

Creating a Lab with a Culture of Care

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*"...we have been in an on-going crisis for two plus years now and to please take care of yourself as needed - if you need accommodations from me, just let me know - I just want you to know you are supported and to not be too hard on yourselves" -
Kate to our lab Discord*

TLDR; In this blog post, we reflect on the ongoing process of creating our Human Computer Interaction Lab. We've tried to create a disability-centered culture of care through each step.

When people think of what it takes to be in grad school, it's often late nights, cramming, and burning the candle at both ends. In one team project course at our university, one of us was told that our team of three should work out sleeping shifts so that two of us could be working at all times of the day. While this is an extreme example, there's an unwritten assumption that a "good" PhD student is one that achieves maximum productivity, and dedicates all of their time to getting their degree to the detriment of physical and mental health at times. Many of us have come into grad school with the notion that it should be extremely difficult and sometimes even miserable. In reality, this "perfect" image is unsustainable. It takes time to do good work, and it takes time to exist outside of grad school and late nights come at a cost.

In this blog, we talk about our efforts to create a space infused with a disability-centered culture of care while working within the expectations of grad school as we build our lab - a lab that functions in crip time¹. Sharing this offers us the opportunity to reflect on our process, but we hope it will also offer a window into how this care could permeate broader academic spaces. We primarily focus on the grad student experience of time within a lab but in future posts, we will go into more detail about topics of writing, reading, meeting, and researching with care as well as how to implement these in your own lab spaces.

This academic year (2021-2022), we have had the unique but impactful opportunity of setting up a brand new academic research lab from the ground up. Kate began as an Assistant Professor at UCSC in Summer 2021 and unexpectedly took on three PhD students in their third and fourth years of the program. All of us have worked under multiple PIs and lab environments and come from different fields (e.g., psychology, robotics, health care, community building) and draw from critical disability studies. Thus, we are drawing on our experiences to incorporate the positives and be informed by the negatives.

¹ Crip Time challenges the typical view of time as linear and uniformly benchmarkable (see: <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684>)

Each of us also identifies as part of the spectrum of disability (Neurodivergent / Disabled / Chronically Ill / ...)². Many of us are working to unravel preconceived notions about our field of Human Computer Interaction (HCI), internal and external ableism, and research in general, so we incorporated discussions of positionality and understandings of our own privileged identities early on in our process. The qualitative and community-based work we engage in requires thoughtful consideration of positionality and addressing the biases we bring into our work.

We have had continuous conversations around lab culture, promoting an inclusive and accessible environment, and the kind of standards we expect from people joining our lab. The backgrounds of our lab members influence these discussions - many identify as neurodivergent and/or psychosocially disabled and access is always at the forefront of our minds. Thus, we have attempted to create a safe space where mental health and access are openly discussed. Lab experience affects many people beyond an individual student graduating from that lab - they will bring that culture to future labs and mentees of their own. We've seen this as we each bring in culture from our previous academic families. **In this vein, we are attempting to consciously design a lab with a culture of care in what can be a demoralizing and oppressive academic environment.**

Setting up the space over time

When we say we are consciously designing a lab, it doesn't mean it happens all at once or even that we know what we will need to implement from the start. Designing a space has been a constant process of checking in and adjusting.

Setting our lab up with a culture of care from the start is something we've talked a lot about, but a lab can't be built all at once. As people with lived and scholarly experience, each of us has preconceived notions of what a lab space "should" be from our previous experience. Kate has been thinking about trauma-informed design and inclusive lab spaces for many years (even before she started her own lab). Bre has been thinking about the creation of accessible spaces and community building. Check out our list of resources at the bottom.

In discussing this blog post, one of us noted that our lab feels like a space that we have unconsciously made feel safe and free to be our true selves. This is when Kate described how long she had been thinking about lab creation and was pleased to note that this safety did feel unconscious in some regards. She emphasized that she assumes everyone in the lab space comes in with and is dealing with trauma. This might be institutional, academic, medical, or personal. Everyone has their own lived experiences. Those choosing to attend grad school and

² Although we do not talk about it in this post, we recognize that our positionality as **academics** with disabilities who are majority **white** puts us in position of inherent power - over both creating narratives, and the way that we construct our spaces and boundaries. Recent occurrences have shown the importance of boundary setting while highlighting the complexities of doing so for marginalized groups. We will continue to grapple with these implications on our own and in future posts.

do research in marginalized spaces, and those who are disabled are likely to have trauma, whether it is acknowledged or not. And, for us, this held true.

Creating a safe space

One of the primary considerations in creating the lab was fostering feelings of safety for everyone in the space. This includes the importance of having control over disclosure or “coming out” as disabled. As everyone in the lab is researching difficult topics of marginalization, disability, or trauma, being able to candidly speak about the challenges and our personal connections to the research is paramount. In that way, this idea of being able to disclose or “come out” as disabled to each other has been instrumental for us and our well-being. However, we do not believe that full disclosure is necessary nor required. Kate has said her intention is to create a lab space that accommodates everyone with the baseline assumption that everyone has experienced trauma. Our lab ethos is that no matter what a person has or has not disclosed, they feel comfortable asking for what they need to succeed (see intro quote). For example, at the beginning of each quarter we make space to discuss any potential accessibility needs for our lab meeting attendees.

Although each of us has always had personable relationships with past lab directors, our personal relationships were kept separate from our professional selves. While we might privately talk about mental health or care, those conversations didn’t necessarily continue into our work. At the most it would be to request an extension on project deadlines. Recently, in our lab chat, we were discussing a TikTok video and talked about whether or not to tell your boss you’re having a depressive episode. Coincidentally, this happened while one of us was having a very bad day for depression, and wasn’t planning on telling the group. They felt that it didn’t seem relevant that they were stuck in bed. They could get their tasks done tomorrow, you know? Because it was relevant to the conversation about the TikTok video, and because the lab space felt safe enough to do so, this depressive episode became illustrative of how comfortable we feel discussing our current moods and needs.

The three of us current PhD students all came into the space at the same time, leading to a collective development of our lab culture and handling of disclosure. As we are in the process of accepting new PhD students, we are considering how to incorporate new people. With any new members we hope to create a space where they feel safe to be open, but also one where existing lab members will be safe as well.

The time we have devoted to setting up our lab is a continuous and explicit process, so we are interested to hear how other labs create agreed upon terms for newcomers.

Our bubble within academia

We are very aware that we're still situated within problematic institutional structures that make up academia [1–5]. No matter how flexible or accommodating the lab space might be, we all still have academic milestones to achieve and external expectations about productivity to contend with. In our lab, there is a continuous verbal reflection on the best way to help each other meet milestones and expectations while pushing back or creating flexibility where possible.

Departmental milestones are discussed in our lab as checkpoints and not something to agonize over more than necessary. A big thing with these milestones is the need to reign in feelings of anxiety and work within a realistic scope, which Kate helps with. When each of us came into the lab, Kate made sure to check in with us about upcoming milestones. These are discussed as administrative hurdles rather than the end all, be all defining our research and career.

For paper submissions, we do what we can to get them into our target venues, but if things don't line up it's not the end of the world as there is always another deadline.

Tessa: Kate and I were aiming to submit to the January CSCW deadline. Ultimately, the paper was in a state where we could have worked the rest of the day to submit something, or we could keep working on it and submit to the next deadline. She left it up to me to decide, and going against what I would have done in a previous lab, I made the decision to wait and submit the paper later. This was freeing in multiple ways. First, Kate provided me with options but left the final decision in my hands. Second, she made it clear that there was no wrong answer and that I should go with what felt right. Third, after deciding to wait, she reiterated multiple times that this was an acceptable avenue and that I should take time to rest.

By providing us with flexibility, we don't feel the need to work ourselves into the ground and also are relieved of feelings of guilt when things don't line up how we had initially planned.

Lab spacetime continuum

Lab spaces and the time we spend together has shifted in many ways due to the pandemic. All members of our lab have met in person only once. We talk mainly through our Discord server. In a way, discord has become our lab space. We have avoided typical communication channels so well that when the Discord servers were down we individually questioned how best to contact each other.

Instant messages can make people feel the need to respond immediately. The messages also persist in the space in a way that wouldn't be true of hallway conversations. We regularly talk about boundaries for both time-to-respond and who has access to channels. It's never assumed that someone will respond immediately during work hours or afterward, and messages on interests and work are pretty much constant. It can be hard to keep up sometimes when the

chat is active like this. We can choose to catch up on previous conversations and chime in, or not if we don't have the bandwidth emotionally or time-wise. It has created a space where we as students feel comfortable being vocal and open about our time.

In setting up this space, Kate has been conscious about which members have access to certain channels. We have channels for different projects and interests that are not viewable unless you are a part of that channel. This helps avoid overwhelming newcomers, while also providing safe spaces specific to PhD students. Prior to new students joining our lab this coming Fall, we discussed a protocol around archiving current backchannels and starting fresh as a group.

The quote at the beginning of this blog serves as an indication of the culture Kate has fostered that pushes back against the idea of running oneself into the ground for one's work. A sense of mutual care has developed across the hierarchy of our lab. Kate checks in with us often while making it clear that we don't need to be working specific hours that match the ones she works. In return, we as students try to be conscious of the limits on Kate's time and energy. Rest in our lab is not a reward that needs to be earned, but rather something to be taken whenever necessary.

(Workshop) Considerations and Future Work

We hope to eventually contribute a series of blog posts and a framework for incorporating considerations of care into both new and pre-existing labs, departments, and other research gathering spaces. For now, we present a series of reflective considerations. Our future care blog series topics include the following - let us know if you'd like us to cover something you don't see here!

1. Contending with personal and professional growth in accessibility research
2. Considerations for Authorship and Shared Contributions
3. Reading and Writing in crip time
4. Academic Family trees and 'passing down' knowledge
5. The Academic Job Market in crip time

We bring to the [Dreaming Disability Justice in HCI workshop](#) the open question of how to run a lab with a culture of care as well as a discussion of initial implementations in our own lab. We are curious to discuss what honoring individual timelines looks like in other's labs and departments and how to improve the experience of disabled academics. **If you are reading this after the workshop, please reach out with your thoughts on these questions, we'd love to hear from you!**³

Open Questions:

- How do we make this available to others as a framework?

³ Email: misfitucsc@gmail.com, Twitter: [@misfit_lab](https://twitter.com/misfit_lab)

- What does care/Crip Time look like in your research spaces and processes?
- What are methods for (care)fully incorporating newcomers?
- What did we miss in our current discussion? Resources to add?

More Resources & Cultural Work to Explore

This is a list of relevant resources to community building that we refer to for creating caring spaces. This list is a work in progress. If you have suggestions for work to feature here, we are happy to add them.

- See Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's writing in [Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice](#) for discussions of creating carewebs and the labor of creating spaces and access
- Check out Mia Mingus's blog, [Leaving Evidence](#), for info on accountability, interdependence, and general disability justice discussion
- For a discussion of power dynamics and accountability abuse in community building, check out [Tada Hazoumi's article](#)
- For recommendations on supporting students in times of trauma see: <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2020/06/03/seven-recommendations-helping-students-thrive-times-trauma>
- Several relevant twitter threads on faculty support for students facing harassment and trauma from [Dr. Nicole Bedera](#) and [Crystal Lee](#)
- For a discussion of approach research and the academy from a decolonial lens, check out [Research as Ceremony](#) by Shawn Wilson (<https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/research-is-ceremony-shawn-wilson>)
- Access is Love [reading list](#) curated by Sandy Ho, Mia Mingus, and Alice Wong with resources for creating accessible spaces and on disability justice

*Note: for the actual blog post we would also like to have a list of suggested social media accounts to follow here

References

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