Welcomed By Design Episode 08 - Dr. Jay Dolmage

[Transcribed by Paige Branagan]

[Introduction]

[soft plucking instrumental music]

Lynn: Hi, I'm Lynn Priestley, and you're listening to Welcomed By Design. The show where we talk about the paths to making our futures inclusive, accessible, and welcoming to more than just your quote 'average user'. Or, in this episode's case, your average student. Because today, I'm joined by Dr. Jay Dolmage. Jay is a professor and chair of English at the University of Waterloo, who considers disability's relationship with higher education, and what we can do to make academia more inclusive. His work brings together disability studies, rhetoric, composition, and critical pedagogy, in ways that I found are approachable and more digestible than so much of academic writing today.

Lynn: His published books include *Disability Rhetoric*, and *Disabled Upon Arrival*. But the book of his we're going to be talking about today is *Academic Ableism*. To quote a little bit from the book's description, "Academic Ableism brings together disability studies and institutional critique to recognize the ways that disability is composed in and by higher education. As the antithesis of higher education often positioned as a distraction, a drain, a problem to be solved. Examining everything from campus accommodation processes to architecture, Dolmage argues that disability is central to higher education, and that building more inclusive schools allows better education for all."

Lynn: Back in February, Jay came to Pitt's campus to do a talk and workshop around *Academic Ableism*, with faculty and students here, and Dr. Jessie Male, who facilitated these events, connected Jay with our show. Folks who have listened to our trailer will know how excited I am for the opportunity to sit down with Jay. His piece, *Mapping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door*, was a huge inspiration for the framework of our show, and how we consider true 'front door access'. It even inspired our cover art. And I was also, admittedly, excited for the opportunity to correct my original pronunciation of his last name. But with this being my last interview on the show, it felt wonderfully full circle to have the very first Disability Studies scholar namedrop of our show be my final guest for recording, almost a year later. [2:30]

[Interview]

Lynn: So without further adieu, welcome to the show, Jay!

Jay: Yes, thanks for having me!

Lynn: So, I'm curious, since, um, as we said in the intro, you are a professor, so you've been on both the student and the professor side of things. When and how did your focus on ableism in higher education initially develop?

Jay: That's a great question, and it goes back a [laughs] long way. I think my earliest memories of school, um, are kind of wrapped up in [the] disability rights movement in Canada. So, my brother Matthew when I began school in a small town, in kind of north of Toronto um, he was being bused to a

segregated school. Uh, we as a family moved away for a year, my parents went back to school. We moved to Vancouver, a big city, and when we were there, my brother could go to school with my sister and I, right. It was, it was just the setup that way for him to be able to be there and in school with us, and it was kind of like my family realized like 'this is the way it's supposed to be'. Uh, we moved back to Gravenhurst and we we brought a case to the supreme, well we went all the way to the supreme court of appeal in Ontario for my brother's right to go to school in his neighborhood school. We lost. Um, so we moved. We moved to a different school board where he could go to school with the kids of the neighborhood and with my sister and I, and not very long after that our case did kind of set a precedent, in the sense that there were then other families that fought the same fight and won.

Jay: Um, for that right for students to at least have the choice to be involved in, you know, a regular classroom setting rather than a segregated school or classroom setting. So, but yeah, it wasn't perfect right? Like we--this was what was happening but it was always a struggle for inclusion, you know, and I very much remember all of the things, the positives that came from it. You know like my brother started a sign language club at our school, like this is the early 80s right? This was pretty cool, but there were a lot of really um, tough attitudes as well. And the other piece of that is that, we lived in-- when we moved, we moved to this town called Aurelia, which had at that time the largest institution. You know at one point it was called a school for the feeble minded, right? It was a segregated setting where people with disabilities were living. Um, and it was a very bad place, a terrible place. Um, but it also imprinted a lot of attitudes in the community around disabled people and inclusion, because it was also the largest workplace. So there was always like this edge to, you know, my family and um, our place in the community, our place in the school, um was my brother really getting the opportunities that he wanted and needed. How

were we going to be able to change attitudes in a city that was a town that was based around the segregation and exclusion of disabled people. That was the industry you know? Um, so those are my, those really are my strongest memories, were of those kinds of small um, gains and also setbacks. And that was central to my experience of education, and I mean I guess if I'm making it about myself, there really was a very ableist demand, I felt, that I needed to really do well. That I needed to prove something. Um, and I think that was shaping in the same way. But there were always opportunities for advocacy, and I was always involved in those ways from the time I was four or five years old, I mean I grew up in hospitals unfortunately, but also in court a lot of the time.

Jay: So, in any case, that's my background, and by the time I got to university then there became a really large disconnect for me. Because I had always been a student who was also in a way an advocate, and there was so much that needed to be done in K to 12 education in terms of inclusion. And in university it was this super elitist space, and I didn't see that same advocacy in any way. You know, a very competitive place. There wasn't a lot of thinking through disability as an identity, as a culture. And yet at the same time, by near the end of my degree, I came to kind of know and understand that there was a field that was growing of Disability Studies. And that whatever I was studying, there were arguments to be made for disability to be central to what I was studying. Whether that was English Literature or History, you know or whatever I was doing that, in my world, disabled people were always in the center. And that there was work then to be done in higher education to center the perspectives of disabled people, and also the cultural, the social and intellectual contributions of disabled people. It's complicated though, right? It's a lot, there's a lot of layers there to it and it's ongoing, right? I still have a pretty conflicted relationship with working in this place that also I think is one of the most ableist places and not just the University I'm at, but higher education in

general. It programs our culture to view disability in these very limited and problematic ways, and yet I'm also working within that.

Lynn: Yeah. Yeah, as a Design major who has also done a Disability Studies certificate, seeing how the discourse changes inside the certificate and outside of it is really interesting. Um, yeah thank you--thank you for sharing that. I think in--because of how often the kind of separation leads to lower visibility of um, disabled folks, like having stories like that fronted is so important because without seeing these stories visibly, the inaccessibility cycle gets perpetuated of assuming that disabled people are, uh, minorities so we don't have to design for disabled people and it just perpetuates. But, kind of moving into your book, Academic Ableism, as this study has developed or this area of focus has developed, I'd kind of like to start with some of the choices you made around writing the book itself. Because one thing I love about the book is that it practices what it preaches, in terms of it incorporates trigger warnings, there are references to other disability scholars who came before you, and the whole interdependence of the work in the disability study space, um, but you highlight 2 choices in your introduction that I would love to discuss. The first being putting theory in as plain language as possible, yet not avoiding theory that may not be legible on first pass. Um, so I was wondering what striking that balance was like for you as you were writing the book.

Jay: Sure. I mean, I should say: I wrote a book before this one, and it's not written in plain [language]--I mean I was trying, I think I was trying kind of innately. But, I think there's a--it's very much a part of the culture especially of something like a PhD program. And the power imbalances that there are when you're a graduate student. Um, and the era that I was--that we're talking about was kind of the tail end of the theory era. You know, of theory being so foregrounded.That there was a sense that if you ever wanted to publish something, it had to sound so smart [Lynn and Jay

laugh]. And that there were certain avenues for how to do that. And--and I do love theory and I love disability theory, and there was lots of it at the time. It was hard to read. There was a disconnect between some of the theory, and the community in a way. Some of the time some of the language, you know, so the first book because--and the first publications when you're really just trying to prove that you're smart. It sounds oversimplified. But I mean at its heart, that's what it is. There's some--some showing off with language that actually is not in service of clarity. It's not in service of connecting with an audience, or writing audience-oriented, you know, stuff? So yeah, but I think there was a conscious--conscious choice with Academic Ableism to say “I'm going to do this differently”. And also just like as a writing tick. I write really really, really crappy first drafts. Like really bad. And I write it all out, and none of it makes sense, and then I have to revise, revise, revise, revise so much. And one of the things I used to do in revising is, I would write--I'd write like, begin a sentence with ‘simply’. And then it wouldn't be simpler. [Lynn audibly smiling] And so, got great feedback from friends, colleagues being like, “you know that you do this right?” [Jay audibly smiling] it's never simpler.

Jay: So then, that was part of the challenge like, can I rephrase something without taking away the complicatedness of it, right? It's not removing the depth of an importance of the thought. It's trying to find a way to slow down, and phrase it a little bit more accessibly, uh, through another go-round, and that's universal design right? I mean, on the simplest sense, the first principle of universal design is just like multiple--conveying information in more than one way. [Lynn audibly agrees] And usually we think of that in terms of like, text plus--like you know multi modality. But I just think even within a text, we can phrase and frame the same types of thoughts or ideas a variety of different ways, and then we're more likely to connect with the audience and the audience is more likely to get

something from which is the goal anyway. So, it's not easy. Hugely laborious to go through and try to realize, when you're saying something that's not very accessible. And then to slow down and try to build that through words, you know, in a more accessible way. But I think that now actually that's pretty much the only way I write, and for a long time it really was how I wanted to teach. I don't really lecture as a teacher, but even when I'm conveying information I want to be able to make it pretty straightforward. And I think maybe then the other thing I would say and it connects to some of the other work I'm doing now, but you know, I didn't tell this as part of my story but one of the things that happened with my family with the, um, with the institution in town was that my mom was actually one of the people who shut it down. And found um, you know, homes for people outside of institutionalization, and we were very close with a lot of those people. And I remember, you know, some of those folks being like, “you have this book, can I have a copy?”. This was my first book. And [I’m] feeling embarrassed and feeling like you know what, I've made this book inaccessible to a lot of people. Um, and yet, I say that I'm writing it from the history and the past that I just told you about. Why am I writing away from, you know, those people, who you know have been central, who I'm trying to listen to, in terms of the work that I'm doing. And trying to be responsive to. And, anyway so, that was part of the impulse too, was like, I want to write a book that any of the students who I'm writing this for, or any of the folks who are part of my, you know, the world that I see, that I experience can also have access to.

Lynn: Yeah, that's--that's so crucial. Um, I was really appreciating the way that there are like, both a more extensive and then kind of a summation, a reminder. Um, I felt like everything stuck, much more, because I could read through it and then I got that reinforcing, like here's the ‘key takeaways’ bit. And I was definitely--as I was reading it I was like, I wish every book was written with this style. And in the second book, or the the

second move that I found so interesting, um, and was very excited as a digital accessibility person was, so you made the book open access, which for listeners, quick gloss, distributed online free of barriers like access charges, licensing, copyright restrictions, but also in addition to making it open access, you made it an accessible digital format. So accessible to assistive technologies, which so much of the web is not. And I'm curious, did you experience any pushback in advocating for either or both of these things in the publishing process?

Jay: I think maybe pushbacks not--like, I was lucky. I want to--I want to be careful to sort of frame this in terms of, because I think there'll be people listening saying, 'I want my book to be open access too', and that's good. I think that they should want that. I'll say a couple things. One is like, open access does not always mean accessible. A lot of stuff that we call open access is simply free, but that does not mean it's been--it's been created in a way that makes it accessible. In fact, a lot of that stuff is not, because--because it's free, there aren't some of the same levers that we have for for forcing big proprietary journal you know, publishing companies like Relish Taylor and Francis. There's at least laws that say you have to make this content accessible. And that doesn't apply as much for some things--some open educational resources other open access materials. No one's really paying attention to the fact that like, yeah, it's free, but these are you know, PDFs that are not even searchable, or scannable, or whatever it is right? So, one piece to make it open access was that the timing was good. I had been down to the University of Michigan for a workshop there, that was--that brought together a whole lot of different people who did digital access, to create guidelines for building accessible books. And those wouldn't necessarily be free books, but, you know as university presses were beginning to think about digital publication, they needed some guidelines and those were our international guidelines, and I was part of that group. I was not a driving force there, but I was involved.

Um, as well as the journal that I edit, Canadian Journal Disability Studies is an open access journal, and we really try to do accessibility carefully and well. So I don't think I would have advocated for open access if I couldn't have been sure that what was created was going to be accessible. So there's that. But also it was University of Michigan press and they'd been involved in these guidelines, and they knew and got the argument that I made which was, this book has to be. The arguments that the book is making are so synced up with--it would be hypocritical. And sorry, but there's lots of disability studies work out there that's making an argument for access, but it costs two hundred and eighty pounds for the hard print copy of the book, you know, and I just--that's an exaggeration, but not by much. There was a sense that I could make that argument to the University of Michigan they knew and understood that like yeah this is--if there's a book that we're going to do this with this should be--should be it. And, the other thing I would say is, if anybody out there is listening and want to make their book open access, I'd love to help you make the argument for it. And one of the arguments is that actually university presses usually sell more books when a book is open access. I think that's probably the case for my book, that more print copies sold because it was so easy for people to open the book up and have a look and see whether they were interested or not, without committing. Um, and I guess the bottom line is you just want the most people reading the work as you can--as you can get. So, yeah, if there are people out there listening I'd love to help you make that argument and find the resources to do it because we need more of it. And we need to help university presses help us do it.

Lynn: Absolutely yeah. I always get so excited when I see open access books, but I got extra excited when I saw you taking note about digital accessibility, as someone who's taught specifically about making PDFs

accessible. This is like my [Lynn laughs and trails off]

Jay: Yeah, well, it's great that you get taught about that. Like, I work at a--a huge Computer Science and Engineering school at the University of Waterloo. And it's very fought hard to find graduate students who know how to do that. It's a little bit mind boggling actually, because it's just not that hard and yet it’s very important.

Lynn: Yeah I always try to start by like showing what the screen reader is understanding from like a flat PDF that has no information and it usually like hits pretty hard, of like, oh we really need to be doing this because it's nonsense unless we don't--unless we do. So, moving ahead after you have gotten the book published both open access accessible, uh, digital formats. And now you do book talks and workshops on the book like the ones you did at Pitt. And I'm wondering if--kind of as you've done these talks and workshops multiple times, what do you find is typically like the most surprising concept for audience members?

Jay: You know what? Okay so, usually giving a talk gives me an occasion to learn some--learn that sense of nerdy. But it just is like, I like it, I like--obviously I haven't been physically traveling places. But even when I'm not, virtually having a conversation with somebody about their program, you know about what their students are like, you know, getting a sense of what the kind of mission of the university is all those things are really interesting, and I like to kind of dig in and learn more. I think often the most surprising thing to people are the histories of their universities, how tied up those often are in eugenics. And this very--you know, the history I'm talking about of institutionalization. That institution in Aurelia, you know, the people who lived there were seen as research subjects for

you know, doctors at University Of Western Ontario and other places who would travel there. You know the person who became the Galton chair of eugenics at the University College in London, got that job because he worked at that institution. So there's always been this connection between higher education and forms of incarceration. Be they--you know, Indigenous or Native residential schools, immigration stations, institutions schools schools for, the, you know, quote unquote schools like the one in the community that I grew up in. So, but then to find out that so much of the research base of many universities is based on eugenic research as well. So that was eye opening for me at Pitt when I was there, I think it was eye opening for people there. Because it's not the history that we talk about. And then I think the other most surprising thing is that students are not getting nearly the kind of like, help or assistance or accommodation that people think they are. And the systems that are in place to help students are very, very limited. To the degree that something like around the order of two-thirds of students with disabilities in the United States are not seeking help at all, because the help that's there is not very much. So, I guess like from start to finish it’s sometimes pretty eye opening to folks and--and I think especially because I give talks in English departments or Design departments in fields that kind of like to celebrate the innovation that’s involved in teaching. It's eye opening to know and understand that most of the accommodations students get are just extended time on tests and exams. [Lynn audibly agrees] And so if you don't give tests and exams then great, good for you. But, what are you doing to make that, you know, more modern or progressive classroom teaching learning experience. How are you thinking through access in that? And most people unfortunately aren't, because they're assuming that there's a system there that's already helping students.And in truth the--the vast majority of students are not--not seeking that help or accommodation at all for a variety of reasons.

Lynn: Yeah, that under reporting statistic. I--I had a feeling it was going to be higher, uh, than expected. But when I heard two thirds I was like, this makes sense unfortunately, but uh, it's startling.

Jay: I know, yeah.

Lynn: But kind of tracking back to the first thing you mentioned about the--the tie to eugenics. I found that to be--I saw a lot of surprise in, when it was brought up just even more broadly with like U.S. History, in Disability Studies classes not even specifically with the university [Jay audibly agrees], because a lot of people don't know that it's a part of our history. But I think it's, in the context of the university you show how it's been built into the university with spatial metaphors, that I think make it really clear how it's like at the foundation of the institution. Um, and the first of these metaphors is the steep stairs. Anyone who has seen the Cathedral of Learning knows, [Jay and Lynn laugh] students are familiar with stairs being central to our university's image. But Cathy, as we lovingly refer to her as, has elevators as well, but they don't get visually associated with the Cathedral by any means. So I'm wondering if you could explain for listeners kind of what the steep stairs metaphor is, and why the stairs being so central to the image of the university, even if there may be ramps or elevators, matters so much. [25:52]

Jay: I mean, I guess like I think there needed to be another way to talk about ableism, right? A way to--a way to metaphor, and for whatever reason that one has worked because I think, almost everybody can associate with some architectural feature on our campuses. And, if we're being honest, stairs are the most ubiquitous design feature. And you could say you kind of associate that with the past, with something like the Cathedral of Learning and you know, very interesting history around that building and what it was supposed to do, right? Not just architecturally, but like

ideologically, metaphorically. But also just like the fact that all these new buildings, like, have stairs that are so central to what they're doing. It's just not--stairs are just not going anywhere. In the sense that we--we create retrofitted access to keep the stairs but also in new buildings we still see the stair as like the central bit of language or grammar, that we use to make the message of the architecture of our campuses. But of course it also fits with that eugenic idea of stepping society, right? There's a famous eugenic, very pseudoscientific graphic that sort of shows the levels of intellect of different grades of labels of intellectual disability, for example. Also that idea of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps. It's always worked, and I've always thought it working is getting up--doing that up a steep set of stairs and we work harder, you know, we'll get there but also the University is supposed to step society. Some people are supposed to get higher and other people are supposed to be kind of arranged below. It works as a kind of line graph in a way, the stairs do. I don't--they're just like you know it could have been other things, that could have been gates, like I write a little bit about gates. But gates are really so much more about--about maintaining the kind of private function, which is again, eugenic. But keeping the community out of campus and I think we just see stair--the other thing is like, if you really think about it, we just spend a lot of time on stairs throughout our campuses, [Lynn audibly agreeing] even flat ones. Um, there are few exceptions to that. But yeah.

Lynn: Yeah, no, the stairs really resonated because when I was prepping for this interview and talking to a friend about it, they immediately brought up there's no elevators to success, you have to take the stairs. [Jay audibly agreeing] And how that sentence doesn't really-- it immediately shuts other, like, certain forms of mobility out.

Jay: Yeah, I guess the other thing I should--most important thing to say is like stairs have very powerful history for, for disabled people, right? In terms of

like the capitol crawl, a famous--a protest in Washington, and what took place across the stairs, right? And very intentionally so, to show the lack of access that disabled people have had to, uh, policy making and law and influence in those spheres. So, you know it works on campuses, it works in like politically in terms of um, political advocacy. So I'm stealing it too, I didn't make this up right? Like this is something that's been ubiquitous. Yeah, and I'll just say like, you know what with my brother we carried a ramp around with us all well, a literal, you know, it was aluminum, it was heavy, it folded up. We needed to have a ramp with us all the time because we were constantly dealing with unexpected sets of stairs. [Lynn audibly acknowledges] So you orient your life that way when that's the way you've grown up. So, and I think, but I do think a lot of--a lot of people have that similar kind of experience. [29:50]

Lynn: Yeah, the bringing around a portable ramp, immediately makes me jump to the retrofit. Um, which is kind of the second architectural metaphor you discuss, and in academia it translates to the accommodation. But this idea that because we are designing with metaphorical stairs, then we have to go back and tack on something to make the course, or the learning experience more accessible quote unquote because access and accommodations, as you point out, are not the same thing. But in your book, you really problematize the accommodation, bringing up metaphors like the stair climbing wheelchair, and the defeat device. And I was wondering if you could walk listeners through these concepts, and talk about why accommodations are not enough.

Jay: Sure, um, I mean we talked--so to begin with, there's the kind of labor of getting the kind of medical and legal verification, certification, that you need to have to access those rights. You know, there's just a lot of hoops to jump through. It's costly. It can be stigmatizing, that they all happen across the backdrop of a culture that says you should be individually

working harder, and you will be individually measured. It's a system in which your failure is an individual failure, not a result of systemic inequality, or inequity, or inaccessibility, you know. So that's the first part, and that process does individuate people, right? It says whenever there's a problem, we treat it kind of like whack-a-mole. Like a disability diagnosis pops up, you hit it within accommodation, everything's equal and even and it's gone, right? Which gives no space for disability as an identity or a culture.Or at no place in the syllabus except for in that extra, you know, boilerplate language at the end that says if you have a disability, you can get this. And we know that disability should be everywhere, [Jay laughs] right? Um, in whatever classroom we're in. We also know and we can sense when something is an add-on, when something is done halfheartedly, and when something is done just because it's mandated. I mean we lived through that--the pandemic, right? It's like wearing a mask on your chin, you know, and your nose and your mouth are out, like you're not really wearing a mask at that stage, but there's a statement there that we know and understand that you're just doing it because you have to.

Lynn: Right.

Jay: That--that sense of like, we've done what we're supposed to do, is very recognizable all across our campuses just as much as the stairs are. Because the accessibility features that we build are so inadequate, [Lynn audibly agrees] right? You know we--we have, we spend $4000 on a button to have a door that will open up that leads to a set of stairs, you know. Or sometimes we spent a thousand bucks on a button that leads us into uh, a vestibule and the next door doesn't have a button.

Lynn: Yeah.

Jay: It's just all mismatched. It hasn't been, you know, thought through from the

perspective of a disabled person and what they need. It's been thought through by somebody who's saying, “this is what the minimum was, here you go. You have it.” So, the retrofit I think is really powerful as a way to remind people like, no, the systems that we have for building something like equity, are really not doing what they're supposed to. And there's a reason why two-thirds of students are not going to seek help, because the help is inadequate. It doesn't mean that people who work in Disability Services aren't doing a good job, they are. They're working hard. The operating budget is so low. The number of people working in those offices is so low that you get what you pay for, [Lynn audibly agrees] you know, and what you pay for is the minimum. Uh, so, in a way like it all is set up--the steep stairs and retrofit are also--it's such a Three Little Pigs thing, right? Or Goldilocks type scenario. Like, I want there--I want to be getting to the point of talking about other ways to think it through. There has to be some porridge that's the right temperature, you know? But to get to that, people need to understand that the solutions that we think we have, are--are doing less good work than we think they're doing. And that's why I think the retrofit is a powerful one, you know. And something like this a stair climbing wheelchair, giving that example, you know that instead of taking the stairs down, we would rather spend twenty--thirty thousand dollars to build a wheelchair so that the individual, then, can get up those stairs, instead of just taking the stairs down [Lynn audibly agrees]. And that kind of thing happens--that happens all the time.

Lynn: Yeah.

Jay: You know, instead of changing the culture of higher education, we--architecturally, we do a lot of things to keep the stairs. And pedagogically, we do a lot of things to keep teaching the ways we were teaching in the 50s and 60s. Which is not very progressive. Even though the general public likes to think that universities are full of like, uh,

radicals. You know, we keep doing the same things over and over again in a way, because they were done to us [Lynn audibly agrees]. And a lot of the--a lot of the retrofitted measures we have for--for even kind of bringing in any form of diversity, not just disability. A lot of it is designed to maintain the status quo.

Lynn: Yeah. The--the whack-a-mole metaphor is so--like very much resonates because, uh, nothing is being done with accommodations to change to the foundation of the class. So the accommodations are just going to keep needing to be applied, whereas we could alter the foundation. Um, which kind of on that note, um, you also compare it to Battleship, which [Lynn audibly smiles] in the process of getting accommodations, I can relate to in which you just kind of toss your diagnosis over and see--see what it lands on accommodation wise. Um, but I'm curious instead of--instead of Battleship, instead of whack-a mole, what board game [Jay laughs] or video game or--what should we be trying to emulate instead?

Jay: Oh that's such a good question, it’s a really, really good question. Because I also talk about, like um, shoots and ladders. [Lynn audibly acknowledges] Which in Canada, we call snakes and ladders which is even scarier [Lynn laughs]. Um, but also shows the kind of like active ways that students are kind of pulled back, you know, like it's not always just passive. But I would--we'd need to build something new, right? Like we would need to start from the ground up. Um, there would need to not be I think--such a great question because I think the biggest piece would--would be, it would need to be the kind of game my kids don't like to play. Because I try to play games with them and they're like, “wait, is there a winner in this game?” and I'm like, “no, there's no winner” then they don't want to play it. [Lynn laughs] They're like that's not a real game, you're making that up.

Lynn: There's got to be a trophy.

Jay: Yeah. But that is academic culture, [Lynn audibly agrees] you know? I feel that right now we're heading into exam week here on my campus and you just feel it, everywhere you go.

Lynn: Yeah.

Jay: Students are interviewing for co-op jobs at the same time, another thing that pits them against one another.

Lynn: Mhm.

Jay: And yet I know that when these students go into their co-op jobs and into their careers, their employers are really frustrated that they can't collaborate.

Lynn: Mhm.

Jay: That they're still in the mode of competing with one another. But, this is what we've built, [Lynn audibly agrees] and it's too much like a game, actually, if that makes sense [Lynn audibly agrees]. It's too much a sense of each individual player for themselves, too much a sense of there being a fair--fairness and meritocracy to it, you know? Too much a sense of there being limited resources and so only some people get to succeed. So, that might be my answer is like, actually we need to--we need to move away from that metaphor of there being winners, and losers, and competition, and it being individual. [38:24]

Lynn: Yeah.

Jay: And also I guess like, there's interesting stuff in Game Studies around failure, right? But I think so much of the narrative of higher education is, you're constantly improving. And that is just ableism in a nutshell. Mentally, physically, socially--in all these ways you're constantly improving. And at the same time you're making sure to meditate and do yoga so that you're--you know, not burning out as you get better and better. But that is not a learning curve.

Lynn: No.

Jay: So learning involves recursion. It involves failure. It involves sometimes starting all over again, it involves taking time off, it involves--like all of these things that we don't narrate as being part of a student experience in higher education. And I think that that's the issue, right? We need to understand what--the funny part is like there's lots of research out there about like, what good learning looks like. Like effective learning looks like. And it does not match up at all with how we plan our curriculum. It doesn't match up with a day. A 50 minute little races to learn.

Lynn: Mhm.

Jay: It doesn't match up with the fact that we demand all these deliverables at the same time, and then we time people in their ability to regurgitate information. Or even, it doesn't match up with the idea that, you know on the Pitt homepage, there's--what's showcased are super learners, who didn't even learn any of that stuff at Pitt, you know? So yeah, like complete different board [Lynn audibly agrees] is in a way what we need right? Um, and--and a different set of outcomes, and a different sense of what those

outcomes should be. We invest an unbelievable amount--I say this a lot, but we invest an unbelievable percentage of the GDP in education. And all of it is seen as an investment, right? But the resources that we put in for people with disabilities are seen as somehow extra.

Lynn: Mhm.

Jay: And we're not getting very good outcomes in terms of the ability of students with disabilities to succeed and thrive. Um, and that those should be seen as investments just the same as they are for any other student. But that doesn't tend to be the discourse that we have so, yeah. That's not really answering your question. I didn't answer your question. That doesn't mean it wasn't a really, really good--isn't a really, really good question. And I wonder what listeners think about it too. Yeah.

Lynn: Yeah, no I think that would be a really cool call to put out to see [Jay audibly agrees]--see what board games, um.

Jay: Totally.

Lynn: Or design that new board. Um, the best I could come up with was like Animal Crossing, because it's like terraforming, you're continually making your environment more movable, there's no real levels, you're just kind of doing pro-social things.

Jay: Yeah, yeah.

Lynn: No, whole new board. I'm excited to see--see what that board game ends up being.

Jay: Yeah I mean there--there are games that are based around education,

right? There's versions of The Sims, there are like things like this, but they all just re-circulate the same tropes of, you know, this is--this is how your life goes well, or this is how it all falls apart. You know, um and the stakes are high, right? I think that's the other piece, the stakes are very high.

Lynn: Yeah, yeah. So I'd like to move into a couple crowdsourced questions. Um, the one I'm really curious to hear your answer to is, so you--you talk about universal design in the book as kind of the third metaphor, this idea that we should be designing a learning experience that is flexible to the greatest extent possible. And so this person wanted to know if you share the concerns of some advocates that universal design learning may contribute to disability invisibility. Um, and they say, “I agree wholeheartedly that retrofitting is not accessibility, but I'm wondering about the students with invisible disabilities who often won't seek accommodations and will quote unquote pass um are there ways in which UDL, universal design learning, while pragmatic, may dissuade identification, imply biases against identifying as disabled, or work against disability politics?”

Jay: Totally. I mean, that's the answer. Yes, [both Jay and Lynn laugh] yes, and you--you were already seeing a very strong co-optation of universal design. A very, you know, it's a misunderstanding of what universal design is, right? But it's already been reappropriated by the university in a kind of neoliberal sense of parroting kind of those values, but then applying them to things that would never be universal design to begin with. Like, they get ‘checklistified’, and I write about that in the book, but like, as like little pedagogical hacks and tricks. Tips and tricks, you know. And that's just not universal design. My response to that always is: Use that. Your university definitely has a page somewhere where they talk about universal design and where they state their commitment to it. But I think a

lot of, especially offices of Disability Services, have been pushed to have to develop universal design policies because it appeals to upper administrators as a way to not extend accommodations.

Lynn: Mhm.

Jay: This would be great if everybody did this, right? Then we wouldn't have to offer any accommodations. So the first piece I would say is like, offices of Disability Services are--need to be supported. [Lynn audibly agrees] Even though we know the problematics of the retrofitted approach. I see those offices as being somewhat nimble, at least over the past decade, in being more flexible around documentation. In thinking things through, and advocating for classroom practices to change, and not just to have temporary one time only accommodations. Um, sometimes as being places where they're listening to disabled students, which is very important, right? Sometimes places where they're driven by disabled students, or they're connected with a disability cultural center, right? Or they're connected with an office of equity, rather than a student services office. And that there's things that can be done that are really important when that's the setup, right? [Lynn audibly agrees] But to me, then also if your university talks about universal design--universal design was an architectural movement that was talking about building things from the ground up completely differently. It's not a bunch of small little things. So to me, then you start having to talk about the big things.

Lynn: Mhm.

Jay: On my own campus: Student workload. Can we get an audit of--of how much work students are being asked to do? And can we be open minded about reducing the workload? That would be universal design, right? What are the biggest stressors, if we have a mental health crisis on campus?

How can we build things differently? Why do we still use grades? How can we have a harm reduction approach to any kind of testing? And an elimination of any timed testing--there's no research that shows that makes students perform better, study better, retain more information, you know, um, big things, right?

Lynn: Yeah, yeah.

Jay: So why is attendance mandatory on campuses that are physically inaccessible? I don't know, like, I'm just throwing these things out there but like that's--to me, that is the impetus of universal design, is to think about the big things. And have conversations and discussions about the big things. Doing those things would not remove the individual agency and advocacy of--of an accommodation, right? Um, but to me, that bigger piece of like thinking about design as a verb, and our campuses as places that are actually constantly changing, um or should be thought of as influx not built and finished.

Lynn: Mhm.

Jay: Um, then we can take aim at some things that we've just accepted as part of what we do for way too long. So yeah, does that--I don't know, does that answer the question or not? I--I guess you're never going to get around the issues that are there in terms of building disability culture on a campus that doesn't want to see disability as a culture. It wants to treat it as a medical diagnosis. Um, and that is all over the curriculum because disability is all over the curriculum. But it's all over as a thing to be cured, or eradicated.

Lynn: Yeah.

Jay: So, we're not going to--I'm sorry this sounds this is going to sound defensive but like, universal design can't be blamed for making disabilities maybe perhaps more invisible on campus, when what we have are multi-billion dollar research agendas that are designed to eradicate disability. That are telling people that we should rather be dead than disabled. And that the only solution for disability is rehabilitation, and you know, therapeutic approaches that minimize it. That's the issue that's creating a sense of passing and invisibility on our campuses. Um, so anyway that sounded very defensive but I just want to put--put it into that context--that is the world that we're living in. [48:15]

Lynn: Yeah, no, um, I think it's a good point. I think universal design, what you were talking about making spaces that--that change. I'm thinking of Joe Shoes talk about how we need to be creating, like, constellating spaces where every new learner in the space becomes a new point and it changes the overall constellation. [Jay audibly agrees] But if we're doing that that means that like--and we're genuinely inviting people to come change the space and not having hostile attitudes towards disability, then it opens up the space for the disabled students to come in and talk about identity, and bring culture into the space. Which is something I would love to see happen [Lynn laughs].

Jay: Yeah, well and there's been a disconnect too between--that the roots of universal design are in usability, are in getting feedback from users, [Lynn audibly agrees] right? And in particular, having spaces, curriculum designed by disabled people, right? Designing through disability, as an identity and culture. Um, and having that kind of sense that that design is accountable, right? Instead the kind of metaphor we get of universal design is like: “Here's how you fix things for good forever.”

Lynn: [Laughs] Yeah, yeah.

Jay: And that's just not it. That's not the spirit, that's not the history of the movement. It's not that. So I think that the person asking that question is very astute, and correct to be worrying about the ways that universal design is getting picked up and talked about. Because it's not--it's very different from what I think we should be defining and understanding universal design as. And at the same time, there's always going to be a goal which would be that on our campuses we see disability very differently than just that very limited medical model.

Lynn: Yeah.

Jay: And that--and I'm seeing progress with that on campuses. Um, and so that's the kind of thing whenever I talk to disability service professionals, you know, it's like where's the Disability Cultural Center? What ways can you promote, you know and-- and help disabled students be involved here. And building a culture and identity on campus that's not just your office.

Lynn: Mhm, yeah. You--you already have answered my question about what questions we should be asking, where we should be going. Um, so I think those are some great starting points for teachers and students to be asking about our universities. But, with that, thank you so much for joining us Jay! [Jay audibly acknowledges] This has been a really really interesting conversation.

Jay: Thank you so much for having me, and yeah I look forward to seeing it out in the world and um, if there's anything else I can do that--I guess this would be my--I keep doing this like, um, talk radio thing but like, anyone

out there who's listening [both Jay and Lynn laugh] my email address is just my last name at uwaterloo dot ca and if you have questions, or if there are ways I can help you, or think through some of the issues you're dealing with on your campus, or find resources for you, help you make an argument I really hope that I can do that. And I really hope you wouldn't hesitate at all to reach out. Because I think we need to counter that culture of everybody having to do things on their own, right? And build that interdependence and work together.

Lynn: Yes, yes, all my love for interdependence [Lynn laughs]

[Credits]

Emily V: Thank you for joining us this episode. We hold that citation and acknowledgement are inclusive acts, so, we want to give credit. This episode was produced by our new producer, Paige Branagan. Sound design is by Emily Kuntz, and the music for this episode is by Blue Dot Sessions. Other resources, like the articles and readings recommended by today's guest, can be found in our podcast resource library, which is managed by Emily Kuntz. The link to that library will be in the episode's description, along with the link for the transcript of this episode, done by Paige Branagan. For a debrief, fact check, and discussion of today's terms, check out our supplement for this episode.

We record at the University of Pittsburgh, which occupies the ancestral land of the Adena culture, Hopewell culture, and Monongahela peoples, who were later joined by refugees of other tribes (including the Delaware, Shawnee, and Haudenosaunee), driven here from their homelands by colonizers. We honor these traditional Native inhabitants of this place and uplift their historic, unique, and enduring relationship with this land, which

is their ancestral territory. We pay our respects to their Elders and their past, present, and future people, community, and culture.

If you have any questions, guest suggestions, or comments about the accessibility of this podcast, please don't hesitate to contact us through our email: welcomedbydesign at gmail dot com. And with that, this has been our eighth episode of Welcomed By Design. A huge thank you to Dr. Dolmage for taking the time to speak with us. We hope that you enjoy this episode, and maybe, you'll join us for our next one! Because we really have to do this more often, don't you think?

[End of Transcript]