disrupt these power dynamics, we are situated within them, especially considering the form the work takes as an academic manuscript and the differential benefits of publishing.

Data Collection

The data, or field texts, for this inquiry are drawn from 44 inquiry group conversations that took place over 36 months in a co-constructed digital interspace via Google Hangouts™ chat. This virtual meeting platform allowed us to center typing as a communication modality, while disrupting ableist norms of what constitutes design, participation, and product of research through collaboration across neurodiverse ways of being and communicating (Lester & Nusbaum, 2017; Teachman, McDonough, Macarther, & Gibson, 2017). Conversations ranged from 60-120 minutes and all contributions were typed. Discussions followed cycles of the academic calendar and occurred weekly (year one), bi-monthly (year two), and/or monthly (year three). Two meetings occurred in person, but relied on Hangouts™ to remain rooted in a commitment to decentering speech. Jamie, Jenn, and Sujit also shared supplemental materials about their respective college experiences, such as topical presentations, reflective writing and conversation, and collaboration on developing and presenting preliminary themes (Year One).

Analysis

Analysis of inquiry group conversations, our hangouts, was an iterative process. Records of all conversations were archived and coded in Dedoose and by hand. As co-inquirers primarily responsible for facilitating logistics of our hangouts, Casey and Katherine took leadership roles in initial coding. They each conducted independent inductive analysis to identify resonant threads across topics discussed over time regarding higher education experiences (i.e. accommodations). They then collapsed the threads, and identified sets of illustrative moments within each. In a

collaborative second pass of coding, they identified proposed functions of each illustrative moment (i.e. navigating systems). Once proposed resonant threads and moments were identified, conversational co-inquirers contributed deeper analysis, final selection and interpretation of thematically representative excerpts, and functions of illustrative moments. Each of the five “conversational co-inquirers” also chose one thread of personal salience and composed an autoethnographic reflection in response as part of the analysis, situating the writing process as an inextricable part of inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, Richardson, 1994). We include these autoethnographic writings as introductions to each finding. The conversational co-inquirers led decision making about representation of excerpts. For instance, it was an intentional, collective choice to leave grammar and punctuation inconsistencies in excerpts. Our virtual chats were informal, and reflect individualized approaches to efficiency and relationality during conversations. This is one way we push back against the constraints of academic writing, acknowledging the ways we also uphold it. Co-inquirers Christy and Brianna offered a final layer of analysis, contributing to interpretation, organization, and critical feedback on identified threads and illustrative moments.

This analysis process reflects our consciousness that methodological decisions have consequences on interpretation and representation (Dindar, Lindblom & Kärnä, 2017). The varied roles across co-inquiries were guided by interests and ongoing conversation. Intentional efforts were made to ensure that the process was not driven solely by those formally connected to institutions of higher education, while also considering equitable division of labor to honor varied relationships and priorities in the academy. For example, Casey and Katherine’s larger role in initial coding rounds reflects their methodological training, logistical leadership, and expressed preferences of the other conversational co-inquirers, who chose to review data after the initial analytical pass so there was a well-defined set of ideas to discuss. We acknowledge that these decisions have implications on findings presented; our negotiations around process were part of the inquiry and invite additional analysis in their own right.

The resulting resonant threads are revealed through illustrative dialogic moments—small stories (Georgakopolou, 2006)—that center experiences navigating college as neurodivergent communicators. In the following section, we lay out how experiences of: 1) Mentorship, 2) Navigating systems, 3) Controlling the narrative, and 4) Negotiating methods and relationality can disrupt ableism and inform future practice in the academy.

Findings

Inquiry group conversations, “our hangouts,” highlighted how individuals who type to communicate navigated and pushed back against systems and structures of higher education, accompanying barriers, and inherent possibilities by carving out purposeful, accessible spaces for themselves and those who will come after them.

Mentorship: Sharing Experiences

I entered undergraduate studies in an unconventional way, having experienced only self-contained special education classes, a sheltered workshop, and a day habilitation setting. The way out of these settings began when I was 24 years old and introduced to supported typing. At the age of 27, the way into undergraduate studies turned out to be as challenging as the way out. Meeting

a group of people who communicated as I did, was truly enlightening. Looking back on my experience, I think the factors that contributed to the group's success were:

- *Total acceptance as an individual*
- *The presumption of competence*
- *Belief in their authenticity of their communication*
- *The use of an inclusive setting, shared decision making and the right to be listened to*
- *Mindful of their sensory issues in the group*
- *Gathering around a table at our meeting place and appreciate the variety of thoughts shared. Everyone had an opportunity to give advice. The sharing was touching. Trusting each other offered a positive foundation.*

As a mentor for this group, I found peace, acceptance and trust. I was a leader. Taking on a leadership role presented a newfound learning experience for me by helping to develop self-confidence not only participating in my college courses but in the classroom. Mentoring this group over the course of time, friendships loomed; for many of us, it was the first experience for us to rise to another level of communication and inclusion, to be free and have times each month to look forward to having these individuals become important in our lives. Having autism we are not known for touchy-feely and hug kind of friendship; encouraging physical touch, such as a hug, for some reasons because of our sensory issues and others can be simply, we do not like to be touched! This translates to neurotypics also, not only those with autism. This group felt more freedom and choice by using our devices and expressing our happiness to see folks by coming back and having another enjoyable session. We also presented at several conferences as a group and individuals. We invited many visitors to speak with us at our meetings: state representatives, a psychologist, and several well-known advocates. I've spent a good part of life sharing topics of My Journey, Autism, Motor planning, Independence/Interdependence, Communication, Presuming Competence, Inclusion, UDL/providing accommodations in learning. It is important to me to present on these topics because I am sharing pure facts not inflated statistics!

Having more life experiences, I find that mentorship begins to separate as an issue solved in a friendship. In the case of Jamie and Sujit, I have had a friendship with Jamie for many years. We have common ground because of shared experience and our years in college. Sujit is much younger, enthusiastic, and I enjoy his love and energy for learning as I do. So with this awesome time on Hangouts™ we three have pulled our individuality into a forever friendship. —Jenn

“Encouraged by Your Good Experience”: Shared Context

From early on, our hangouts became a space for mentorship. As a new college student, Sujit often sought input on access, accommodations, and relationships in college, illustrated in the excerpt below as he inquired about Jenn's past experiences at a college to which he was considering transferring.

Sujit: Hi Jenn. How very good to know you went to [a private four-year] College, how was your experience there? I will be transferring there in another year or more. I am just getting myself prepared.

Jenn: I loved [private four-year college], Sujit, but the students did not know how to approach me.

Sujit: Maybe I shall go and visit the college sometime.

Casey: Sujit, you've never been before?

Sujit: I am encouraged by your good experience. No, I have not been there as of yet.

Jenn: Visiting is a great move. I have names of professors who are the best.

Sujit: I should take those names from you. Maybe I shall go visit next summer.

Jenn: Sujit, my thoughts for visiting is not summer or breaks, the profs are gone then. My thoughts are to email them and find out their availability and to coordinate your schedule with theirs.

Sujit: I shall email and check during the spring and make some visits planned.

Jenn: Wise man.

Sujit: Meanwhile I would take your prof's contact details. If you are ok to share.

Casey: It's really nice when you know others who have been to the same college so you can get this kind of info ahead of time.

Sujit: It also helps that they are already exposed to our method of communication. That is what I have to always explain at [the community college]. But luckily I have had great professors so it was not a problem.

The conversation revealed the value Sujit placed on shared contexts and his perception of the labor required to prepare himself and the college community for his presence. Jenn offered honest feedback about her experience with hesitant peers on campus, and advice about strategically planning visits and relationships with particular professors. As Casey suggested, these interactions seemed representative of those expected between a new college student and an alumna from the same campus. Yet Sujit's punctuating response, "it also helps that they are already exposed to our method of communication," ensured that the nuances of being a student who types to communicate remained inextricably connected to his decisions and relationships in higher education. Jenn's allusion to ableism at interactional and institutional levels suggested that his preparatory efforts were indeed necessary as he entered this new space. She also later offered that she had a different experience building relationships with "fellow grad students I admired and accepted and included me."

Reflections and Planning

Sujit's desire for support from similarly situated mentor-friends propelled our conversations forward, yet often initiated reflections on the past and its shadows in the present. Consider the following:

Jamie: Love these ideas we share. i would like to have had an ally in my typing world.

difficult to be alone in that.

- Jenn:** You guys will always have Jamie and me as your backups
- Jamie:** Jenn does it seem more than long where we would talk about the road to being more than just typers at a college?
- Casey:** Well that's what we are hoping to do... create spaces for all of you to draw on one another's experiences as resources and allies.
- Jamie:** Sujit i desired to take a communication course but they did not accept [my communication method]. you are very fortunate to be there. i love your opportunities.
- Sujit:** Jamie, your advice about talking to the prof before the course started was helpful.
- Jamie:** Sujit, having the courage to see them at times made me nervous but the connection seemed to open not just the mind but the willing heart. do you wonder if our physical selves seemingly are changed from this?

Having already traversed the landscape of undergraduate and graduate programs, respectively, Jamie and Jenn had points of reference for supporting others. Jamie's wistful wish for a typing ally punctuated by Jenn's insistence that she and Jamie will "always" be there as "backups" for Sujit illustrated that access to informed guidance from mentors was not part of their college experiences. A hangout over a year later demonstrated how Sujit's experiences intersected with Jenn and Jamie's past and present, creating opportunities for reciprocity.

- Jamie:** Jenn how are you feeling now that you are done with college?
- Jenn:** Lost I miss college so much.
- Jamie:** my mom called me in to see a memory alert on Facebook. it was your graduation and we cheered for you.
- Sujit:** I want to talk about how to be a better communicator. I always struggle to be in a group of speaking people and be more person who can get on equal footing.
- Jenn:** Envy you Sujit.
- Jamie:** I did love college as well. Hard to feel completed for me.
- Casey:** I do get that lost feeling too, Jenn.
- Jamie:** Sujit it took me many eras to understand it will not be normally equal. i dearly feel ok with that now.

Jamie's final comment to Sujit reflected a confidence that, he suggested, took time and experience to develop. Yet as Sujit's question indicates, the structures and struggles of communicative ableism loom large, later adding: "Best to reconcile as you say Jamie. But it is tough for me now." While space does not allow for replication in its entirety, this conversation epitomizes how college offered experiences both Jenn and Jamie continued to long for, while simultaneously raising critical

questions about the consequences of ableist expectations and practices, particularly those that hinge on speech.

Navigating Systems: Access as Multidimensional and Interactional

I got mostly all that I wanted during my course study at [community college]. During my first semester some hitches were encountered during my math testing as the role of my support person was not understood. The proctor they appointed would be supporting me [in place of my trained communication partner] at the testing center. That did not work. The matter had to be sorted out at the board level. So it was decided that I would do my exams at the testing center in a soundproof cubicle with my support person. The cubicle had a camera for monitoring and a computer. But the last two semesters was allowed to take my tests in my classroom with my peers. That was very helpful to be near my friends and my teacher.

Sometimes I would be accommodated in adjacent available room to give me more space to relax in between [test questions] and take a break. My professor would drop in between to check on me. I saw over a period of time there was more awareness in the people I met of my very different way of being and interacting. Whenever I vocalized my professor would get the cue that I needed to say something and give me the opportunity to participate in the discussion. My letter of introduction at the beginning of the semester to the professor and my support person advocating for me helped. I feel that there needs to be so many different advocacy and awareness needed at different levels to have a serene and mature experience in education of autistic minds. —Sujit

“They thought the table was the accommodation;” Attitudinal Barriers

The structures of the academy cannot be separated from interpersonal realities and power dynamics within them. Many of our conversations centered on the nuanced ways individuals navigated the system when their experiences and presence call forth ableist assumptions and structures underlying them. Attitudes of and interactions with professors not only laid the groundwork for class experiences, but often reflected a level of gatekeeping to learning opportunities, or what Jamie termed “invitation[s] to the brain.” In addition to overt, institutional ableism present in campus spaces and structures, experiences within the interactional realm had tangible impacts on access and participation.

Jamie: When I was put at a table in front of everyone with my back engaging the stares of course I felt so worthless.

Katherine: Oh gosh that sounds so stressful, Jamie.

Jamie: I believe they just thought a table was the accommodation but kind thoughts of where to place it were desiring more development.

Jamie: I was always curious about the true emotions in professors voices Casey, the face was smiling but their tonal sounds of speech were boldy truly opposite.

Casey: Very hard to hide beneath smiles, Jamie. I'm sorry that you those contradictions existed for you in some of your professors. I remember some of your stories about those that were less welcoming than others and vice versa.

- Katherine:** hat's an interesting point Jamie: trying to figure out professors' true intentions. Sujit, do you ever struggle with that?
- Jamie:** Extra creative engaging to do well in those areas Case. i believe it takes strength.
- Casey:** agreed, Jamie. And like that phrase "creative engaging" ...truly an art, I feel, to Do that.
- Sujit:** I had good professors till now and they were very welcoming
- Casey:** That's really great Sujit. It makes such a big difference.
- Katherine:** I always do better when i think someone believes in me.
- Jamie:** Great grounding of reality is vital and at times i did very much wonder if i would be strong enough. perhaps being a typer importantly forms a diverse opportunity to move the freedom of your success. i mean that without that i really believe it would be simpler to see success without dominating discourse of ability.
- Katherine:** Hey Jamie, can you say a little bit more about what you mean by [that]
- Jamie:** Katherine i mean the issue is engaging their belief in my typing. this is where i was clear about the voice of the professor. i knew if they were curious, connected or confident.

Jamie highlighted the structural and interactional accessibility of classroom experiences, with roots in the realm of access as “only logistics” (Mingus, 2017). His account of “the table” revealed how efforts to retrofit space also brought to light assumptions and biases of those in power over the classroom, and underlined the inherent reverberations of such microaggressions on self-esteem (Keller & Galgay, 2010). Jamie noted that the “dominating discourse of disability” played into and emerged out of the contingency of his “success” on professors’ willingness to accept his mode of communication.

Experiences like Jamie’s illustrated that navigating access structures required a level of labor, often occurring between the lines of formal accommodation processes, in ways arguably antithetical to the purpose of such systems. Additional examples of this tension arose in conversations about securing access to accommodations like testing centers, along with support for communication, processing and performing in them. Access to testing centers is a common accommodation for college students with disabilities, granted through a process relying on disclosure and retrofitting (Dolmage, 2017). These centers offer space for completing work, sometimes coupled with extended time, use of a scribe, or other supports in what is perceived to be reduced distraction environments (Wolanin & Steele, 2004). Sujit and Jenn connected over experiences balancing needs for quiet space, provisions for questions read aloud and scribing, while also seeking options for movement, comfort and privacy that separate, compact rooms or cubicles typically did not offer. Both described self-advocating for adjustments to existing spaces. References to sensory experiences also threaded through such conversations about access and participation, often referenced as negotiating “personalities” of classrooms, or as reflections on emotions associated with campus spaces. For example, Jamie posed the question of whether “there will be a college taking the sensory issues in true understanding?” later expanding, “I wonder if

we will always have to work so completely to overcome the sensory problem of the typical environment?” His wonderings captured the realities of environments designed without “true understanding” of neurodivergent ways of being, sensing, moving, (inter)acting, again highlighting the labor required for navigating systems designed around neurotypicality, raising questions of what, when and how spaces are truly accommodating or flexible, and for whom.

“You were wise;” The Role of Support

While Sujit described having “welcoming” professors, our conversations revealed additional layers to the interactional dynamics of his experiences. He emphasized the importance of having a highly trained, familiar support person accompany him from the start, to avoid barriers created by needing to build a relationship and skills with new communication partner, as well as professors and classmates.

Sujit: Having [communication support from high school] to support me knowing me so well helped

Casey: Yes, you're totally right Sujit that is so helpful to have trusted supports in place that already know you so you can focus on building new relationships with others.

Jamie: Sujit you were wise to have [communication support] you greatly knew. Mine had little knowledge but were lovely people.

Jamie: Sujit do you feel puzzlement of your typing from the professors?

Sujit: Jamie I have not come across anyone who doubted my typing.

Jamie: learning Casey has never seemed as education but a form of invitation to the brain.

Casey: love that, Jamie. So true.

Katherine: well, you two really accepted your brains' invitations!

Sujit: In fact great belief in my confidence in my ability have made me the team leader for presentations

Jamie: feeling naturally pleased Sujit really that you are having wonderful experiences

In addition to supporting his access and participation, Sujit’s communication support partner acted as a liaison with faculty, staff, and students unfamiliar with his ways of being and communicating. This arrangement allowed Sujit to focus energy on content and relationships. Sujit’s support relationship reflects Mingus’ (2011) notion of “access intimacy:” the “elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs. The kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level” (para. 4). As Jamie noted, opportunities for consistent, familiar support were not typical of his college experience, but suggests an intentionality and perhaps lessons learned from the (his?) past.

Jamie later broadened the topic, turning a critical lens on consequences of both interactional and institutional ableism evident in the experiences discussed.

Jamie: folks did this get heavy in your hearts? i mean to know many intelligent people who had no invitation.

Katherine: I feel heavy for the years when people were sitting and waiting for their invitations to arrive.

Casey: I feel heavy in my heart about this too Jamie.

Sujit: That is so true Jamie I know lot of folks who are not lucky to get quality education

Jamie: You are a person of journey and justice. we believe in ourselves but partnering is vital.

Sujit: There is still darkness in minds of people about people who are different

This heavy turn illustrated the individual and collective sense of urgency in disrupting systems built on narrow ideas of who can consume and produce knowledge.

Controlling the Narrative: Decisions, Disclosures and Dynamics

I was seemingly always a curiosity to other students and professors, with using typed communication. I do get a yearning for it all to be just a normal part of life, but I necessarily have discovered that with typing and talking, it's better to speak in a private appointment with the professors. The Disability Services office sent a letter to each of my professors. This tells them that I will be typing in class and will have a communication assistant. I also send my own personal email to them describing that I may do stims in class and sometimes look distracted, but I am truly listening. I let them know it is difficult for me to do quick answers to questions at times, but I can give them the answer before the class is ended. I also ask them to please speak directly to me and not to my communication support person, and that I am always willing to engage honest discourse about my autism for greater understanding.

Inclusion in higher education is being all passionate among the capabilities to see people emotionally and not only for the different places of where we live within our bodies. Really, being able to see the structural normalcy in the efforts to meet the correct attention of supporting people with autism, it seems higher education is kind of ignoring the whole person and simply teaching to their disability. The passion must move to where real support is given in the life after the graduation. I think it feels mighty lost in the afterwards. I would desire a more rich and truthful engagement in the voices trying to say the correct words in their effort to be fundamentally inclusive.—Jamie

“The best of both worlds”: Domains of disclosure

Decisions about disclosure, identity, and educating others resonated throughout our conversations. While perspectives and experiences varied on these topics, they raised critical questions and highlighted the intersections of cultural, institutional, interactional, and personal

levels of ableism impacting self-representation. Evidenced below, conversations centered the entanglement of disclosure decisions with tension between anonymity and flexibility offered by various course formats.

Katherine: online is a different "vibe" for sure.

Jamie: I liked online most of the time. I like to place my true thoughts there and felt more open than in a classroom.

Sujit: I too like online course that need intense thought

Jamie: well there is no diverse way to look at people. we are all equal there it seems.

Jenn: I only took one online class so trying to find the various paths to follow was difficult

Sujit: Last summer I took a writing course, Jamie, and I truly liked it

Jamie: now the reflection of it has me thinking the development of thinking to type was easier really because the environment was so comfortable at home and quiet.

Casey: I always found that summertime lent itself to more creative kinds of writing so took classes that allowed me to do that

Sujit: Yes I liked there was enough time to ponder.

Jenn: No I loved the classroom with peers.

Sujit: Yes I do both, a mix every semester so I have best of both worlds [wink emoji]

The interplay of identity, time, space, and relationships was evident in careful decisions and varied preferences about when, where, and at what pace to take courses. Underlying conversations about formats is an acknowledgement of choices around access, disclosure, and representation offered by online courses. As Jamie noted “we are all equal there it seems.”

This thread of anonymity offered in some spaces more than others continued to weave through our hangouts related to the impact of course structures on (in)visibility of alternative communication access. In another conversation, Sujit shared he was “always open about my disability and communication method” and saw face-to-face classes as spaces to encourage “people to be more aware of the typed communication.” Jenn honored his preferences, while adding: “That's fine. But I took advantage of not being known so I felt good about that.” She later expanded: “It feels good for me to be me than when I walk into a class I feel they see my autism first...When online you cannot see my disability you just know my name and read my thoughts.” As Sujit described, face-to-face classes offered occasions (necessity?) for self-advocacy. Online courses afforded Jenn opportunities *not to* disclose her disabilities, but rather navigate the virtual realm in the same manner as others, enabling disruption of disability as her master status. Here, decisions reflected varied preferences, but were acts of “rhetorical agency” (Kerschbaum, 2014), situating disclosure as an interactive, contextualized process.

"I will vote to share..."; Tensions with teaching

Sujit, Jamie, and Jenn often positioned their experiences as embodied counternarratives, ambassadors for neurodivergence and augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) even when that was not a mantle they chose to take on. While all described themselves as trailblazers and mentors, they also acknowledged that their roles were often blurred, and their presence brought forth occasions for educating others (Hillary, 2019). These expectations and labor were at times exhausting.

Jamie: i was always teaching about myself and the autism. I emotionally got very tired of that at times.

Katherine: My husband - always felt that too - that it was his responsibility to "educate others" about what it was like to be Deaf.

Jamie: perhaps that path in life Katherine is the path enjoyed as we feel worth. it made me annoyed but proud of not giving up.

Katherine: well put, Jamie.

Sujit: Yes educating others is always important to pave the way for others following us. I had put in statements in my ipad that I would often play to the class. To explain autism and why I needed support

Jamie: Sujit what an excellent expression of reminding the people that you were boldly a part of them

Casey: That's seems like a great idea Sujit and a good way of preparing for the road ahead based on your past experiences in new settings. What makes you decide when the moment was right (or, ripe!) for sharing one of those comments.

Jenn: Once or twice in my undergrad years. I agree the process for us constantly explaining ourselves is a pain but having profs reading the wrong material about [typing to communicate] I will vote to share the correct way yes?

Jamie: Jenn i am not understanding your thought

Casey: So by sharing yourself and experience, Jenn, it's like you were providing another (more accurate) "reading" for them

Jenn: You are correct

Sujit: Profs start believing in us when they see us in action. I would be asked questions many a time at the time of introducing myself.

Underlying this conversation is acknowledgment that while our inquiry group identified as collective allies in the fight for representation and belonging across neurodiverse experiences and communication modalities, those members who identified and/or performed in neurotypical ways could more easily choose when, how, and whom to engage in the work of teaching about and

fighting for communication and inclusion as social justice imperatives. This was particularly true in academic spaces rife with privilege for those whose ways of being, thinking and communicating have historically shaped, perpetuated and benefitted from the structures of higher education (Dolmage, 2017). For those in our group whose ways of being diverged from socially constructed norms, presence was often read as—and required energy for—resistance, calling for “expressions of reminding the people that [we are] boldly a part of them.”

Methods and Relationality: Negotiating Ableism in and out of the Academy

Throughout my doctoral studies I was fascinated by the “how” of research that purports to include disabled people as co-researchers, continually troubled by how to make meaning of my positionality as a non-disabled person (Vroman, 2019). As someone who also claims a feminist stance to scholarship, I value embodied knowledge and lived experience while also seeking ways to deconstruct traditional power dynamics that might otherwise serve to reinforce ableism in the academy. Davis (2000) proposes that due to our unique training and social location, there is a role for non-disabled academics (in this case, ethnographers) doing disability research where, “their expertise lies in their ability to produce writing which counters hegemonic discourses and their capacity to represent the complexity of people’s lives through recognizing the importance of individual experience, culture and structure” (p. 203). Shakespeare (2006) attempts to bridge the gap between abled and disabled and notes that most non-disabled people doing this work have very close connections to the disability experience through family members, colleagues, friends, etc. and thus “have a stake in solving the disability problem” (p. 197). Though I bristle at what I assume is Shakespeare’s slightly ironic use of the phrase “disability problem,” as the partner of someone who identifies as Deaf and disabled (also a member of “the academy”), and friend of many disabled people, not least of those being the co-researchers in this work, I understand my role as that of disabled-adjacent accomplice. In fact, within our virtual hangouts space, the fact that our communication happened in the same way (we all received and expressed communication by reading and typing), resembled culturally Deaf spaces where “voices off” norms dictate the rules of communication and interaction. In spaces where Deaf people are the majority it’s considered rude to speak rather than sign. There is something about not only shared language but shared communication modality that feels like it goes beyond allyship, approaching something that’s perhaps yet-to-be-named. It reminds me of an instance a few years ago when my husband described me in a way that is still among one of the greatest compliments I’ve ever received. We were attending a social gathering and my husband introduced me to a Deaf acquaintance of his who, in noticing that I signed, asked if I was also Deaf. My husband told her I was Hearing, but then used a Deaf cultural term to characterize me thusly: “No, but she has a Deaf heart.” I like the poetry and ambiguity of that sentiment, and understand my “Deaf heart” as a key facilitating factor in the success of our inquiry process and products. —Katherine

Unique challenges arise when storied experiences cannot, or will not, be “told” through avenues traditionally constructed for doing so, particularly when those constructing the opportunities can and do primarily speak. For individuals who type to communicate, or require supports to access academic and social experiences, the project of qualitative researchers must be to change those dynamics (Ashby, 2011; Teachman et al., 2017). The *ability* to “articulate ideas...is [often] viewed as more important than the actual message itself” (Brunson & Loeb, 2011, Effects of a Medium para.1), centering methodological concerns about how research can fulfill

participatory aims to authentically include disabled people as co-researchers (Goodley, 2014). Our analysis yielded salient findings about how Hangouts™ offered a means to advance shared understanding about college access for/by neurodivergent communicators, and the reciprocal functions of our specific co-constructed interspace. The virtual nature of our hangouts offered opportunities to resist narrow notions of the inquiry process and reconstruct “voice” as multimodal and multidimensional (Ashby, 2011; Brunson & Loeb, 2011; Mazzei & Jackson, 2009). We often discussed this modality, particularly regarding how chat-based conversation could level the communicative playing field and shift power dynamics that typically privileged speakers. The excerpt below began during a conversation about Jamie and Sujit’s recent (familiar) experience in which speaking support people dominated conversations:

- Casey:** I wonder sometimes how much those who speak [i.e. communication partners] take liberty with the "space" when they feel that part of their role is to get others' attention, read or re-read comments, or provide verbal encouragement etc.
- Sujit:** Yes writing on the board could help
- Jamie:** I enjoy this i was truly thinking when you do not the physical structure you can focus on more word developments
- Sujit:** Hangout technology should be put to use
- Jamie:** This is very certainly cool to be talking in the reality of time isn't it
- Casey:** Might be worth a try, Sujit. Or any kind of way to reduce others' speaking. Jamie, yes very cool. What do you mean by the reality of time?
- Jamie:** Great fun to try to think that voice people could be silent

This moment exemplified our conversations about communicative and relational contexts, and the dynamics we collectively aimed to resist. We often discussed how our inquiry group served as a source of affinity and connection. Jamie characterized the space as “grounding”, noting: “I really feel better when we talk. I am highly happy to hear our journeys of likeness and difference.” Jenn highlighted the diversity present, commenting on enjoying “being together and we each have our own slant on the topic.” Additional examples of the range of functions of this space served: Katherine leaned on the group in preparing to teach her first graduate course, and Casey sought support during career moves and postsecondary teaching, finding partnership in help and encouragement during change. These relationships contributed to collaboration and solidarity, marked by presentations across three campuses, undergraduate and graduate courses, a conference, shared meals, reflecting ways we engaged through the academy, and forged connections outside of it. Yet even as we acknowledge reciprocity, words fall short of capturing relationality within this group; the harder to describe aspects of this partnership, and our space, are perhaps the most important. You, reader, (do you?) (have to?) trust us. What is not captured in pages of an article are the ways that our relationships have grown out of/evolved into new dimensions of friendship, and continue to enrich each of our personal and professional lives, in addition to the academy.

Discussion and Implications

This inquiry started in the midst of transitions; some of us were embarking upon getting to know—and being known through—new educational and professional contexts. Coming together for this project offered a means to navigating different, and distant spaces through consistency and connection with a familiar cadence and community. When an opportunity arose to pause, analyze, and write about our time as a group, it was evident we had a contribution to make about higher education experiences, but less clear how to convey and learn from the role of friendships, relationality and interdependence that make this work possible. As much as our experiences intersect through our inquiry, I was reminded through the writing process yet again that the systems in which we are situated (continue to) create barriers to fluid, multimodal, and neurodivergent representation reflective of us as a group of co-inquirers. The evolution and product of our work mirrors how we have wrestled with complexities around ourselves, one another, methodology, communication, ableist structures in which we operate, and discomfort of uncertainty. All we can conclude is that based on our time together, as well as our respective moral, academic and personal commitments, we did what we set out to do. We heeded Rolling & Brogden’s (2009) advice to “make your acts of research to your own casts, and then take the risk of contributing your ways of doing to the constitution of a community of like-minded doing”—trusting that “New ways of doing produce new habits of doing, which in turn produce transitions in our disciplinary states of mind and being” (p. 1147). Our storied conversations counter dominant narratives to put forth opposing viewpoints. They prove that the cycles and structures in which we are wrapped/rapt do not tell the whole story. Together we tell of/through unconventional and relational moments so that uncertainty around that which is difficult to hear/see/feel/do becomes just a bit less cogent and we all become a bit more curious about (how to seek, tell, and honor) the stories (and people) we/you/they think we already know. —Casey

This inquiry centered experiences of college students and graduates who have forged paths in the academy and simultaneously sought to shape the work coming out of it. Our process of conversationally co-inquiring about higher education resists a system that too often marginalizes students and scholars with disabilities as knowers and knowledge producers (Taylor, 2018). As colleagues, friends, educators, and scholars navigating neurodivergent ways of being and interacting, we know the risks of privileging speech and perpetuating ableist communication norms (Ashby, 2011; Hehir, 2005). While we highlighted Jamie, Jenn, and Sujit’s experiences traversing college landscapes, we also aimed to chart a new methodological course, together. Our intention was to dismantle methodological barriers by co-constructing an inquiry interspace around collective decisions and pivot on participation of individuals who have been systematically excluded from the academy, in an inquiry, incidentally, *about* their very presence in it.

Our conversations centered agency, friendship, affiliation, and advocacy against a backdrop of ableism. Revealed through illustrative moments, ableism at institutional, cultural, interpersonal, and personal levels intersect in/through the experiences of typing to communicate in college. We see this reflected in discussions around accommodations, space, and microaggressions grounded in the primacy of speech and unaided communication (Keller & Galgay, 2010). Our conversations consistently underlined the contingency of inclusion on communication; a link that relies heavily on and reproduces normative expectations of interaction, independence, and attitudinal gatekeeping. They also remind us that presence, alone, of neurodivergent communicators in ableist systems does not guarantee inclusion, or cultivate belonging. Our work and experiences suggest when positioned to navigate the “problem” of the

academy's "typical environment," neurodivergent students who type to communicate are tasked to employ or develop: strategic approaches to interaction, rhetorical agency around disclosure (Kershbaum, 2014), and interdependence and relational selectivity, guided by or in search of access intimacy (Mingus, 2011). These efforts grew in resistance to ableism and out of necessity for the sustainability of presence in such spaces. We share our conversational, storied experiences to encourage those situated in/around the academy to actively name and resist ableism through practice and relationship (Dolmage, 2017; Yergeau et al., 2013). This could start with efforts to decenter speech in classrooms (virtual and face-to-face), teaching through AAC, and embedding choice in seating, organization, and especially expressive modalities across campus contexts.

We recognize that institutionalized ableism extends far beyond classrooms. Milner and Frawley (2018) articulate the ironies and, arguably, hypocrisies, with which we have wrestled in that participation requirements of theoretically "inclusive" research methods often exclude "harder to reach voices": those "whose subjectivities are communicated beyond the ordinary lexicon" (p. 4) and/or hinge on relationality and interdependence. For individuals whose ways of thinking, being, communicating, and (inter)acting fall outside the realm of socially constructed norms, simply claiming to include their voices, in research and higher education is not only insufficient, it may reproduce ableist conventions that excluded them from such spaces in the first place. If college is "a place to broaden perspectives, consider new ideas, and envision a world as it could be," (Ashby & Causton-Theoharis, 2012, p. 277) so too must work *about* college facilitate opportunities that heed and expand on experiences of students whose voices have been historically excluded, seek their collaboration across all phases of research, and challenge narrow notions of who belongs in the academy. We wonder: What might that scholarship look/sound/feel like? Who consumes it? These systems that we work to resist, are the same that position us/them/this inquiry on a path that screams for more traction. And even as this inquiry pushes boundaries of presence and participation in research, we have to ask: whose voices are we not considering? Who has not yet been able to demonstrate fluency with a form of communication that grants access to the tools of the academy? What other modes of participation and engagement could we (must we) envision?

We end with more questions than answers, yet know this work has implications for collaboration across communicative and neurocognitive diversity about experiences *within* higher educational spaces and research coming *out* of it. Woven throughout this inquiry are bedrocks for inclusive, participatory research: 1) Flexibility and creativity in data collection; 2) Constructing participation based on multiple modes of receptive and expressive communication; 3) Prioritizing consultation, transparency, and ownership of inquiry; 4) Reframing academic expectations, insisting on shared accessibility; 5) Allowing ample time for study design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination. Without establishing these principles as paramount, the academy will continue to propagate ableist structures and practices it purportedly aims to dismantle (Vroman, 2019). While we are hopeful about the possibilities inherent in these methodological implications, Jenn reminds of the necessity of continued vigilance: "...after I got my M.S. I realized that [special education] did not change greatly in twenty years. I was blown away and felt I was duped studying education." To ensure that our inquiry was not undertaken in vain, we argue that change requires breaking down doors of understanding to experiences, knowledge, ways of being and communicating across a spectrum of human diversity. We will not await "invitations to the brain" to arrive from the academy. Rather, we insist—through our storied conversations and relational commitments—that what, why, and how to make space, hinges on all of us, together. We/they/you/I belong. And partnership is vital.

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