Feminist Disability Studies Pedagogy

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Disability Studies, Universal Design, and Intersectionality

The goal of this paper is to raise awareness about systems of oppression and privilege, as related to ability and disability in the classroom, and to provide tools to create instructional and institutional transformation. Feminist analyses of privilege, oppression, and intersectionality provide a framework for looking at the diverse experiences of people with disabilities and our access to education. Many disability studies theorists argue for a model of “universal design,” which seeks to create architecture and instruction for the widest group of people possible. I argue, however, that although we should strive for universally designed objects and pedagogy, we must simultaneously keep dialogue about intersectionality and the individual experience at the forefront. Feminist disability studies theory and pedagogy urge us not only to take into account the many and varied bodily, mental, and psychological differences, but also to consider how race, class, sexuality, religion, nationality, and so on, can intersect with the disability experience.

Currently, privilege and oppression permeate our classrooms and thus facilitate learning and teaching opportunities for some students and teachers while restricting opportunities for others. By incorporating feminist ideas like those presented in Peggy McIntosh’s article, “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” we can challenge ourselves to examine not only the ways in which we structure our environment to fit a certain type of race and gender, but also how we socially and culturally create an academic system that privileges a certain type of body and mind (the able bodied) (95), thereby creating disability discrimination. Disability studies reveals and deconstructs the social manifestation of disability. Simi Linton highlights this perspective, and critical movement, in her foundational text, Claiming Disability:

We are everywhere these days, wheeling and loping down the street, tapping our canes, sucking on our breathing tubes, following our guide dogs, puffing and sipping on the mouth sticks that propel our motorized chairs. We may drool, hear voices, speak in staccato syllables, wear catheters to collect our urine, or live with a compromised
Linton denotes how people with disabilities, although having very different disability experiences, are frustrated and oppressed by the barriers that are socially and politically created. This view challenges the common “medical model of disability,” which describes people with disabilities as “deviance from the norm” (Linton 11) and as medical, psychological, and pathological problems that reside in individual bodies. Interdisciplinary disability studies scholars like Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Susan Schweik, and Paul Longmore, identify the ways in which disabilities are socially and culturally designated—and provide a space for persons with disabilities to reassess what they have been told about themselves (their medical, psychological, and/or general cultural experiences, and their rights). This recognition and awareness has propelled thousands to reclaim their disability identity with pride. The social constructionist or “social-cultural” model of disability articulated by disability studies scholars and activists lets the observer better understand how ability ideologies are constructed rather than inherent to the body or mind of a person with disabilities.

A typical example of the social-cultural model of disability identifies stairs as a barrier for a person with a physical or mobility-based disability. Stairs are created, as a ramp can be created, but we tend to privilege one type of structure (stairs) over another. This privileges one type of person, and simultaneously oppresses another person. Due in part, I believe, to the fear of resituating the disability experience as an individual issue or problem, there has been a strong movement toward universalizing access. The goal of “universal design” is to make every environment as accessible as possible to the largest number of people. In other words, we are creating physical objects and, now, instruction, for the widest and most diverse group possible. For example, many would consider a ramp an object of universal design, as it can be used by people who use wheelchairs, walk, or need to push a stroller.

By using universal design, we are constantly thinking through how we can make each object in such a manner that the most comprehensive group of people can use it. Universal design is a great practice. However, we need to be careful that, in our pursuit of large-scale access, we take into consideration what feminist history and scholarship has shown us. Although disability studies scholars and activists have demonstrated in many ways that the barriers are rooted in physical and social structures, not in individual people’s bodies, this does not mean that we can put forth access as simple modifications of a physical object to accommodate a larger group of people. Disability studies scholar Tanis Doe argues, “Universal design, on the other hand, is not and should never be a substitute for, or exclusive of, accommodation” (81). Human variation is simply too diverse to use a “one size fits all” methodology.

Universal design focuses on promoting large-scale access. There may be individual situations that also require accommodation, but there is little inquiry or discussion as to the complexities of individual
situations. I am suggesting that we use accommodation and universal design simultaneously to inform the physical and social environments of our classrooms and departments. To apply only universal design or individual accommodation would either leave gaping holes in access to academia and courses, by not seeing and addressing the intersecting dilemmas of privilege and oppression within the disability experience; conversely, it could situate the problem and solution as residing in individual bodies and environments, thereby reinforcing the false notion that disability is an individual problem (rather than a socially created barrier that can be, and often is, interconnected with additional forms of privilege and oppression).

Feminist Disability Studies Theory

Feminist disability studies scholars encourage us to move away from universalizing concepts of disability to reveal the multitude of disability experiences. The barriers for people with disabilities can go far beyond physical modifications. Garland-Thomson reminds us that we must use our feminist analysis of intersectionality while looking at categories of identity, like gender, sexuality, nationality, and disability. Garland-Thomson and Susan Wendell are two of the leading scholars in feminist and disability studies addressing these issues.

Disability experiences are often absent from women studies courses. Feminist disability studies scholars are urging women studies to bring the disability perspective into our discussions, research, and teaching on diversity. To avoid any thoughts of a unified disability experience, feminist disability studies encourages us to explore not only the ways in which the double-bind, or double-oppression, of sexism and ableism intersect and impact women with disabilities (Wendell 261), but vigilantly pushes us to explore how the various, additional cultural experiences of privilege and oppression influence the lives of people with disabilities.

Looking at able-bodied privilege as McIntosh looked at white privilege prompts us to start thinking about all the things that are physically created, like the staircase. All physical objects are manufactured for a certain type of body, mind, and/or emotion. These are physical, or object, privileges. There are also social privileges we grant certain types of people, such as recommendations for jobs, invitations to parties, and positive representation in movies, newspapers, and textbooks. To demonstrate how physical/object privileges and social privileges designate certain people as deviant, we can explore the ways in which society has or has not been constructed physically and socially for particular bodies, minds, and emotions. Here are a few examples of what able-bodied privilege might look like:

Physical-Object-Privileges

1. I can walk up the stairs to an apartment and not have them be barriers to my living or visiting friends there.
2. I can be at work or school, because I do not have to worry about whether or not people are wearing perfume.

Social-Privileges

1. People think of me as a sexual being, and they believe that I could be a good partner and parent.
2. I will do well on the SAT or GRE, because I was not routinely pulled out of a portion of my classes for speech, physical, or psychological therapy or testing.
Language: Social Privilege and Oppression

Physical/object privileges and social privileges are not negative in and of themselves. It is the imbalance in who has, or does not have, access to these privileges, and the logic and language used to justify the exclusion of certain people, that is negative and oppressive. Language can play a big role in social privileging. It can liberate or oppress students and instructors. It plays an enormous role in reinforcing and internalizing ableism in our classroom dynamics, from our syllabus to our readings and verbal exchanges. For example, to say that someone has “overcome her/his disability” posits disability as something negative to get over, rather than as something to live with and quite possibly live with happily. Saying that someone did something “despite” her or his disability makes it appear that the disability (rather than the physical barriers and negative social positioning) itself usually stands in the way of achievement and happiness and thus denotes disability as a personal flaw. “Overcoming” language, or ideologies, which Simi Linton also discusses in her book, Claiming Disability, support the idea that one must somehow negate or counterbalance her/his disability to achieve social recognition and success. It wrongly places responsibility on the individual to find access and accommodation. People with disabilities, like people who have not been labeled with disabilities, desire to simply be valued as everyday community members, be it hard-working, fatigued, famous, and/or reclusive. “Overcoming” language resituates the individual with a disability as solely responsible for his/her success and happiness, rather than placing responsibility on society for equal access to physical and social privileges.

Some oppressed groups, and/or some groups seeking equal rights, have reinforced this “ideology of overcoming” by situating people with disabilities as, “the ‘they’ that we are not.” This reinforces the separateness, or “Otherness,” of people with disabilities, despite the fact that both women and people with disabilities have had to fight for their rights and work to dismantle oppressive social structures and attitudes. Many women have been battling the idea that they are born inherently weak, less intelligent, and overly emotional (essentially disabled) for years. Women did not need to overcome their “inherent weakness”; they needed political and social change. Take, for example, an ad published by the National Organization for Women, which shows a picture of a little girl walking away, and says in big, bold letters, “This healthy, normal baby has a handicap. She was born female” (Banner 225). Below the picture, small print reads:

“When she grows up, her job opportunities will be limited, and her pay low. As a sales clerk, for instance, she will earn half that of what a man does. If she goes to college, she’ll earn less than many men with a 9th grade education. Maybe you don’t care—but it’s a fact—job discrimination based on sex is against the law. And it’s a waste. Think about your own daughter—she’s handicapped too. Womanpower. It’s much too good to waste” (Banner 225).

It is important to consider how this language, and women’s internalized feelings about themselves, situate persons with disabilities. The ad assumes that the reader does not have a disability, and/or that the reader views being disabled as a
negative thing. What this ad gets right is that it is society that constructs whether or not women succeed, depending on access to work and equal pay, just as many persons with disabilities’ success depends on access, accommodation, and equal pay.

Many women have been fighting against some of the major components of what it means to be disabled, just as some persons with disabilities, with nonmental, noncognitive, and non-emotional disabilities, have worked to prove that they are just as intelligent and rational as their able-bodied peers. The juxtaposition of “us versus them” situates all persons with disabilities, or persons with certain disabilities, as “the ‘they’ that we are not.” The language and the practice of able-bodiedness and/or mindedness say things like, “We are just as capable as men,” or “We are just as capable as the nondisabled.” These socially constructed ideas of who has ability (and who does not have ability), which are directly tied to access to physical/object and social privileges, reinforce the idea that in order to be a liked, loved, and/or respected member of a community, one has to be able to work, produce something, and not be dependent upon others. This ideology alone squelches the possibility for many of us of fully engaging with, appreciating, and loving those around us. It also ignores the ways we are all dependent.

Intersections with Disability Oppression: Ramifications

The ways in which we extend objects and social graces to certain people and not to others creates privilege and oppression. This is similar to, and directly tied to, how money greatly controls who is privileged and who is not. Various forms of privilege, like white privilege and class privilege, allow particular individuals to “cash in” additional physical-object and social privileges, leading to an ever-increasing disparity between the privileged and the oppressed. This is played out heavily in our academic institutions, starting from whom we admit to the university to whom we allow to succeed.

For example, although I face disability discrimination nearly every day in academia, my parents were able to spend the money to get me tested for a learning disability. This is where social privileges, my parent’s race and class privilege, fed into a physical/object privilege, the finances to get tested and receive the physical accommodations (books on cassette or CD). In many scenarios regarding students with disabilities, the students will probably never get tested and never know alternative formats for learning. Also, as is the case for many disabilities, proof of a disability through a doctor or psychologist’s test must demonstrate a significant difference in a particular type of ability level. The “disability” has to be severe enough for an individual doctor, psychologist, and/or academic institution to deem accommodations necessary. If my learning difference had been considered “mild” or in the “average” range, this would mean that my grades would have been significantly lower. I probably would not have been accepted to graduate school, and my chances for obtaining a well-paying job would be limited. Depending upon the intersecting forms of privilege and oppression, these junctures can greatly influence an individual’s future.

The idea behind universal design is to increasingly erase the requirement of getting individual testing to mark one’s bodily or mental difference as a means to acquire accommodations. It is a wonderful goal,
but as we transform the academic system in that direction, we must keep in mind the limits of universal design and the need to be vigilant about additional complexities and needs. The concept of universal design must always be tempered by a commitment to recognize and address unforeseen barriers and needs of individual students. Feminist disability studies pedagogy reminds us that we need to address these intersections with disability oppression through dialogue, awareness, and collaboration in our classrooms, departments, and academic institutions.

Understanding these various interweaving social-cultural positions often leads students and instructors to want to work together to make both the physical objects and space, and the instruction and learning, accessible.

Classroom Applications

I begin courses by handing out the syllabus in multiple formats (12 point font, 16 point font, low-contrast paper, and computer disk). In this instance, the instruction is universally designed, because I am providing multiple formats. The computer disk, however, would be the closest to a universally designed object, because specialized computers and software can make the text available in multiple formats (if there is access to computers and specialized software). Before the students even review the syllabus, this practice immediately raises awareness about the potentially differing needs in our learning environment, and encourages them to speak with me about their learning needs, regardless of their disability status and affiliation with disability services. Using methods like this sends a signal that the individual student is not solely responsible for providing an accessible environment, and hopefully tells the student that this environment is a disability-positive space. In some ways, this is a social privilege, because I am providing a social cue that recognizes accommodation and disability in a non-negative way. One goal is to encourage dialogue, and to try to learn about the different learning styles and barriers for my students. Encouraging a safe space and dialogue in large and small group discussions (and through email-chat or e-postings), can create an opportunity for an individual to let an instructor know that there is a barrier to her/his access to learning. Encouraging safe spaces and dialogue also provides the opportunity for individual accommodation, which may be used as a resource for new methods and outcomes of universal design. Students may use accommodations the instructor provides without the instructor knowing.

An additional way to make a course more accessible is to have a syllabus ready well before it begins, so that someone who has to arrange for books on cassette or CD can do so through the accommodations office. The instructor can send out an email before the first class to all the students, attaching the syllabus as well as directions for “universally designed” access to the classroom. If the instructor is open to working through learning needs with students, she/he can make this known in the syllabus. The instructor can let students know that they are willing to work with or without the university disability services and documentation letters. This can be liberating, because some students find disability services offices stigmatizing, and many cannot afford the testing that is required to obtain accommodations.
Find out how a person using a wheelchair would access various classrooms, because finding accessible doors, ramps, and elevators can be complicated and time consuming. Ensure that classroom space is accessible, so that a person with a mobility related disability is not forced to sit in particular areas of the classroom. Many computers already have some pre-installed, basic accessibility software. Knowing and teaching these tools can create physical access for some. Having access to this one universally designed object may be the difference between a 2.5 and a 3.5 grade point average for a student and between publishing and not publishing for a colleague.4

Very rare, but equally problematic to the typical dimensions of disability discrimination already presented in this paper, is when instructors discuss such ways to make things easier for students with disabilities—by not making them do all of the assignments or exams. This happened to me as a student a couple of times, and one time I even had to make the university administration force a professor to allow me to take an exam. Such social interactions, which some people may think of as kind, gentle, and/or forgiving, usually feel incredibly disrespectful, mean, and demeaning. We want access, not a way out of something. When people use such language, or treat accommodation as a joke, cheating, and/or pointless, they are telling people around them that they think of the individual as the problem, and as deficient, rather than recognizing the lack of accommodations as the root of the issue.

Universal design attempts to create access, and it can be implemented at the instructional and departmental levels. I am encouraging my department to make our space more accessible and inviting. For example, in our hallway we have a vertical flyer holder, with multiple slots, attached to the wall. Flyers about classes and requirements are organized in the slots. We can make this single item much more accessible to a wider group of people by buying a new horizontal pamphlet holder that holds the flyers, positioned lower, where it can be reached by most. People who use wheelchairs and people of short stature will have access to flyers, as well as most other people. If that is not an immediate option, we can at least make all the flyers available at the lowest level. In addition, we need to make each flyer accessible. We need high-contrast, low-contrast, and large-font copies readily available. Disk copies would be a single item that would be the most accessible to the widest group of people. This is an example of using universal design in creating an item. There should be a large-font and Braille sign that draws the attention of people passing by, making them aware that we have accessible formats for our departmental information. However, if we provide computer disks or CDs of our departmental information, as the “most accessible to all” design, we are potentially not addressing how the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and/or class issues might impact this access. If someone cannot afford the screen reader program, they might not have access after all. There may be specialized computer labs, but there are barriers in the accessible computer labs as well. Also, take into consideration how you would feel if you had to take the time daily to go to a “special lab” across campus because you are “different.” Universal design will, we hope, eventually demand screen-reading programs in all departments, if not all computers, because it does make each
space and each computer available to a larger group of people. Books and books on tape both need to be created and situated for access, but one type of physical/object privilege requires a doctor’s note. Imagine what it would be like if you had to get a doctor’s note to be able to check a book out of the library!

To escape some of the ableistic restrictions on learning, I teach and practice what I call “interdependency” in the classroom (Doe 11). I model interdependency from the onset of a course by acknowledging to the students that I, the instructor, am dependent on them in order to have a positive learning community together. I have someone read the syllabus aloud, and I explain to the students that I will need to depend upon them from time to time to read visual material aloud. This can really impact a student, as the university instructor is sometimes considered a pinnacle of able-bodiedness and mindedness. Instructors can come up with additional ways to demonstrate their relation to interdependency, like having one or two students help with monitoring class time, or writing things on an overhead as the instructor dictates a mathematical equation.

When we support each other in learning I call this “practicing interdependency.” We do this by creating physical and social privileges for one another where they do not exist. The students have the option to obtain participation credit by practicing interdependency with their peers and by articulating how they made our learning environment more accessible by assisting another individual or individuals. Some students have read material aloud for another, recorded it onto tape, provided notes to someone who was out sick, or rearranged the classroom every day to make it accessible for people with mobility disabilities. I was impressed with the dialogue between students when they were mutually trying to figure out how to address a learning need that has not been addressed before. A student identified that she had a learning barrier because she could not sit for long periods of time. After their discussion, the students came up with a simple social and physical adjustment: she stood up or lay down on the floor for parts of the class. It was an easy solution, but stigma often blocks people from taking such actions. Based on our workshop, the students also describe how interdependency works and where and why privilege and oppression surface.

I think interdependency radically changes the classroom culture and promotes an ethic of caring and community building (rather than competition and hierarchy). I have had many instructors say to me that it is impossible to address each individual’s needs when you have a class of fifty, one hundred, or more. I agree that it may be an impractical task, but this could mean that large lecture classes are inaccessible. However, when multiple individuals work together to make the environment accessible, it suddenly becomes significantly easier to meet all the various needs in the classroom, including the instructor’s needs—which is rarely discussed or considered. Practicing interdependency is perhaps especially pertinent in larger classes. In Talking About Disability (1998), Elaine Seymour and Anne-Barrie Hunter highlight that about one-third of students with disabilities are already coping with barriers by “collective action” and reaching out to people for support (119). I believe I am simply extending and formally recognizing this by practicing interdependency. Part of practicing inter-
dependency, however, is about creating an awareness of, and articulating how, some bodies and minds are normalized through readily available physical and social privileges. If you do not have teaching assistants with whom you can work, you can try working with student-peer facilitators. Creating smaller cohorts where a student-peer facilitator, who is familiar with you, the course, and universal design and accommodation, will make it more likely for individual student needs to surface and be met. The smaller cohorts can meet in and/or outside of class to work on course material together, and an instructor can guide and mentor the teaching assistants and/or peer facilitators.

It is important in large classes that all material is accessible in multiple formats (visual and auditory) both in and out of class. For example, if you give a lecture, make sure you have solid notes available in a text format. Some students will probably be willing to create and share detailed notes with their peers, especially when it is a community value to work interdependently. Posting lectures or detailed notes online can also create tremendous access for the person living with a chronic illness, who may miss many classes, and for the person who has a visual, cognitive, and/or hearing related disability, because they may have software that can grant them access to what you want the students to learn.5

When writing on a white board it is best if the instructor either does not continue talking until finished writing, or if the instructor can request that a student write for her/him. Someone who relies on reading lips will miss everything an instructor says, if her/his back is to them. Similarly, it is important to lecture on and discuss material that has been read. Some people need to hear it, discuss it, write it out, or even act or draw it out to truly learn material. Students can practice interdependency by working with classmates outside of class, implementing alternative learning methods. As needs arise, students can help address the barriers, but be careful not to disclose people’s disabilities. There can be detrimental consequences if they are subsequently discriminated against. It is key to create both as accessible an environment as possible and a classroom culture where people with disabilities are safe in expressing the additional barriers they may face in their learning or teaching.

We all regularly use tools—physical and social privileges—in our teaching and learning, but we expect them to the degree that we do not even really see them. Practicing interdependency raises awareness of the divide between those who have and do not have these privileges and works to address these inequitable barriers. The goal is for everyone to learn, and to demonstrate that they have learned, the material. It should not matter in what form that is achieved. Not addressing the barriers is really allowing some students to have a key to an exam while prohibiting others. One would be allowing access to the information, which will/might be on an exam, meanwhile prohibiting others. Because it is a classroom value to share ideas (i.e., to participate), we need to ensure that the ability to learn and share ideas is attended to for everyone. That is why I often acknowledge practicing interdependency formally, as part of the participation grade. At mid-quarter and/or the end of the quarter, you can request that the students write about their understanding of, and experiences in, practicing interdependency, both in how they assisted and were assisted through various physical and
social privileges. This is a way to assess both participation, and their understanding of this theory and method. However, I must note that students often utilize this method just as readily when it is not a formal part of their grade, but rather just a classroom-community value. I have observed that students can have tremendous power in creating social change around accessibility.

Conclusion

From course requirements to the physical space of a department, students, faculty, and administrators have access to building, reinforcing, or breaking down barriers. Many of the students who have participated in my class addressed not only issues within our classroom, but also in the larger university and their personal lives. Institutions can provide enormous and swift changes to make academia truly available to all people. Individuals and departments, however, do not have to wait, or depend upon the larger institutions, to make their learning environments more accessible and welcoming. Using what disability studies calls “Universal Design” and using feminist theories of privilege, oppression, and intersectionality in your dialogue with students and instructors about disability and intersectionality can alleviate some of the immediate oppression in classrooms and departments. The feminist disability studies pedagogy that emerges will provide an opportunity for students to make it known that they need an accommodation that the universally designed object or instruction is not providing.6

Feminist disability studies pedagogy reveals to us that not just the physical/object privileges need to be addressed. By dialoguing together about social privileges as well, we are less likely to neglect additional cultural forms of privilege and oppression that intersect with a student’s and/or instructor’s learning and teaching in the classroom. Therefore, academic institutions and instructors should not only be urged to make “reasonable accommodations,” but also, or rather, be encouraged to collaborate on ways to create access for all on an ongoing basis.7

NOTES

1. This is in contrast to the “accommodation model,” which addresses an individual’s need for accommodation. This model is problematic, because it situates the disability, rather than the social and physical barriers, as the problem.

2. I would like to thank the following people who have engaged with me in topics related to feminism and disability studies, helped with editing, and/or supported my research: Joelle Brouner, Dennis Lang, Angela Ginorio, Rose-marie Garland-Thomson, Tanis Doe, Charity Ranger, David Allen, Shirley Yee, Sara Goering, Chad McMullen, Paula Knoll, and the American Association of University Women.

3. A few scholars claim that a disproportionate number of nonwhite students, particularly black male students, are put into specialized classes in K-12 schools. These students are often diagnosed as having some form of learning disability. Multiple issues need to be addressed here, such as the intersections of race and ethnicity with disability and the history of pathologizing people of nonwhite ethnicities. I wish to remind the reader and researcher, however, to be cautious about resituating people with disabilities as abnormal, deviant, deficient, and problematic. By being concerned with the barriers for people with disabilities and people of color in learning, we can tease out some of the dimensions of racism and ableism in these scenarios. Please see the articles by: Reid and Knight; McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne; and Carter.

4. It is not only difficult to obtain accessible
software, it is also difficult to find the training on how to use it. I view training as a social privilege that is needed to have access to many physical/object privileges.

5. Always keep in mind that additional dimensions of privilege and oppression may block someone from these physical/object privileges—like time and access to a computer with specialized software.

6. When I used all of these theories and methods, as outlined throughout this paper, I received the highest rating, and highest “relative rank” possible for “evaluative and grading techniques” in the formal student evaluations. I do believe it takes awareness, however, by the students of the unfair privileging of certain types of bodies and minds to appreciate these teaching and grading practices.

7. I quote “reasonable accommodations,” because this terminology is used on many disability services forms, including the letters I have given to professors to let them know that I will need accommodations in their class. For me this term is an oxymoron, because any lack of accommodation is not reasonable, as it contributes to furthering multiple types of oppression.

REFERENCES


