ABSTRACT

COREY MARSH PATTON. Autism and Composition: Finding the Voice of Empathy in Autistic Writing. (Under the direction of Professor David Rieder.)

*This is an essay about autistic writing and its place in academic life. It is also a response to Melanie Yergeau’s formulation of autism as a rhetorical condition. As a professor with autism, she has set in motion a lively discussion among composition and rhetoric scholars about the poor accommodation of students with autism and other disabilities. She argues that composition teachers would better accommodate their disabled students by giving them more room to represent themselves in discussion and research. She makes her case against common misunderstandings among researchers of psychological terms such as “disability,” which have come to signify students’ inability to express themselves or show empathy. As someone with Asperger’s syndrome, I see Yergeau’s work as a call for more autistic scholars to explore the rhetorical features of autistic writing, of which I claim empathy to be central to our understanding of autism as a rhetorical condition. I argue that autistic writing is just as valid as autism research in communicating to teachers the role of emotion in writing. In a literature review, I will go over three works by autistic authors Temple Grandin, Naoki Higashida, and Daniel Tammet in order to make connections among rhetoric, empathy, and autism. In a discussion section, I will relate their arguments on empathy to ongoing discussions on the role of emotion in writing, with some attention to Margaret Price’s universal model for teaching composition. In conclusion, I raise some implications of including autistic writing in English courses, citing current trends in autism research.*