

Transcript for "On Digital Academic Publishing, Accessibility, and Rhetorical Invention: An Interview with Jay Dolmage." From *Doing Digital Visual Studies: One Image, Multiple Methodologies*. <https://www.ccdigitalpress.org/book/ddvs/chapters/dolmage.html>

Laurie Gries:

Okay, I think we're recording. Thank you so much for being here. I appreciate it so much, and I'm really excited to hear your thoughts about the collection and digital visual studies and really pick your brain on where you think digital visual studies needs to go from here from both a rhetorical and a disability studies perspective. So I have a few questions that I want to ask you, but I would love for you to begin by just telling us how you identify in terms of your research of study, where do you think your expertise lies, what are the questions that most concern you about rhetoric and disability studies right now, where are you at with your scholarship. Just give us a little update.

Jay Dolmage:

Sure, well, I'll zoom out a little because the most recent update is I haven't done anything since March of 2020 pretty much. I mean that's not entirely true, but pretty much none of my own research, which is kind of okay. I was prepared for that. I had a couple of books come out quickly together, which was a weird fluke, and so I knew that I wanted to take a break and promote other people's work. So even this conversation is a nice other opportunity to, you know, reflect on things that other people are doing and amplify that.

So, I edit a journal and a lot of my interest in digital visual studies actually comes through thinking about publication processes, and I've learned so much about that through the journal, I've learned about that through publishing my own books, and trying to push for them to be available in a variety of formats. You know, the one book is now even available as an audio book. The journal has been really interesting in that we're online and open access, and it's a disability studies journal, and so a lot of the movement around accessibility in academic publishing has come from disability studies, and I think continues to be led by disabled people and by folks who are engaged with those questions around access. And it's been really illuminating as an editor because you get a kind of peek behind the scenes. You're involved in that process, and you're collaborating with people in that process. It's like you were saying when we were chatting earlier, when you begin working with other people, it's a lot more work, right? But that's because you're teaching and learning, and you're able to do so much and get so much accomplished and get so much work out there. So, it's actually really rewarding to do that. I think there are still obviously really large issues around accessibility and that big question, and it was engaged with in such a thoughtful way in the chapter of the book that, you know, you drew my attention to most closely around digital making and accessibility.

Laurie Gries:

Shannon's chapter.

Jay Dolmage:

That's right, yeah. You know there's a difference between access as we speak of it in terms of open access and accessibility, and there's some tension there around what is the accessibility. Is it the accessibility of a kind of finished text? Is it an accessible process? And so, that's where it begins to dig in with my love of teaching, right, and teaching within composition and rhetoric where we've had such kind of complicated engagements with process and product, and that's to me, your work is one of the most interesting places where we're doing that engaging with process and product. And as a culture, it's been a kind of revolutionary couple of decades, two, three decades around our consumption of visual and digital information, and who's involved in making it, and how we receive it, and expanding that process of making, expanding that process of receiving. The tough part is, from a disability studies perspective, most often the accessibility part is a retrofit. It's an afterthought or it's a kind of subordinated thought. It's a bonus. You know, whatever way you want to describe it.

Laurie Gries:

Or I hate to say it's an obligation put down – I mean impressed upon-- editors and writers by a press rather than, as I think Shannon's saying, as you're thinking, thinking about accessibility from the very beginnings of the invention and the design process of the scholarship that we're producing. That's a fundamental shift in the way that we do things if we go there.

Jay Dolmage:

Absolutely, and in a way, you would think that given legalistic and legislative history in North America around disability that that compulsion, that being compelled to be accessible, would be part of the equation, but it's actually interesting because what I see most of the time is when people are compelled to be accessible, they just say they'd rather not. You look at large universities like Stanford who, you know, did not make a huge sort of corpus of visual teaching materials accessible when they put them online and when they were compelled by law to make them accessible, they said “we'd rather not,” and they just yanked them all down. There's lots and lots of examples like that.

I think COVID has been really interesting, even the fact that you and I are having this conversation right now, that you're going to get emailed an mp4, that you can be emailed a transcript. You know even transcription of audio information was something that most instructors just never would do. It would seem too complicated, and now we know it's actually really easy and that, and that, we can create tools to do that kind of work. Being forced to pivot all online pushed a lot of instructors into, for many unfortunately, an uncomfortable position of having to make things more accessible than they were in a physical classroom and in a way kind of being checked and surveilled on that accessibility. The thing was, most of them just didn't do it, right, so that's the tough part. So, when we had this pivot, it wasn't disabled folks in the room being checked with, it wasn't disability services offices – you know, for all the critique that I might have of those offices, they do have expert ability to put accessibility first, and they just weren't at the table. So, in a way we missed a big chunk of that opportunity, and yet in another way, there's an opening, I think, just because we've at least had to encounter the idea that access to information is uneven, students are accessing it from a wide variety of different

contexts. The process that students engage in--whether that's writing or reading or making--there's just so much more going on socioeconomically in terms of these tools that we know have a kind of infrastructure that is biased and sometimes discriminatory. We know that stuff now better, maybe, than we did before. It's just now what are we going to do about it?

Laurie Gries:

Yeah, what do you think – I mean publishing this digital book, I've published digital, you know articles, before but the labor that goes into a digital book project is really intense and, you know, I think I'm going to be completely honest, I wish I had thought about accessibility more from the very inception of the design. And I think what Shannon's chapter really kind of pushes me to realize is that, 100%, I'm assuming that people will be able to see the screen, right? That is just an assumption that I came to the project with. It's a flaw. It needs to be corrected. I mean how do we – what do we do to push scholars so that accessibility and thinking about design is not an afterthought--it's something that we conceive of from the very inceptions of our ideas about a project or invention. And what do we need to do beyond what, say, the press is requiring of us?

Jay Dolmage:

Yeah, I mean the big argument that I make is around that juncture between open access and accessibility, and, you know, some of the kind of mapping that you've done around particular images shows us just that--that the reach of some of our visual arguments, some of our visual art, is just unbelievably rapid and wide in ways that we wouldn't have imagined before. From a rhetorical perspective, the first thing that that says to us is we don't have a sense of audience like we used to. We need to drastically expand it.

With the journal, I see that we have readers in 193 countries and a big part of that is the majority of the world does not have access to information in the same way that we take for granted in North America, and especially access to academic material. So, you know, you build something open access for a philosophical reason, and then you're blown away by the wide uptake that it has. So that's a kind of shift that we have to have in our thinking...like this will get taken up and used in ways we can't foresee. And rhetoricians are really interested in that, right?

Right.

Jay Dolmage:

Well, that also entails a different type of audience in terms of language, in terms of sensory engagement, in terms of the context through which people are engaging with things and mediums that they're engaging with things. So, it all begins to kind of atomize and a big part of that, I think, is that if you really want that audience and that's in your desiring text with that kind of rhetorical velocity, then accessibility has to be part of it from the beginning. Which is so different from the, from the, I don't know, almost quaint in-group sort of audience for academic texts previously--you know where you could basically imagine all of your readers,

and, you know, even picture their, you know, whatever tweed jackets and the couch that they're sitting on, I don't know.

Laurie Gries:

Right, sitting like this is what you still imagine, right, even though a lot of us are doing this, but even that's an able-bodied assumption, right?

Jay Dolmage:

Yeah, right. But for me the push is – there's an important push and an argument that you can make about expanding your audience. You want to have a larger audience, making it open access, right, removing an economic barrier, that is a material removal of a material barrier, right? So... it's like carrots and sticks, right? And the carrot of accessibility is that, you know, I've made this argument before, there's all of these what I call interest-convergence arguments that you need to make, which are really problematic. But one of them is if you make it, if you make a digital text highly accessible, it makes it more searchable, right? It makes it more translatable. All these other things that don't really have to do with accessibility, but people sometimes seem to care about more than accessibility. All that kind of metadata and all that other stuff that you build in does make it more searchable, does make it more translatable, does make it for more rhetorical velocity in terms of how people might find it, how people might remix it, how people might recirculate it. So that's really important, but that's not a very good ethical argument for accessibility, right? It's an interest=convergence type of argument, and the truth is, you know, the other arguments we always make are, like, the numerization of disability: what percentage of the world has a visual disability, whatever, right? You're excluding all of those people if you don't build accessibility in, which is a kind of like “don't be a bad person” argument.

Laurie Gries:

Right.

Jay Dolmage:

But to me, there's a much more important thing that actually has nothing to do with audience at all, and it's the one thing I was really thinking about in the chapter that I was reading as well-- is that disabled people are altogether too often conceptualized by artists, by rhetoricians, as only audience, not as makers and creators.

Laurie Gries:

Oh, interesting.

Jay Dolmage:

And so, for us in in comp and rhet, because we care deeply about process, we can't just think of disabled people as consumers of a product.

Laurie Gries:

Right.

Jay Dolmage:

Right, and what begins to become really interesting is when you begin building a process that's accessible, a process that's for disabled people, by disabled people. Then things start to get really much more interesting. They get more interesting, right? But they also get more rhetorically rich. We begin to sort of pull apart what the process is and understand the benefits of different pieces of the process once we remove barriers within that process....And it's in all the chapters in the book, but that rich kind of description of what the process is and decisions that are made in that process of making, creating, or remaking--that kind of attention to pieces of the process is where I would want to push for more thought around accessibility. You know for me, just with something as simple as a visual description of an image, I am interested in starting with a visual description of an image instead of ending with visual description of an image. I think that applies for a lot of the pieces; once you begin to think about accessibility then the act of making it accessible becomes a rhetorical act rather than a kind, like you said, like a mandated or forced act.

Laurie Gries:

Right. I think this is fascinating. You're just kind of blowing my mind right now when I'm thinking about – well, I don't think in rhetoric and composition we've ever done a very good job of spelling out the processes through which we do research. And I have worked really hard in my own work to really try to make the methods that I use as descriptive...as possible and as explicit as possible so that people could take up the methods if that's in their best interest. But admittedly, I've...never thought about how would I describe those methods if I was actually considering different abilities of the researchers. That is, like, I don't know, I mean I'm trying to think about what that would look like, right? I'm also trying to think about how many people are so resistant to even trying to spell out our methods in the first place, and then they're going to say “oh and now you want us to, you know, describe our methods thinking about all the different disabilities or all the different abilities that people have. Really?” Really provocative.

Jay Dolmage:

I mean, there's neat overlaps because also in rhetorical studies, we know and we think about user-centered design, usability. And students do that kind of work in our classes all the time, sometimes by nature of the fact that we've got big classes and we need them to work together, other times because we really value that, and we have really diverse classrooms in general, right? I mean most often our classes are mandated courses, and every student takes them, and I love that. And I'm at a university that's a very tech-oriented university, and so students come with a --and so that, there also becomes a kind of way you trick yourself, which is our students already have a really high level of skill with doing this kind of work, and so you can kind of congratulate yourself that you already have a bunch of students who already have this skill or you can think of the entire group and be pushing each of them to be doing things that they're not already really comfortable with. And the thing for me is Waterloo is one of the best computer science, math, and engineering schools in probably the world, but students don't get any training around accessibility in any of those courses, even just like writing accessible code. They just don't. They just get skipped. So actually, in my classroom, it's a place where I want to

introduce that into the design process, and it's cool because later when they are involved in these big collaborative projects, I get to be involved in helping them find users with diverse backgrounds or whatever or just folks with disabilities to test out their ideas and the problems they're trying to solve. So, I think it's really valuable and important to be doing that.

Laurie Gries:

Where do you think the responsibility comes – I'm really interested in this notion of trying this user-centered design idea and thinking about even with this digital book, like I'm thinking about the people who reviewed it. I don't know who they were, but I'm assuming they were able-bodied. I don't know why I'm making that assumption, but do we in terms of publishing need to add that layer of review to every single thing that's published, really?

Jay Dolmage:

Yeah, I mean there's a few initiatives, right, so there's the building accessible books initiative, and that was sort of a bunch of big ten schools and the society for disability studies was involved in that, but also actually a bunch of people in comp rhet, people like Margaret Price, were really involved in the beginning of that because part of the thought is you need to... train the publishers first, and they need to be prioritizing it. And again, I can go back through and rehearse all the different arguments for expanding the audience and all those reasons for it, but to me it's an education in visual culture, it's an educational and digital tinkering. Even when we're retrofitting stuff, there's something really to be learned from doing that retrofitting. And the fact that we are on university campuses that are governed by particular laws and where we know that there are a lot of disabled students, some of whom get accommodations but most of whom don't, we know that that's who's in our classroom, so in a way we're working with what we have. Then for me, you want the results of our research to be accessible to those folks. There're these two really weird terms that have established themselves in Canada because funding agencies started asking people who wanted to get funding to talk about knowledge translation and knowledge mobilization, and I don't know if those two things have come up much in the States, but in Canada they're ubiquitous because you have to prove that you have a plan for knowledge translation and a plan for knowledge mobilization. To me, that's been such a great opportunity to foreground accessibility.

Accessibility is like the ultimate form of knowledge translation.

Laurie Gries:

Right.

Jay Dolmage:

It is what you're trying to say and argue, the research you're trying to do, and then share, accessible to everybody, right? And especially to stakeholders who may have particular types of insights based on their lived experience. That's good research. The knowledge mobilization piece is much more in line with your big intellectual project, but what's your plan for getting this out there and not just to the audiences that you usually would get it to? That leads us into things like plain language, it leads us into versioning, different ways of engaging across different

modes and mediums with our work. To me, then, if you have to write that into a grant proposal, and you write that into how you're going to train the graduate students who are mainly getting the money in your grant – that's why you do – that's such a great way to do it. It's happened in a way as kind of like a fluke, right, but that's a process that works. As researchers, we're teachers who are working and collaborating with other people. If we have to think from the beginning of that being accessible as researchers, we're engaged in a process we have to think about that as being accessible, and then the product has to have velocity right outside of just academic circles, hopefully a public impact of some sort, and it has to be understandable to the general public. All of those become opportunities to build in more accessibility.

Laurie Gries:

I'm just thinking of even the word “reader” right? I mean, I'm hearing you use the word “audience” a lot, but I'm thinking about how much assumptions are just built into that, you know, our notions of a reader and our audience being filled of readers, right? I mean that's what we are trained as scholars to do: we write things that people read, right, rather, in Shannon's words, having embodied experiences with them in a multi-sensory way. I wonder how much us really interrogating our assumptions about audience on that level could help in all of this regard as well.

Jay Dolmage:

Yeah, We have a kind of – it's not architecture; we have this kind of interior design of terms and “reader” is one of them and maybe don't do a very good job of – well they're limiting us in a lot of ways, for sure. I think of that even with the journal. I mean it's an online open access journal, and we've had digital art installations and things like that, but people don't think about – I have to actively remind people that they can do more than just publish chunks of text. The issue was when we were at such a print publication culture, you couldn't. It cost so much money to have more – you're paying every image, but we just don't have that anymore. We have so much more freedom that we're not using, especially in academic publishing, and we have the opportunity to engage with an audience. It's not just a one-way communication, whether that's through social media and other and other forms. It's knowledge mobilization, it's knowledge translation, you know whatever you want to call it. We also have a responsibility to do more than just park our ideas in a place and hope somebody might come.

Laurie Gries:

Right, oh absolutely. Thank you so much. I mean, you have just given me a ton to think about, and I so appreciate your time and energy and for just engaging with the project and sharing all these wonderful ideas. I wish you luck in all of your intellectual endeavors that you're engaging with right now, and I hope you and your family are safe and healthy.

Jay Dolmage:

And thank you, same to you. Thanks for involving me. It was fun. I went through and read the chapters when I first got it, and then I went and reengaged the last couple of days, and, uh, it's

really interesting, exciting stuff and, to be honest, some folks whose work I hadn't read before who now I'm really excited to read more.

Laurie Gries:

Oh great! Well, thank you so much. All right, we'll talk later.