Article

Reimagining Work: Normative Commonplaces and Their Effects on Accessibility in Workplaces

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Abstract

This article investigates how normative attitudes about work construct barriers to workers who are blind and visually impaired. The researcher collected narratives about rhetorical experiences from blind and visually impaired participants in the United States and analyzed accounts of these workplace interactions to identify rhetorical commonplaces that drive arguments about work. These commonplaces reveal the ableist assumptions that construct access barriers and constrain rhetorical possibilities for disabled workers' self-advocacy. The author proposes that business and professional communication students and practitioners should engage in collaborative approaches to flexible thinking and leadership necessary for reimagining work in ways that promote accessibility.

Keywords

disability, blindness, access, rhetoric, workplaces, normative commonplaces

Lisa is a former kindergarten teacher from the United States who is visually impaired. When her visual impairment made it difficult for her to see students raising their hands to be called on, she taught students how to participate in turn-taking conversation. While Lisa's young students recognized the value of her adaptive strategy, her employer did not. Lisa recalled that one employer said, "You don't have control of the classroom because they're not raising their hands." In contrast, a subsequent employer, who viewed the same adaptive strategy as valuable, said, "That's brilliant because it's teaching them how to have conversation rather than dictating!" Lisa's example begs

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the question of how two employers can view the same adaptive strategy in such different ways. What assumptions did Lisa's employers hold that drove their claims about the value of her adaptive strategy? And how did their assumptions about work and working bodies shape the rhetorical possibilities for Lisa's self-advocacy?

Assumptions about disability, work, and adaptation are important to examine because estimates of unemployment among people who are blind and visually impaired remain high. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010 Current Population Survey estimated that 63.8% of U.S. blind and visually impaired working age adults are not in the labor force (American Foundation for the Blind, 2017), while the 2015 American Community Survey estimated that 58% of U.S. blind and visually impaired working age adults are unemployed and actively seeking work (National Federation of the Blind, 2017). Per capita blindness and unemployment rates are generally comparable in other high-income countries and significantly higher in low- and middle-income countries due to inadequate health and education resources (World Health Organization, 2011). A Bill-and-Melinda-Gates-Foundation-funded international project report indicated similar or more critical disability employment situations in low- and middle-income countries around the globe (Cummins, 2011). Feelings of underemployment among people who are blind and visually impaired, though understudied, also have been estimated to be common (Goertz, van Lierop, Houkes, & Nijhuis, 2010).

Employers' negative attitudes, biases, and lack of knowledge have been cited as significant barriers to employment for people who are blind and visually impaired in the United States (Capella McDonnall, O'Mally, & Crudden, 2014; Lynch, 2013) and for people with other disabilities in other countries (Foster & Wass, 2013; Kitchin, Shirlow, & Shuttleworth, 1998; Price, Salzer, O'Shea, & Kerschbaum, 2017; Sarrett, 2017). Through rhetorical analysis of accounts of workplace interactions from the perspectives of people who are blind and visually impaired in the United States, I identify specific assumptions about work and working bodies that shape attitudes and arguments about access in workplaces. Rather than arguing for better self-advocacy from disabled workers, I ask, how do assumptions about work and working bodies shape rhetorical situations surrounding disabled workers, and how do those rhetorical situations construct barriers and constrain workers' possibilities for self-advocacy?

Business and professional communication is an ideal site for interrogating assumptions because those assumptions are often communicated in interaction between employers, workers, and colleagues. I interrogate ableist assumptions about work by examining workplace interactions, which I define as communicative events occurring between a worker with a disability and his or her employer, potential employer, or colleague. I bring a rhetorical lens to these interactions to understand how claims about work are made. The study presented in this article strongly suggests that everyone in the workplace needs to interrogate personal and professional attitudes about working bodies—more specifically, commonplaces of where, when, how, and by whom work is performed and measured—to make space for new, more flexible conceptions of work for employees with disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

Technical communication scholars (Meloncon, 2013; Palmeri, 2006; Wilson, 2000) have suggested ways to teach analysis of scientific, medical, and technical discourses through the lens of ableism, laying the groundwork for examining workplace interactions around disability for evidence of ableist assumptions. Scholars of critical technical communication pedagogy have supplied methods for teaching how normalcy is constructed in communication such as web accessibility statements (Larkin, 2013), safety communication and usability (Palmeri, 2006), and medical and scientific discourse (Wilson, 2000). Technical communication scholars have also focused on improving the accessibility of online technical and professional writing courses (Oswal & Hewett, 2013; Oswal & Meloncon, 2014), web design (Pass, 2013), and multimodal pedagogy (Walters, 2010). Interpersonal communication skills in workplaces, while highly valued (Hynes, 2012; Robles, 2012), remain undertheorized (DeKay, 2012). Given the established imperative in the field to use rhetorical analysis and critical technical communication pedagogy to challenge ableist constructions, and the need for more in-depth research on interpersonal communication in workplaces, interactions around disability in workplaces are important sites for business and professional communication teachers and students to intervene.

To intervene in interactions around disability in workplaces, it is necessary to understand how ableism shapes collective imaginations of work and working bodies. Campbell (2014) has asserted that ableism functions within modern societies by determining what kinds of productivity and contributions are most valuable. Hughes (2015) has argued that neoliberal conceptions of citizenship, which portray all workers as able-bodied, further exacerbate ableism by harboring resentment toward citizens who need state protections to perform the hard work that is expected. Together, neoliberalism and ableism set an impossible standard for disabled citizens, as they are expected to make certain contributions to society that are determined based on imagined "normal" workers. When they cannot meet those standards, disabled citizens become the object of resentment and rejection (Hughes, 2015). This impossible standard of setting expectations based on imagined workers with normal bodies points to the pressing need to interrogate the ableist assumptions that underpin collective imaginations of work. By inference, interactions around disability in workplaces are crucial sites for examining ableist assumptions underpinning collective imaginations of work. Furthermore, given that disability studies scholars Kerschbaum (2014) and Titchkosky (2011) have established that disability is relational, fighting for access to the workplace requires interrogating the interpretive relations that make disability recognizable, which are inherently interactive and collaborative (Titchkosky, 2011). If access requires that everyone views disability as something other than deficit or incompetence, then, it is imperative for everyone to interrogate the ableist assumptions that shape workplace interactions.

Despite the availability of legal protections, interactions between disabled workers and their employers and colleagues remain active sites where access is negotiated. O'Brien (2004) pointed out how the Americans with Disabilities Act Title I, which provides legal

protections to people with disabilities in hiring and employment contexts in the United States, stipulates that negotiating reasonable accommodations should happen in interaction between employer and employee. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit also ruled that neither the employer nor the employee should unilaterally drive the process, but the U.S. courts often assume that employers and employees have enough knowledge to engage in truly bilateral negotiations (O'Brien, 2004). Similarly, Engel and Munger (2003) found that American disabled workers are more likely to exercise their civil rights by projecting a righteous identity than by taking formal legal action. As such, everyday interactions in workplaces are sites where disabled people deploy discourses to construct identities as rights-deserving people (Engel & Munger, 2003). If disabled individuals' access in workplaces often depends on their interactions with employers and colleagues, then business and professional communication scholars need to examine those interactions to understand how ableist assumptions shape collective imaginations of work.

Rhetorical analysis provides a useful tool for interrogating ableist assumptions underlying collective imaginations of work because it reveals how ableism is unknowingly transmitted through our everyday discourse. Cherney (2011) argued that ableism is so invisible that it often "denies its own rhetoricity," or, in other words, many people do not understand how privileging certain abilities is not a neutral objective (Ideology and Rhetoric, para. 5). In the context of workplaces, then, where specific skills and abilities are highly valued, it is especially important to examine how ableist assumptions shape collective imaginations of work and become transmitted through everyday discourse. Illuminating the rhetorical nature of ableist ideas about work opens space for more flexible claims about how work is performed and measured.

Study Design

Data for this article were drawn from a larger institutional review board-approved, qualitative study of blind and visually impaired people's rhetorical experiences in the United States. The original research question asked, what does it mean to communicate about disability and how do people with disabilities learn to communicate about it? Participants were recruited in connection with a U.S. community-writing project for people who are blind and visually impaired and the researcher's own involvement in local U.S. blind and visually impaired communities. Groups that were recruited included people who identify as blind or visually impaired, family members or close friends of someone who identifies as blind or visually impaired, or professionals who work with people who identify as blind or visually impaired. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 19 blind and visually impaired individuals, one parent of a blind child, and two blindness professionals, one of whom is also visually impaired. Participant ages at the time of the interviews ranged from 21 to 72, and they represented people who identify as blind, visually impaired, and low vision, though many of them use the terms interchangeably. Participants included those who have been blind since birth and those who began experiencing vision loss or blindness during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood. All but one participant had earned or was pursuing a college or university degree or higher at the time of the interviews.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interview protocol was designed to elicit participant narratives about communication experiences in different contexts (e.g., school, work, family, social life, etc.) over the course of their life span and reflections on their development of communication strategies. Interviews were semistructured to allow participants to narrate the communication experiences most meaningful to them. To allow participant narratives to drive the meaning-making process, data were collected and analyzed with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014) was conducted after the first nine interviews, which led to the initial observation that participants perform daily communicative work to shape audience opinions of them and to gain access to both material things like documents and groceries and immaterial things like social inclusion and respect, a phenomenon the researcher calls everyday rhetorical labor of disability. Through an initial tagging of textual data from the interviews, a list of about 60 descriptive codes that identify rhetorical moments and strategies observed in the early stages of this study was generated. The final 12 interviews were conducted using targeted interview questions to elicit narratives focused on specific rhetorical experiences and strategies. After conducting open coding on the final set of interviews, the large list of descriptive codes was categorized into three groups: (a) internal dimensions of rhetorical experience, (b) external deployment of rhetorical strategies, and (c) purpose/intended outcomes of rhetorical labor. The code group titled purpose/intended outcomes of rhetorical labor was divided into three categories that describe intended outcomes of participant rhetorical labor: (a) access to inclusion, (b) access to institutions, and (c) access to information.

Data presented in this article were drawn from narratives that were coded with access to institutions, which I defined as moments in which individuals negotiate with people who hold or represent institutional power. These narratives were then further coded for "workplace interaction," defined as an exchange between a participant and employer, potential employer, or colleague. From this set of coded data, I selected those narratives that provide the most detailed accounts of workplace interactions. Thus, this article focuses on selections from seven participants—Abigail, Lee, Jackson, Nadine, Jenny, Lisa, and Mary Kathleen—referred to with pseudonyms.

The research question that guided analysis of these workplace interactions was "What assumptions about work and working bodies are called into question in these interactions?" After additional rounds of open coding, accounts of workplace interactions were sorted into five groups of assumptions about work that were called into question in interaction: (a) when work happens, (b) where work happens, (c) how specific job tasks are performed, (d) how professionals look, and (e) how work performance is measured. I examined these five categories of assumptions as *commonplaces*. Commonplaces is a rhetorical term that refers to the method of invention that Aristotle (2007) described in *On Rhetoric* for finding *topoi*, or places where orators can go to find resources for arguments, including general and specific ideas that are commonly agreed on within an audience or community. The concept of commonplaces is useful in this study because it provides a method of identifying the commonly held

assumptions about work and working bodies that shape arguments about access that manifest in workplace interactions. Given that Aristotle's theory of *topoi* encompassed both general and specific ideas, I identified both assumptions about work and working bodies that traverse the boundaries of professional communities and those that are specific to professional communities.

I analyzed participant narratives about rhetorical situations in which their access needs to bring these five imagined, defining features of work into relief. Although participant accounts of rhetorical experience do not always fit neatly into these five categories of commonplaces, the commonplaces serve as lenses through which to see the textures of ableist ideologies that shape collective imaginations of work. These rhetorical commonplaces are called *normative* to draw attention to the ways ableism privileges norms based on able-bodiedness. These norms masquerade as common sense, disciplinary ideas about what constitutes work. *Normative workplace commonplaces* refers to the ideological resources available in workplaces for making arguments that define where, when, how, and by whom work is performed and measured.

Findings of the Study

For each commonplace, I include one narrative that reveals the negative consequences of fixed, normative commonplaces and one or two narratives that reveal the positive consequences of more flexible commonplaces of work.

When Work Happens: Timing, Scheduling, Workflow, and Pace

Jackson's career in customer service and forms processing was punctuated by employers' arguments about his inability to "keep up." In his first job in customer service in 1989, Jackson was not especially confident requesting accommodations. When he found himself unable to keep up with the number of phone calls he was supposed to make, he quit due to his own internalization of his inability to keep up and became a stay-at-home dad. When he had to go back to work in 1997, he did not disclose his vision impairment during the hiring process out of fear that he would not be offered the job. After receiving the job offer, he requested an accommodation of working fewer hours to avoid eyestrain, but he received pushback from his employer until he provided medical documentation. Working fewer hours, however, did not suffice in helping Jackson keep up with workflow demands as he continued to lose more vision. Given the hostile reaction he had received, Jackson was fearful of asking for more accommodations. His progressive vision loss was making it harder to read the insurance forms, so he started drawing on the help of his colleagues, which sufficed until the company diversified and switched Jackson to a department where they used different computer screens that were even harder for him to see. Jackson struggled to keep up until the company closed the department and made all the employees reapply for jobs; he was not rehired.

Jackson encountered similar arguments about his inability to keep up when he began working in customer service at another company in 2002. This time Jackson negotiated accommodations during the hiring process, but when he still had not received the assistive technologies he requested after 3 weeks on the job, he began to worry about being deemed unable to keep up. Eventually, he did receive the assistive technologies he needed, but when the company diversified, he had to "learn more things and do more work." To resolve this problem, he applied for a different job within the company that required less phone time and more database and contract work, but once again, the nature of the work changed, he continued to lose more vision, and he could not keep up. As he put it, he was starting to make typos where typos were not permissible. When a coworker offered to help speak to the manager about his access needs, Jackson received the negative reaction he feared: "If you can't handle this, can't keep up, we're firing you." Jackson was moved to another department where there was less work to be done, but without enough work to do, he felt pressured to look busy: "I'd be twiddling my thumbs and they could see that." Jackson was fired shortly thereafter along with a thousand other employees nationwide.

In contrast, Lee described how a more flexible conception of time opened routes to access in his career. Lee's narrative of his 40-year career as a litigator focused on his constant efforts to access documents. Accessing documents is affected by a common-place of when work happens because courtroom proceedings have timelines for producing documents. Lee described that to compensate for his need to access documents in advance, he was always "overprepared." He never went into the courtroom alone; he always brought an assistant who was in charge of making documents accessible to him. In some situations, though, he was faced with a "surprise document" in the courtroom, and he learned that he would need to make more forceful demands for more flexible conceptions of time: "I found early on that my peers and particularly my opponents would take every advantage that they could and they would suddenly produce a document." Lee explained that he had two options in this situation. The first option is to ask the judge to give him time to let his assistant read the document aloud to him in the courtroom. He did not seem to prefer this strategy because of the way the disruption made him appear:

> They show up with a document that I've never seen and I don't have any time to read it and you've got all that pressure, and the courts, and the people in the audience and then you're standing there looking fat, dumb, and happy and then you've got to read it and you've got to react quickly.

The strategy he seemed to prefer involves calling the quality of the evidence into question. Lee would ask the judge, "Where was this last week? I need time to prepare so I want an adjournment." And then the judge would ask the opponent, "Why didn't you give it to him in advance?" And the opponent would respond by saying something like, "Well, we just didn't know . . . we just found it last night." And the judge would eventually decide, "Well, it's either not good evidence or we're going to give him an

adjournment so he can prepare for the document that you should've given him two weeks ago," giving Lee the time he needed to access documents.

Where Work Happens: Physical Mobility and Presence

When seeking work in 1991 as a health care provider who travels around to different locations, Abigail encountered a commonplace of where work happens informed by normative ideas of physical mobility. Abigail described that when one potential employer found out that she is blind, the employer began asking her questions that implied normative ideas about physical mobility. After inviting her for an interview, one employer called Abigail back and asked her the following questions: "Did you know that there are mountains here? Did you know there are high land prices here? Did you know there's snow here? Did you know there's wind here?" Abigail did not end up interviewing with that employer because she got an offer from another employer who did not ask her questions about her mobility even though, as she pointed out, they get far more snow. Her potential employer could not imagine how a blind person might travel through wind, snow, and mountains. Given the rigidness of the employer's imagination of physical mobility, Abigail was left with the rhetorical labor of convincing others to reimagine where work happens. She explained that she knows if she had to work there she would be able to "whip 'em into shape," or help her employer and colleagues understand how she performs work, but she tired of such rhetorical responsibility. "But oh, do I really have to?" she recalled thinking.

In contrast, Mary Kathleen's employer helped her reimagine where work happens when she decided to resign from her job after she had to stop driving and could not get to work. She left a resignation letter on her employer's desk, but as she was waiting for her ride in the parking lot, her boss came to talk to her. She remembered that he said, "You know this is a new millennium coming up. There's no reason for you to quit. We have computers now. You can do things from home. What kind of a commitment can you make?" Mary Kathleen responded, "I really don't know." Then her boss said, "Well I don't want you to quit. Let's talk about what we need to do to keep you here." Mary Kathleen bought a personal computer and her employer bought Microsoft Office Suite and screen-reader software for her and she began working from home 2 days a week. The company arranged for her to ride to work with a coworker the other 3 days. Mary Kathleen has been doing this since 1993, and she is now the vice president of the company. In this example, Mary Kathleen's employer initiated the opportunity to reimagine the workplace. Without her employer's structural support of providing software and/or helping her arrange rides with a colleague, Mary Kathleen would have quit.

How Job Tasks Are Performed: Assistive Technologies, Error, and Collaboration

Nadine works in international development, and when she was starting her career around 2014, she encountered a commonplace of how job tasks are performed that

made it difficult for her to meet her employers' and colleagues' expectations. Nadine described that in one internship she would try to explain to her employer why she was not able to send a digital calendar: "Because I technically can't hear what the calendar is saying. It's not accessible." Instead of reimagining how this task is completed, her employers reacted with surprise and expressed the idea that everyone should be able to do everything, especially the most "basic" tasks. Similarly, in a subsequent job, Nadine was unable to use the touch screen copy machine, and once again her colleagues drew on commonplaces of how job tasks are performed to ascribe the inaccessibility of the technology to Nadine's abilities as a worker: "People will say [in a snarky voice], 'She can't even make 'em print! She can't even get things out of the printer, or make copies!' or something like that, just something an eighth grader can do." Nadine explained how her employers' and colleagues' ableist assumptions caused her to have to defend her abilities:

> [Speaking as though she is speaking to a colleague or employer] . . . So, no, I'm not the best person to go work this touch screen copy machine because it doesn't work and so what do you want me to do? I'm not the best person for that, but if you need a one-page brief written, I'm your girl. If you need some sort of research, then I'm the one to come to. If you need something to be communicated, you need a meeting to be attended, you need someone to articulate our main talking points, I'm here for you. If you need me to develop the talking points, I'm there for you.

Nadine pointed out that the tasks she emphasizes—writing, research, speaking, attending a meeting—are more essential to the function of the job than the basic tasks like making copies, printing, and sending digital calendars that her employer and colleagues had demeaned her for not being able to perform; these basic job tasks had overshadowed Nadine's other abilities as a worker.

Jenny also faced negative attitudes toward her use of assistive technology when she began her training as a health care provider in 2011. On her second day of clinical training, Jenny was called into her instructor's office and asked to sign an illegal contract stating that if she made any kind of mistake she would be thrown out of the program. Jenny recalled,

> She told me that she didn't think I was going to be successful because of what she saw, but she didn't really have any examples. She was concerned that I had to use a large font on the computer and would I be able to read patient records?

While it is impossible to know exactly why Jenny's instructor had this reaction, it seems the instructor's observation of Jenny's use of assistive technology made her concerned about error. Jenny thought the instructor extrapolated from her use of assistive technology to ascribe weakness and liability without having any evidence to support her claim. After going home, sobbing to her husband, and contemplating quitting, Jenny decided to order a screen magnifier that she can quickly place on any computer screen, and she decided to work even harder since she knew she had a target on her

back. She faced similar negative attitudes from other clinical instructors, and she worried about her employment prospects in a field that deeply values perfection and, by association, able-bodiedness.

In contrast to Nadine and Jenny, Mary Kathleen described ways that her colleagues are open to reimagining how job tasks are performed. When Mary Kathleen designs presentations, she relies on her colleagues to help her identify appropriate visuals. She earmarks websites where she finds information for her presentation or finds websites where the content leads her to believe there might be appropriate images. She shares those resources with a colleague, who identifies the most appropriate and visually appealing images. Her colleagues' willingness to reimagine how workers design presentations allows Mary Kathleen to complete a task that might not typically be considered a collaborative one.

How a Professional Looks: Discomfort and Authority

Lisa, whose workplace experience was referenced in the introduction, began her career as a teacher and later worked in consulting. When Lisa became a consultant in 1995, she encountered commonplaces of how a professional looks that called forth her rhetorical labor of building credibility with her clients. Lisa described that even though she consults with clients about how to learn about difference, she senses her clients' discomfort when they notice that she does not appear normal. Her clients' discomfort makes her feel pressured to disclose because they remain uncomfortable until she provides an explanation. At first, Lisa resisted the pressure to disclose because she thought it was unfair to have to build credibility based on disclosure rather than on her behavior as a professional. When Lisa began consulting in collaboration with her partner, Janet (pseudonym), who is not visibly physically disabled, their clients' discomfort about how a professional looks became even more obvious. Clients would often direct all their questions and commentary toward Janet, and Lisa was left wondering, "Am I in the room?" Lisa and Janet developed a triangulated approach to responding to these situations; when clients directed the conversation toward Janet, she continued to ask Lisa what she thought, and when clients only looked at Janet for an answer, Lisa responded anyway. Lisa recalled that Janet expressed the importance of taking on some of this labor so that Lisa does not appear pushy. Now that she has been working as a consultant for over 20 years, Lisa has accepted the burden of immediately disclosing her visual disability to more quickly dispel her clients' discomfort about how professionals look.

Mary Kathleen also described that she faces initial discomfort from colleagues about how a professional looks when she facilitates workshops with unfamiliar audiences. She dispels her colleagues' discomfort by using humor, which makes room for reimagining how a professional looks. She asks the audience members to introduce themselves by sharing one interesting fact about themselves, and Mary Kathleen shares that she is legally blind and follows her disclosure with, "'I cannot see you right now. I see your silhouettes and you're telling me your names and who you are and I'm going to know where you're sitting, so no changing seats!' And they all laugh." Mary Kathleen noted that after disclosing her disability and making the audience laugh,

some colleagues take it on themselves to provide her with visual information that helps her function as a facilitator. For example, sometimes participants tell her that someone else in the audience looks confused, which helps Mary Kathleen perform her role as a facilitator.

How Work Performance Is Measured: Markers of Success

To demonstrate the disciplinary quality of commonplaces of how work performance is measured, the contrast between Lisa's two different experiences working as a kindergarten teacher is elaborated here. Lisa explained that although she took a transparent approach to disclosing her disability in her first placement as a student-teacher, she encountered commonplaces of how work performance is measured that prevented her adaptive teaching strategies from being perceived as equally successful. As I explained in the introduction, since she cannot see students' hands when they are raised, she convinced her students that turn-taking conversation is a more valuable skill. She explained to them that raising their hands is not a lifelong skill but instead a way for teachers to control the conversation. Students responded with amazement and excitement, and then Lisa taught them how to have a conversation in which they wait for pauses and take turns. Lisa recalled, "And the kids loved it because it was so empowering for them to not have to be controlled by a hand raise." Despite her kindergarten students' abilities to dislodge a marker of teacher control, Lisa's employer was not able to recognize her adaptive strategy as an equal performance. Her employer told her, "You don't have control of the classroom because they're not raising hands."

After this experience, Lisa sought a teaching position in what she described as a more nontraditional school where she felt her adaptive strategies would be valued. When she deployed her adaptive strategy of asking students to engage in turn-taking conversation, her employer reacted by saying, "Oh my God, that's brilliant because it's teaching them how to have conversation rather than dictating!" This employer also helped Lisa gain confidence in her own capacities as a teacher with a visual disability. Like many participants, advisers had told Lisa that no one would hire her, so believing in her own abilities was not always easy. As any kindergarten teacher would, Lisa worried about losing students during lunchtime. Since she could not rely on her own vision to keep track of them, she developed adaptive strategies like asking the students to count each other, which doubled as a means of teaching them to count. Inevitably, Lisa lost track of a couple students who were later found hiding in cubbies or in the lunch room, and she worried that her performance would be deemed unsuccessful and her disability would be to blame. Instead of measuring her performance through the lens of her disability, Lisa's employer depersonalized her error in a way that had tremendous impact on her confidence as a disabled worker. Her employer assured her that this could happen to anybody and it did not happen because Lisa is visually impaired or because her adaptive strategies are not as effective; rather, it happened because those students were not ready to be in school all day. Lisa emphasized the impact that her employer's belief in her abilities had on her: "That was such a gift, and I still have such a huge place in my heart for that director to just have the clarity to say that."

Discussion

Findings from this study demonstrate how widely accepted ableist assumptions, called normative workplace commonplaces, fuel claims about work and working bodies that prevent access. These claims are communicated in interactions between disabled workers and their employers, potential employers, and colleagues, and the hegemonic power of normative workplace commonplaces often leaves disabled workers with the challenging rhetorical labor of destabilizing commonplaces to gain access. Whereas previous researchers identified access barriers like employer attitudes, biases, and lack of knowledge (Capella McDonnall et al., 2014; Foster & Wass, 2013; Kitchin et al., 1998; Lynch, 2013; Price et al., 2017; Sarrett, 2017), and sociologists identified everyday interactions in workplaces as sites where access is often negotiated (Engel & Munger, 2003; O'Brien, 2004), this study specifically identifies five normative workplace commonplaces that provide rhetorical resources for ableist claims about work and working bodies. This study answers calls in business communication for more theoretical knowledge of interpersonal communication (DeKay, 2012; Hynes, 2012; Robles, 2012) by demonstrating how ableist assumptions about work are often implicitly reinforced in interpersonal communication. While critical technical and professional communication scholars have utilized disability studies to rhetorically examine and teach ableist constructions of technical and professional texts and pedagogies (Larkin, 2013; Meloncon, 2013; Oswal & Hewett, 2013; Oswal & Meloncon, 2014; Palmeri, 2006; Pass, 2013; Walters, 2010; Wilson, 2000), findings from this study suggest that technical and professional communication students and practitioners need to learn how to critically examine and reimagine widely accepted, defining features of work and working bodies in order to promote accessibility in workplaces.

In the pages below, I discuss how the findings show how normative workplace commonplaces can either be used to reinforce ableist standards or, conversely, to reframe adaptation as beneficial to workplaces and reimagine defining features of work.

Normative commonplaces of when work happens set unrealistic standards for workflow, timing, and pace based on imagined able-bodied workers. Throughout Jackson's narrative, the commonplace of when work happens or, more specifically, the pace, timing, and scheduling of work, provides employers with rhetorical resources to push him out. Over and over, Jackson is held to standards based on normative constructions of time without being given the resources he needs to perform work. Without the support of employers and colleagues open to collaboratively reimagining time, Jackson is stifled by arguments fueled by the hegemonic power of normative workplace commonplaces, so much that he internalizes ableism and becomes fearful of the consequences of self-advocacy. While I do not have access to the employers' perspectives, the constant changes in workflow, pace, and technologies used in workplaces, combined with Jackson's own progressive vision loss and fear of requesting accommodations, make keeping up an impossible standard. While some might blame Jackson for not being a better self-advocate, his narrative demonstrates how employers' limited imaginations of when work happens have real material consequences for workers with access needs.

Conversely, Lee gains access by leveraging a commonplace specific to his discipline. He draws on legal commonplaces of what counts as good evidence to persuade the judge to throw out the evidence or to call for an adjournment so he can have time to access the document. While some might attribute Lee's success to his own rhetorical skill of reframing a legal commonplace, this example stands in stark contrast to Jackson's in its demonstration of how commonplaces of when work happens can be reimagined in the interest of access. Business and professional communication students need to learn how commonplaces of timing, workflow, and pace set impossible standards for disabled workers and how those standards are implicitly communicated in technical and professional communication.

Normative commonplaces of where work happens set ableist standards for physical mobility and presence. When Abigail's potential employer found out that she is blind, the employer asked questions suggesting that he or she could not imagine how a blind person might travel for work. In this example, the employer's questions imply a normative conception of physical mobility and its relationship to work. While Abigail knew that she would eventually be able to challenge their normative ideas about physical mobility, she tired of the rhetorical responsibility and chose to work in an environment where she would not have to expend as much effort challenging normative commonplaces. In contrast, Mary Kathleen's employer provides her with structural support and leverages other workplace commonplaces (innovation and progress) to reimagine where work happens. While her boss's flexible attitude could be attributed to personality or the credibility that Mary Kathleen had already established, this example suggests that employers can leverage workplace values like innovation ("a new millennium") and collaboration (ride sharing) to marshal existing resources to make arguments for access. Without the support of her employer, Mary Kathleen would have quit due to her own internalized ableist assumptions about where work happens. In addition to learning how to reimagine physical mobility and presence and their relationship to work, professional and technical communication students need to learn how to leverage existing workplace values to make persuasive arguments that promote access.

Normative commonplaces of how job tasks are performed construct rigid ideals about what it looks like to complete specific job tasks. Nadine and Jenny both experienced how these commonplaces can be used to ascribe weakness to their identities as workers. Nadine's colleagues perceived her inability to operate what they considered to be a basic task as evidence of her weakness as a worker. Nadine has responded by drawing on other values in the workplace—communication, listening, research—to move her colleagues and employers to reimagine her value as a worker, even though her inability to use the touch screen copy machine is not as essential to the function of her job. In Jenny's clinical experience, her instructor draws on a commonplace that is especially strong in health care—make no mistakes—to make a claim about Jenny's inability to perform work. Jenny's experience of being deemed liable for using assistive technologies causes her to doubt her own capabilities as a worker and makes her believe that she needs to make no mistakes, an impossible standard for any worker. In contrast, in a workplace where her employer provides structural support for

reimagining work, Mary Kathleen's colleagues are open to reimagining how job tasks are performed, sharing the task of incorporating visual information into her presentations without denigrating her abilities. Business and professional communication students need to be taught how to reimagine specific job tasks without denigrating the identities of workers.

Normative commonplaces of how professionals look need to be reimagined to allow workers with disabilities to establish authority based on their professional abilities. Lisa finds that her clients' discomfort about her nonnormative appearance affects her ability to establish credibility, but with the support of her colleague, Lisa is able to dispel her clients' discomfort and establish authority based on her professionalism. Mary Kathleen uses humor to dispel a new audience's discomfort so that they can participate in reconfiguring her role as a facilitator. Business and professional communication students need to learn that shared responsibility is essential for destabilizing normative ideas and promoting the dignity of disabled workers.

Normative commonplaces of how work performance is measured need to be reimagined from disciplinary perspectives. The contrast between Lisa's two different experiences using the same adaptive teaching strategy demonstrates how discipline-specific ideas (in this case, teacher control of the classroom) can either be leveraged to reinforce ableist assumptions or can be reimagined in the interest of innovation and creativity. By reimagining how work performance is measured, the employer supports, rather than stifles, Lisa's development of new adaptive strategies. Adaptive strategies need to be viewed as tools for innovation and creativity.

These findings suggest that normative commonplaces set unrealistic standards based on imagined able-bodied workers, and without employers and colleagues who are open to collaboratively deconstructing those norms, workers with disabilities are left without confidence and agency to persuade others in workplaces to reimagine those normative commonplaces. Inflexibility and an absence of structural support have material, social, and emotional consequences for disabled workers, and employers lose opportunities to collaborate with disabled workers on innovative and creative strategies. Based on my rhetorical analysis of participant accounts of workplace interactions around access, I argue that cultivating access in workplaces requires redefining essential features of work, a mental task that necessitates shifting focus from an ableist perception of tasks and their outcomes to a constructive perception of disabled workers' ability to adapt to achieve the same work goals. Open communication and collaboration among employers, colleagues, and workers with disabilities is essential to this process.

The positive examples from the findings of this study indicate that employers and colleagues should share in this responsibility, as reimagining work for people with disabilities can have a "chain effect of pro-disability climate" (Wittmer & Lin, 2017, para. 5) on workplace cultures. For example, in the school where Lisa's adaptive strategies were valued, she saw numerous examples of colleagues taking responsibility for "mutual adaptation." When the school secretary noticed that Lisa was having trouble locating her colleagues' mailboxes, she took it on herself to redesign the labels so they would be easier to see and more aesthetically pleasing for everyone. Valuing flexibility

can fuel creativity and innovation. Through triangulated approaches to negotiating access in workplaces, employers and colleagues can develop the flexible thinking skills necessary for reimagining fixed definitions of work and working bodies. I argue that for disabled workers to integrate into workplaces, everyone needs to be willing to reimagine what inclusive work looks like. If everyone takes part in reimagining work in the interest of accessibility, flexible mind-sets can cultivate workplaces where creativity and reinvention lead to new possibilities.

Implications for Pedagogy

Beyond learning about legal requirements for accommodating disabled workers, students and practitioners need to be inspired to reimagine work and working bodies in ways that promote access and fuel creativity and innovation. Business and professional communication instructors can help students and practitioners learn the flexible thinking and communication skills necessary for reimagining norms that prevent access for workers with disabilities. Instructors should teach flexible thinking and open communication around questions of access through triangulated approaches that share responsibility among employers, disabled workers, and colleagues. Students and practitioners can be placed in scenarios in which normative workplace commonplaces are called into question and each party is responsible for participating in the negotiation of redefining aspects of when, where, how, and by whom work is performed and measured.

   Business and professional communication students and practitioners can also analyze workplace communication (e.g., performance reviews, policy documents, job descriptions, mission statements, employee handbooks) through the framework of normative commonplaces by searching for those commonplaces identified in this article and others that emerge. Identifying normative commonplaces can help students discover where ableist assumptions are reinforced and where there is room for flexibility. Students can also compare one genre of communication across various workplace contexts, looking for ways different policies and workplace environments reinforce normative commonplaces or create room for flexibility. Workplace practitioners can host workshops that focus on specific workplace practices or policies and engage workers in analyzing commonplaces through the lens of normativity.

Implications for Research

The framework of normative workplace commonplaces developed in this study can be used as a method for investigating how specific disciplinary bodies of knowledge fuel arguments about access in workplaces. It would be useful for professionals to know exactly which defining features of work specific to their discipline might need to be reimagined when access is needed. Researchers could interview workers with disabilities in specific disciplines, asking them about their self-advocacy experiences in the workplace, to identify discipline-specific commonplaces. Researchers could also interview those same workers' employers and colleagues, asking about what defining

features of work were called into question and how they were or were not reimagined. Researchers should also strive to uncover strong examples of how defining features of work were reimagined in ways that promoted access and inspired creativity.

The absence of rhetorical activity around disability in workplaces also deserves further research. Price et al. (2017) indicated that university faculty with mental disabilities did not disclose or request accommodations for fear of stigma. Price et al. (2017) suggested that employers prioritize clarity and transparency, cultivate access without requiring disclosure, practice universal design, and work toward "imagining collective accountability in academic spaces" (Conclusions, para. 8). While Price et al. (2017) have resisted bureaucratic approaches to access, more research is needed on specific rhetorical strategies that employers can use for collective accountability.

Limitations of This Study and Directions for Future Research

The findings presented in this study are not meant to be representative of all disabled workers' experiences. This study was focused on a small sample of people who are blind and visually impaired, limiting the kinds of workplace commonplaces that were identified. This study also was not designed to access the perspectives of multiple people involved in workplace interactions around disability. Further investigation into employers' and coworkers' perspectives could reveal additional or different commonplaces that shape those interactions. This study also does not account for the use of disability employment advocacy resources. Future researchers should expand their attention to additional agents involved in interactions around disability in workplaces to deepen their understanding of how ableist assumptions shape these interactions.

Conclusion

By examining participant accounts of their workplace interactions through a rhetorical lens, this study identifies commonplace ideas, or widely accepted beliefs about work and working bodies, as factors that prevent access. Five categories of defining features of work were identified in participant accounts of their workplace interactions: (a) when work happens, (b) where work happens, (c) how job tasks are performed, (d) how professionals look, and (e) how work performance is measured. Employers and colleagues wielded these commonplaces to enforce normative standards and parameters, constraining the rhetorical possibilities for disabled workers' self-advocacy. While some participants used rhetorical strategies that improved their access in workplaces (especially drawing on other workplace commonplaces), many were left with few rhetorical resources and little agency for advocating for their own access because the hegemonic power of normative commonplaces left them fearful of the consequences of self-advocacy. Business and professional communication leaders must teach students and practitioners how to share responsibility for reimagining normative workplace commonplaces so that workers with disabilities can achieve

access and integration in their workplaces. Conclusions from this study also suggest that all professionals need to actively question what has been assumed as "normal" in workplaces and view ability as a multifaceted, embodied quality that manifests itself in different forms in different bodies and always exists on a continuum in all countries.

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