Often Not Included in Inclusion:
Neurodiversity and Creative Writing Instruction

Panel Description:

This panel explores best practices for designing inclusive creative writing courses that respect neurodiversity and neurological variation. In fostering accessible spaces for all creative writing students, panelists (including neurodivergent writers) reimagine the contemporary creative writing classroom. What are the advantages and limits of the models we use? How might we build more accessible and equitable experiences that encourage a lifetime of reading and writing?

Statement of Merit:

Approaches to inclusive pedagogies often leave out neurodiversity and, in doing so, leave out many students and teachers. Panelists (including neurodivergent writers) have recent books about inclusion and identity in the creative writing classroom and varied experiences with neurodiversity in different types of institutions and programs. They will consider multiple, informed axes of marginalization and forms of diversity to suggest asset-based pedagogies that encourage neurodivergent aesthetics.

Outline of the Session:

Introduction - Janelle Adsit, Panel Organizer

In a chapter devoted to the question of the language we use, Eli Clare in *Exile and Pride* writes: “I think about language...if I call myself disabled in order to describe how the ableist world treats me as a person with cerebral palsy, then shouldn’t I call nondisabled people enabled?” (82). This change in the language—using the term “enabled,” rather than “able-bodied”—destabilizes common notions about disability, emphasizing the ways that certain embodiments are privileged and “enabled” by the structures of society. The word “enabled,” in Clare’s terms, “locates the condition of being nondisabled, not in the nondisabled body, but in the world’s reaction to that body. This is not a semantic game” (82).

How are certain neurologies privileged and enabled within creative writing? And how do our practices need to transform, in order to promote a more equitable and inclusive creative writing?
I. Presentation by
Rita Maria Martinez
Educator; Author of the poetry collection The Jane and Bertha in Me
www.comeonhome.org/ritamartinez
Twitter: @cubanbronteite

[see second attachment for presentation outline]

II. Presentation by
Anna Leahy
Director of MFA in Creative Writing | Director of Tabula Poetica & Editor of TAB
Author of Tumor, Aperture, Conversing with Cancer, and other books
www.amleahy.com | www.facebook.com/amleahy | @amleahy

I plan to discuss the concepts of inclusive design and of mismatches in designed spaces and apply these approaches to the context of creative writing courses. When we plan and execute a particular iteration of a course, we are designing something with many components, but often, we don't consider the variances across students nor do we think about neurodiversity (as opposed to more visible, physical differences) when considering accessibility issues in the course. I plan to draw from ideas I covered differently in my recent article in Aeon and refer to Kat Holmes’s book Mismatches, among other sources. I’ll likely also include a couple of examples of ways I worked with neurodivergent students even before I knew the term and how my perspective continues to change.

III. Presentation by
Lisa Cupolo
Writer, Teacher and Founder of The Cognitive Diversity Project, Chapman University

My experience on this topic originated in the personal. When my daughter was five I fought for years to have her learning differences recognized and once I accomplished that I fought like hell to have her treated like everyone else in the classroom. Neurodiversity is inherited genetically and husband is a successful writer and professor and yet did terribly in a classroom setting as well. There is much grey area in regard to neurodiversity - dyslexia, dyscalcula, dysgraphia, ADD, ADHD, etc, are all under this umbrella and affect one in five in every college classroom in every society, regardless of race or class or gender.

Why are a disproportionate amount of writers, artists, engineers and entrepreneurs neurodivergent thinkers? I spent 7 years studying education systems for students who are ‘out of the box’ thinkers, ie. creative and innovative, and how schools fail to nurture their inherent abilities. I created an internationally recognized Cognitive Diversity Conference at Chapman
University in conjunction with UCLA and UCSF Brain Institute to spread awareness about the least known and least visible form of diversity. Creativity does not arrive in a straight line. Creativity in the classroom needs to be nourished at a young age and fostered with the acceptance that development is singular to each individual and artists and original thinkers need not be contained to be supported. I will pull from many resources, including *Proust and the Squid* by MaryAnne Wolf to more recently, *Normal Sucks, How to Live, Learn, and Thrive Outside the Lines*, by Jonathon Mooney.

**Discussion Questions for the Panel:**

- Sami Schalk defines the field of disability studies in *Bodyminds Reimagined*: “Disability studies is the interdisciplinary investigation of (dis)ability as a socially constructed phenomenon and systemic social discourse which determines how bodyminds and behaviors are labeled, valued, represented, and treated” (3). In other words, “disability” is an interpretive fame and a construct that should be continually interrogated. How do we, and how might we in the future, define neurodiversity within the context of creative writing?
- How are our institutions addressing neurodiversity as part of accessibility?
- What changes have we made or might we make to make our courses and assignments more inclusive and equitable?