

Disability Studies Pedagogy: Engaging Dissonance and Meaning Making

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Abstract: Student responses to disability studies pedagogy are influenced by the context in which they learn. This study examined student responses in two disability studies initiatives: one within a teacher preparation program that included American Indian students, the other within a stand alone, interdisciplinary course taken primarily by Americans of European descent. Course dialogue and students' written assignments were used to identify and categorize their responses. While some students readily engaged in critique of disability as culturally constructed, experiences of significant resistance related to positivist filters, adherence to individualism, and defense of identity-related norms. These responses are discussed as considerations for more effective pedagogy in this relatively new field.

Key Words: disability studies, critical pedagogy, student response

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Anticipating student responses is essential in developing disability studies pedagogy. Ultimately we hope to foster shifts in position and cultivate allies in the movement to transform dominant notions of disability. As a critical pedagogy, it is expected that student responses will include a mix of dissonance, as well as solidarity. Few studies have been conducted to directly examine this process within the field of disability studies (Cypher & Martin, 2008; Kniepmann, 2005; Thomson, 1999). In this paper, we reflect on student responses within two disability studies initiatives, each at a different institution. One initiative was embedded within a teacher preparation program that primarily consisted of American Indian students; the other initiative involved a stand alone, interdisciplinary course taken primarily by white, traditional age students. Each of the researchers was involved in teaching or developing the disability courses examined in this paper. The different contexts allow us to examine a range of student responses. As expected, students in the former situation generally embraced the opportunity for cultural criticism, while many students in the latter situation were significantly challenged by the questioning of dominant assumptions. In this analysis, we categorize and describe student struggles and engagement with the concept of disability as culturally constructed and discuss the implications for disability studies pedagogy.

Our approach to disability studies is grounded in sociology (Bogdan & Biklen, 1977), cultural studies (Hall, 1997), and critical pragmatism (Burbules & Berk, 1999), recognizing that disability is socially constructed through forces of knowledge and power that create oppression and exclusion. Disability studies does not deny that there are differences, either physical or mental, between people; rather, the significance of these

differences takes on meaning within particular discourse, social institutions and practices (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994). Our aim is to foster a framework for inquiry that identifies oppressive discourse in the context in which it is formed, coupled with a determination for social change (Dewey, 1927). This approach is distinguished from disability studies scholarship located in literary criticism and the humanities, which has less emphasis on forms of social power and advocacy (Abberley, 1999, p. 693). As a foundation for understanding students' responses, we begin with an explanation of our underlying assumptions about disability studies and considerations related to the learning context.

Disability Studies and the Learning Context

Our pedagogy is built upon the following three assumptions: (1) meaning is culturally shaped through shared experience; (2) power operates within culture to institutionalize certain values, practices and structures; and (3) culturally shaped oppression can be transformed. We adhere to the concept that transformation of oppressive discourse involves identification and rejection of associated assumptions, beliefs, practices, and structures. It is not adequate to simply reveal social injustices or focus on specific alternative outcomes, such as inclusive education. Substantive change requires understanding and explicit rejection of that which contributes to the injustice. As noted above, our aim is to give students a framework for and experience with critical inquiry, as an ongoing process. This goal is in line with Dewey's (1927) notion that democracy is the development of social intelligence. Through enduring the consequences of our actions, we adjust our thinking to generate increasingly rich and better experiences. Personal and social change are essential aspects of the process, as we are all implicated in the production and reproduction of cultural meaning and practices.

Our conception of criticality is different from the conventional approach to critical thinking which emphasizes the acquisition of cognitive skills, such as diagnosing invalid forms of argument and knowing how to make and defend distinctions. We do not find it sufficient to change individual thinking habits without challenging institutions, structures, ideologies, and relations of power that have engendered distorted thinking in the first place. Criticality "is recognized as having conscious political intentions that are oriented toward emancipatory and democratic goals" (Quantz, 1992, p. 448 - 449). Therefore, it does not simply engage in criticism (a charge critics have leveled against post-structuralism), nor does it peruse unreflective, uncritical "practical" social action. Our view is that unless students are thinking within specific socio-political and ethical contexts, generalized critical thinking simply enshrines many conventional assumptions in a manner that often teaches political conformity. We believe that criticality is a pedagogical practice, a definition of what we do and whom we are, not simply how we think (Burbules & Burk, 1999). As such, each of the authors has personal experience with disability and/or efforts to effect change in disability services, education, policy, and a variety of community contexts.

With the goal that students critically examine cultural assumptions, structures and practices, resistance is expected. The literature on critical pedagogy emphasizes students' beliefs and identities as a source for understanding this resistance (Ellsworth, 1989; Britzman, Santiago-Valles, Jiménez-Muñoz, & Lamash, 1993; Janks, 1995; McKinney &

van Pletzen, 2004). Students' investment or identification with disability-related norms will certainly influence their engagement with critique. We argue for consideration of at least two other major sources of dissonance and resistance. Most important is acknowledgement that a culturally constructed world view is fundamentally different from the dominant, positivist view in which knowledge is considered objective and outside of ourselves. For most students this way of thinking is taken for granted. It is a habit of mind and by definition not open to question. Even for those who are open to understanding the social construction of knowledge, it is rarely a quick or complete transformation. Students' openness is also likely to be influenced by situational factors such as time to attend to the complexity and challenge of considering fundamentally different beliefs and ideas. Related to this, the educational context in which they are encountering disability studies is an important factor to consider. Students in the teacher preparation program that was part of this study had the advantage of being immersed in the ideas over time and focused within a specific discipline. Students who are taking a stand alone course have the challenge of interpreting cultural critique of disability within the framework of their major discipline and other coursework. Some students come to disability studies with experiences, beliefs, identities, and situational factors that leave them open to cultural critique. For them, disability studies can be empowering and can contribute to the development of their criticality. For most students, the expectation of disability-related cultural critique can range from a potentially transformative experience to one of confusion, dissonance, and even defensiveness.

While much of the literature on critical pedagogy points to the importance of facilitating student self-reflection, consideration of the context in which they are learning may suggest a less targeted approach, at least initially. At an introductory level, opening the classroom to student reflection and personal beliefs can act to privilege the dominant notions they are likely to hold. While student-centered teaching is aligned with critical pedagogy, it is not effective if it reinforces dominant positions. Even when presented with narratives, perspectives, and information that challenges their beliefs, students who are highly invested or immersed in dominant ideologies are likely to reject or re-interpret them within this framework (Festinger, 1957).

A number of critical theorists suggest a directive approach to counter dominant positions. Dewey (1927) argued the importance of giving advantage to marginalized voices and perspectives in the democratic process. More specific to the learning process, Gramsci (1973) emphasized the importance of exposing students to a body of theoretical work through didactic means if necessary. Similarly, Willingham (2007) suggests that a fair amount of content knowledge increases the likelihood of developing critical thinking. Though disability studies is grounded in a democratic and constructivist approach, student characteristics and other contextual factors may call for a more directive approach prior to open learning.

The risk, however, with being too directive is that students will adopt the mechanics of critical inquiry without the opportunity for involvement in it as a change process. Flores (2004) cites the following cautions:

“There is no doubt that students can be taught to examine words for political meaning and to criticize the values that lie beneath the text, yet the risk is real that students are trained to produce a reasoned critique that is neither individually transformative (Graff, 1990; Seitz, 1993; Horner 2000) nor that brings change in student practices or aspirations (Janks 2002)” (The Risk of Simplistic Binaries section, para. 2).

The challenge with disability studies pedagogy is to consider the contextual factors in which students are learning. In situations in which there is a short time frame and high student resistance, they may benefit from the opportunity to gain and process content knowledge, without the expectation(s) of open response or personal application that could be threatening. This does not mean that student resistance should be suppressed. Rather, as students inevitably assert dominant notions of disability, alternative perspectives and information can be readily referenced and used to criticize, problematize, and complicate those points of view in the struggle for new meaning (Giroux, 2001; Flores, 2004). The opportunity for active personal engagement in cultural criticism should be available to students as it is meaningful to them. As McKinney and van Pletzen (2004) conclude:

“Such change takes place in haphazard, non-linear ways in relation to a multitude of experiences, rather than a single semester university course... Thus pedagogy for change, both of the self and of the social, may translate at the level of the classroom into aiming for moments of significant intellectual engagement in issues of social inequality and representation” (p.169).

In this article we describe a range of student responses to disability studies and the contextual factors that influenced their learning. Emphasis is placed on student responses in the stand alone course, as this is an increasingly common scenario in the early stages of the field. These students more clearly reflect the dissonance, as well as opportunities for change, that we will benefit from understanding. Responses of American Indian students in the teacher preparation program validate the importance of and possibilities of sustained inquiry that is in solidarity with those who have experienced marginalization. Together, the different contexts allow us to explore several tension points and opportunities for facilitating students’ involvement in transforming oppressive disability discourse.

Research Contexts and Data Collection

We examined student responses to disability studies at two different colleges. Both institutions were small, liberal arts colleges located in the Midwest. At Institution A, disability studies was offered as an introductory course through the Interdisciplinary Studies Program. Students were sophomores through seniors with various majors, including education, paralegal studies, and communication studies. Class sizes were small, ranging from 9-16 students. The students were predominately traditional age European Americans and none of them had studied disability from a critical framework prior to taking the course. At Institution B, disability studies was the emphasis of a teacher preparation program in special education. It was offered in a hybrid format that included class meetings as well as online learning. The program was designed for a

cohort of 16 students, half of whom were American Indian, one was Hmong, and the others European Americans. While the two initiatives differed in terms of design, length of study, and disciplinary location, they were grounded in the same theoretical framework as described in the previous section and offered similar content which included personal narratives, a framework for inquiry and cultural critique. We also used collaborative teaching which we believe was of significant value in listening, clarifying, supporting, and challenging students. Most important, the approach reinforced the collaborative nature of the meaning making process.

Personal narratives including readings, videos, and discussions with disabled people were used as grounds for understanding the need for change (Bogdan & Taylor, 1976; Longmore, 2003; Mooney & Cole, 2000). They challenged essentialist notions of disability, allowed for perspective taking, and provided students with exposure to the social injustices related to disability on a personal level. As noted above, however, revealing social inequities will not necessarily bring about change (Ellsworth, 1989; Britzman et al., 1993; Janks, 1995; Granville, 2003). Students were provided with the opportunity to learn about culturally shaped meaning (Hall, 1997) and inquiry through text analysis and examples of cultural critique (Baynton, 2001; Davis, 1997; Gould, 1981; and Oakes, Wells, Jones & Datnow, 1997). We used text analysis (Rousmaniere, Quantz, and Knight-Abowitz, 1998) as a model and means of inquiry using three essential questions. How is disability represented in our schools/culture? In what contexts have constructions of disability arisen (e.g. historical, economic, political factors)? What are the moral, political and value positions that maintain these representations? This line of inquiry was used throughout our courses in readings, discussions, and projects to explore a variety of disability related issues and topics.

Using this line of inquiry, we cultivated criticality and opened up the possibilities for envisioning social change. A few specific strategies were used in the stand alone course in the effort to engage students who had more traditional backgrounds and potentially higher levels of resistance. For example, the cultural construction of beauty was explored as a likely means of engaging them in critique on a personal level. This provided the opportunity to understand how meaning is shaped in a way that is consequential to them and to make a connection with disability related norms (Garland-Thomson, 1997). We also used a number of collaborative and dialogue-based strategies to aid in both interpreting course readings and sharing their understanding (Fitch & Hulgín, 2008). A major strategy was the expectation that students conduct cultural critique on a disability related issue of their choice. While the text analysis framework challenged them to conduct cultural critique, the option to select an issue allowed them to do so at varying levels of personal implication. Self-reflection was not required in the analysis. We did not expect that all students would achieve critical thinking or transformation, but aimed to provide a foundation of knowledge and a framework for analysis that would make meaningful involvement possible.

We used ethnographic methods to collect data including participant observation, analysis of student assignments and classroom discussion. Data collection occurred over a period of two course terms and involved the use of reflective field notes that focused on students' dialogue and the questions they raised in class and in individual meetings. We

relied heavily on analysis of students' written work. Our primary purpose was to contextually describe points of dissonance and connection in students' responses to disability studies.

The following sections describe four significant categories of responses by students as reflected in course dialogue and their written work. The four categories include: (1) positivist filters: objectivity and blame; (2) power of personal narrative vs. adherence to individualism; (3) identity: a source for challenging or defending disability related norms; and (4) moving from criticism to criticality. All students, whose work is referenced, provided formal permission to use their responses in this article. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Positivist Filters: Objectivity and Personal Blame

A positivist epistemology is the foundation of dominant notions of disability. Positivism is the belief that meaning is objective and universally valid. It is the view that meaning exists externally, and independently, in the "thing-itself" and thus transcends time as well as culture (Kincaid, 1996). The dominant scientist/positivist discourse strives to eliminate value-oriented questions and regards fundamental normative and ethical questions as strictly personal. This values-free or neutral position effectively individualizes and depoliticizes social justice issues, such as oppression associated with disability, reframing them as micro and personal rather than macro and structural. Students' adherence to knowledge as objective truth and the tendency to personalize disability issues were a source of significant struggle and misunderstanding among those in this study.

On a basic level, there was literal confusion with course readings as students misinterpreted authors' cultural criticism as objective statements. For example, after reading an article by Lerner in which he critiques meritocracy, a student stated, "Lerner believes that our society is based on merit." After reading Hall's article on representation and meaning, another student summarized his concept of naturalized meaning with confusion, "Stuart Hall says that social power means that, 'This is just the way things are, get used to it, we'll never change this.' If that is true, then the world really will never change and people with disabilities will always have problems accessing things, getting good jobs... and that is not true." This level of confusion made it essential to use reading guides and structured dialogue to clarify the meaning of course readings and content.

As they were guided to view meaning as socially constructed, many students held to the notion of phenomena as fixed and subject to right/wrong interpretation. Students commonly made statements such as, "The way that we, as a society, see something may not be the right way to see it." In her final paper, another student concluded, "Disabilities, sexual orientation, race, age, and gender are all things that we socially construct. We give each of those things a certain meaning. It doesn't mean we give them the correct meaning. We give those things meaning by having those meanings be opinion-based." Students also commonly held to the notion of disability labeling, with the two common claims summarized as such: (1) there is no alternative to formal disability labeling, and virtually nothing to be done about informal labeling; both are inevitable and natural and (2) the stigma of formal disability labels ("exceptionalities") stems from myth and personal

ignorance; correctly understood they are actually beneficial and necessary to adequate funding and the equitable distribution of resources (Fitch, 2002; in press). One student, who cited strong consequences of labeling in the educational system, still held to the fixed nature of disability and thus, the inevitability of labeling. She wrote:

“I do understand that there are students who have learning disabilities and require more help than others. This issue is not that the student has the disability and needs more help with her or her studies, but whether or not the educational system has done all it can to insure that it has explored all the alternatives before labeling the student with a disability.”

As instructors expected, when students, who were positioned in the positivist framework, engaged in cultural critique, they did so in the form of personal blame. According to Seas (2006), students tend to adopt the binary of us vs. them if they have not learned to see themselves as part of the construction of knowledge. As they came to see disability related norms as oppressive, students commonly personalized and situated responsibility outside of themselves as reflected in statements such as, “People are programmed to the normal,” “The Special Olympics makes disabled people out to be outcasts,” and “We are convinced to pity those with disabilities and to be thankful that we’re not like them.” A tone of blame was evident with statements such as, “How would we like to be called names such as idiot and ugly? We wouldn’t like it very much...It’s not fair to those who are disabled to be the butt of jokes.” Even though this student described herself as participating in negative responses, she viewed this as other than human. She stated, “We are convinced to be rude, mean, judgmental, embarrassed, and to act like we are better. This is how wrong our society and media are - to convince us to be such monsters.”

Students’ position of personal blame in attempting cultural criticism shifted to one of neutrality when issues in which they were invested were called into question. For instance, one student who supported segregated education concluded, “Kliewer and Biklen warn of the social consequences of labeling. Others argue against the dangers of full inclusion as it may detract from the education of those not labeled with disabilities. It is reasonable to assume that they are all correct to some degree.” Another student, who described herself as benefitting from educational tracking, responded to the Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997) critique of privileged positions associated with this practice as follows, “I believe there is no wrong party in this debate and that every parent, teacher and school board member is trying to accomplish what they thought was best in the situation.”

The challenge in meeting this basic level of resistance is to make explicit the contrasting assumptions underlying positivist and cultural studies discourses. The identification and rejection of oppressive discourse needs to be distinguished from the issue of personal blame if we expect students to openly engage in critique and take responsibility for change. This level of understanding was developed in students who made statements such as, “Often these views of people with disabilities are not meant with malevolence, but they do oppress the disabled community.” Andrzejewski (1995) suggests countering blame through constant attention to the structural and discursive social construction of dimensions of knowledge, by asking students to understand why things occur and what

macro forces shape their knowledge. In the effort to raise the personal to the social, however, narratives of those who have been marginalized are essential.

Power of Personal Narrative vs. Adherence to Individualism

Cultural critique relies upon the perspective of disabled people as a source of countering dominant norms: identifying misconceptions, exposing their consequences, and understanding that which is equitable and just. A challenge in promoting personal narrative as a means of social understanding was students' equating this with adherence to individualism and personal truth.

A number of students maintained the legitimacy of dominant practices such as Special Olympics, tracking, segregated education, and congregate residential services based on notion of individual choice and individual needs. Their assertions were grounded in the claim that they personally knew people who experienced these practices as positive. In response to personal narratives that supported inclusive education and community living, students asked, "Do all people with disabilities and their families take this position?" "Don't some people need specialized residential settings?" While students were open to inclusive education and community living for some, many concluded that the segregated options should also be available. In the words of one student, "Simply put, both self-contained education and full inclusion can work in harmony on a case-to-case basis in order for students to receive the education they are entitled."

This becomes a particularly complex issue related to disability in that the concept of "individualized" needs has been used to justify inhumane and unacceptable practices (Bogdan & Taylor, 1994). In line with critical pragmatism, we did not want to define acceptable practice. We did, however, want to promote the notion of continual interrogation of practices for the purpose of identifying and resisting those which are oppressive. This process must be grounded in knowledge of consequences to individuals, and within a framework of critical inquiry and social change.

In this effort, we exposed students to critical perspectives and posed questions about how those perspectives that are *not* critical are culturally shaped. For example, consider the student who argued for continuum of educational placements. His argument was based on the perspective of a man, who he supported, and who claimed he would have benefitted from more specialized, even segregated education where he could have learned skills such as interviewing strategies, needed to secure a good job. In addition to referring to narratives that were critical of segregated education, we posed a series of questions such as, "Did he need a segregated setting to get this?" A number of class members raised the issue that many typical students graduate without knowing how to interview for or secure a job. We continued with the questions, "What is the root of this underlying notion that real life skills are non-academic?" and "What would education look like if it were more meaningful for all of us in that respect?" Students' answers to the latter question provided a rich opportunity to understand the value of raising personal issues in the broader social context. Their tone was enthusiastic as they used the negative experience of disabled students to re-imagine education that would benefit them all. As Tingle (1992) argues:

“...the wish to feel at home in the world is not the expression of a delusion, or as Freud might have it of humanity's naive self love; it is the expression of a profound human need. What radical pedagogy must, instead, aim to do is to transform this need from a grandiose expectation into the desire to create a world in which all may feel at home” (p. 88).

A number of students shared stories of taking action in support of disabled friends and family members. One student had a brother with cerebral palsy who died a few years ago. Despite needing round the clock nursing care, his mother was committed to keeping him at home. The student shared several stories of how he challenged his friends to relate to his brother as a competent peer, someone to “hang out” with. For example, though his brother did not move or communicate except to make simple utterances, he laughed when the student got into trouble – a typical sibling behavior. Another student who had a disabled friend told stories of how he confronted people who focused on his friend’s differences, asking them to get to “know him as a person first.” These students’ stories demonstrated action to transform images of disability; yet, their determination for change remained within the realm of the personal. Both students seemed guarded against viewing their situations in a broader social context. The latter student spoke to us outside of class and explained that he was worried he was “using” his friend by holding him up in the learning process. Both were uncomfortable with their situation being seen as anything beyond a personal matter - being a good friend, or good brother.

Feminist theory provides a rich source for understanding the tendency to adhere to personal experience. Brown (1995) argues that this type of feminism:

“... betrays a preference for extrapolitical terms and practices: for Truth (unchanging and incontestable) over politics (flux, contest, instability); for certainty and security (safety; immutability, privacy) over freedom (vulnerability, publicity); for discoveries (science) over decisions (judgments); for separable subjects armed with established rights over unwieldy and shifting pluralities adjudicating for themselves and their future on the basis of nothing more than their own habits and arguments” (p. 37).

To the extent that students rely upon individualism and authenticity of personal experience, they are free from struggling with disability as a more complicated social and political issue.

Identity: A Source for Challenging or Defending Disability Related Norms

Identity has been a central focus for understanding students’ responses to critical pedagogy. Bauman (2007) argues, "Identity owes the attention it attracts and the passions it begets to being a surrogate of community: of that allegedly 'natural home' – that natural home of non alienation” (p. 107). Students who have been marginalized by cultural norms readily challenged them as a means of connection. They recognized the social construction of identity and the importance of using the perspectives of those who have been marginalized to construct a just or inclusive society. For many students, however,

their sense of “who they are,” was constituted by traditional notions of disability. Challenges to these norms represented a threat to their self and place in the world.

As expected, a number of students were directly involved in practices that were subject to examination and critique within the course, such as providing congregate and segregated services or participating in educational tracking. On several occasions critique expressed in readings or class dialogue seemingly called into question the identity of students who defended the practices; some responded strongly and with emotion. For instance, in a class discussion of Foucault’s concept of a hierarchy of control, we examined behavioral management strategies that have been considered acceptable practice such the use of isolation rooms. One student described how schools strong arm students by using “big men” to carry out these practices and explained that “he was one of those men.” According to him, the people he works with are “severely disabled” and that “these people need time out.” He was critical of his role, but defended the practice. On another occasion, we were discussing the history of institutionalization and its roots in medical discourse. Two students, nursing majors who work in a residential setting for children, were visibly upset. They described their work setting to the class and claimed, “But these children are happy. You should see this place, it is like a home. We make it like home, we’re all family.” After class they asked if they could conduct an analysis on the importance of residential settings.

One student responded particularly negatively to a reading by Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997) on educational detracking in which the authors deconstruct the practice. This was not the same student cited in the above section. In a written response, this student argued:

“She (Oakes) merely ranted on for fifteen pages about the so called inequities put into place by the ‘white elite.’ Oakes neglected the issue at heart, detracking, to rant about the social, economic and racial difference in America. I feel she could have written a more convincing passage if she had omitted the slanderous accusations of inequities imposed by the ‘white elite,’ and focused on how all students would benefit from detracking....”

The affective response by this student may be attributed to the fact that the concept of “white elite” challenged her identity at a more basic level than challenges to work based practices others faced. Tingle (1992) concludes that strong responses from students seem to be arguments for their selves, conceived as something distinct from their particular social roles. He claims this to be particularly true if students conceive of their beliefs as “self-objects.” He explains:

“In this case, the sort of control students may expect to have with respect to their beliefs may more resemble the sorts of control they expect to have over the parts of their bodies or the thoughts in their minds. Those challenges to beliefs which suggest that they might be reexamined may be experienced by the student as a challenge to his or her self-objects and concurrently his or her control over these objects. It is as if to say some outside force had suddenly laid claim to a territory one had previously regarded as under one's own control. Students may indeed

feel, with respect to challenges to their beliefs, much the same sorts of feelings of embarrassment and even shame that one might experience before suggestions that one's nose is too long or one's body too fat" (para. 18).

Perhaps the strongest identity-related response came from an African-American student who expressed tension and resistance throughout the course. His resistance centered around the association of disability with discrimination. He argued that disability was real and "somebody would be crazy to mistreat someone with a disability." Acknowledging the sensitivity of this issue, I simply took opportunities to engage the class in examining the intersection of disability with race, including incorporating the work of Keith Jones, a disabled, African American activist. The student made this the focus of his text analysis; yet, the majority of his critique focused solely on race. In his analysis, the student wrote: "Although there have never been signs or documents stating that people with disabilities could not enter restrooms, use water foundations, or eat in restaurants, discrimination is still an issue. More subtle ways to keep people that are physically or mentally impaired out have been used, such as not making a building wheel chair accessible." Then he quickly shifted to a discussion of discrimination related to African-Americans in a way that was fragmented from disability. The student wrote:

"African Americans weren't really allowed to do much as U.S. citizens. Amendments had to be passed before they could even vote. Violent acts were normal. The word discrimination doesn't fairly describe what the African American race went through."

He continued to describe the major events in the fight for African-American liberation, as well as his personal experience with "acts of prejudice." Using his paper to recount and distinguish the injustice experienced by African-Americans, this student almost completely cut himself off from cultural critique of disability.

The responses of these students point to the complexity and potential of creating challenging, yet safe and engaging space within disability studies. Students whose sense of identity is open to the social construction of self will be affirmed or challenged to redefine or reposition themselves. Students made comments such as, "this course helped me understand myself as a person." Those who are resistant to this notion will accept as 'truth' only that which reaffirms their limited conceptions of self (Sedgwick, 1990) or will experience threat to self.

Disability studies pedagogy will likely affirm or challenge identities and thereby demands careful consideration. One lesson, as noted above, is to closely guide students in critical readings. Unlike with other readings, the assignment associated with the Oakes, Wells, Jones & Datnow (1997) article was relatively open, asking students to simply connect the authors' arguments to other course readings. Guided questions would likely have assisted all students to interpret the authors' points more constructively. Is it sometimes more constructive for students to focus on issues in which they are less invested, at least in the initial phase of developing criticality? Two of the students mentioned above conducted thoughtful analyses in their papers, focusing on issues in which they were less invested - children's literature and film.

Embracing Criticality

Some students seem to flow through the courses, learning to describe and identify representations of disability in terms of their historical roots and contextual factors. Some of these students were already critically positioned, as was clearly the case for American Indian students who saw immediate parallels to their history. For those with minimal prior reflection on disability issues, their level of criticality developed as they explored issues through readings, writing, class activities and dialogue. These students readily identified social injustices and applied critical analysis to issues which included labeling, physical accessibility, community living, group segregation, and other forms of oppression. These students were engaged in transformation.

Many students in the teacher preparation course drew upon their history with injustice to understand disability related injustice. For example, one student made the following reference, "Labeling of indigenous peoples started as a policy in 1782 or thereabout, during the First Continental Congress; suggested by a statesman named James Duane, an attorney also. He declared 'psychological warfare' and so began the use of the derogatory word of 'Sachem' in reference to our Sacred Medicine People." Another student elaborated:

"Native people have had much the same treatment as people with disabilities in the area of negative language. Instead of staying that 'Indian girl,' just say 'the girl' or better yet use her name. Being Indian, just as being a person with a disability, does not relegate someone to a certain category of person. Negative stereotypes of Native people have plagued them, much like people with disabilities. Changing our language for the positive will have positive and lasting impact."

Moving beyond the issue of language, these students described their future roles as "standing up for the rights" of others and as change agents in the educational system with the intent to build membership in classrooms and use responsive instructional practices.

In the stand alone course, a number of students demonstrated criticality in their final papers. One student chose to examine accessibility in her own apartment complex. She chose this issue because of a sense of responsibility in her own living situation. After observing a lack of accessible parking spaces, curb cuts, and entrances, she engaged in a process of inquiry that evolved through use of the text analysis framework, reflections, and class dialogue. She contacted the residence staff and management on several occasions, asking, "What are the existing barriers for a resident who uses a wheelchair or an assistance dog? What about a visitor? What does the ADA require?" Class members were interested in her findings, especially when she reported that residence staff was surprised and increasingly irritated at her questions. Since barriers to physical accessibility are relatively easy to see, this proved an important point of reference for drawing the class into the critical process. This student's act of interrogation led class members through a line of inquiry, including questions such as, "What was their rationale for lack of access? Whose interests are served by not creating access? Where does power

lie in this situation?” She concluded, “Everything from not having accessible buildings, accessible parking, not having curb cuts to get from the street to the side-walk, or vice-versa is all a way of ‘normalizing’ the fact that people who use wheelchairs are not welcome here and do not live on the property.” This student seemed empowered that she had brought this issue into management’s consciousness.

Another student, an education major, analyzed her experience working as an instructional assistant to a girl who was in the process of being excluded from public school for her behavior. The student, Bridget, initially expressed concern over how the girl, Christine, was being treated and that her role as a one-to-one instructional assistant might act as a means of segregating her. Using the text analysis framework, she began by describing how the classroom teacher often referred to Christine as being “hard to look at,” even showing her an old childhood photo taken prior to cleft palate surgery. Bridget interpreted this as a process of “objectifying” and “closing off power” to the girl, allowing the teacher to “disconnect from her.” She also described how the Christine’s competence was undermined by reducing instruction to functional rather than academic skills, and by assigning her a one-to-one assistant. She wrote, “From an analytic perspective, the message being sent was that Christine would never be able to function without stringent guidance....The issue not being discussed is the fact that the problem wasn’t with Christine, but rather with Ms. Smith’s being unable to reach a student with her teaching methods.” Christine was eventually hospitalized, upon which Bridget reflected:

“Looking back on my experience, I realize that I was being used as a means to an end... I often wonder why I did not pursue an administrator about what was happening in this situation. I did not speak out because of my lack of experience. The teacher had a plan that was supported by other teachers, instructional assistants and district level special education directors. I honestly thought this was common practice... I have learned that if something doesn’t feel right, it probably isn’t. I was intimidated by titles of people and allowed that to influence my decision not to speak out.”

In the process of conducting a text analysis, this student identified how her actions were oppressed or shaped by power relations. Having a framework to move beyond personal criticism of this teacher, as well as of herself, allowed her to see injustice in its complexity and cultivate a determination for change.

Conclusion

The opportunity to examine a range of responses to disability studies brings to light the influence of context on students’ learning. Students’ identities and positions in relation to traditional norms influence their understanding. More specifically, students who are heavily positioned in a positivist framework are likely to translate new concepts into notions of objectivity, personal blame and individualism. Their engagement is also influenced by the extent to which they are involved in disability studies, whether through a discipline specific program or singular course. With increased awareness of the

possibilities and challenges of disability studies pedagogy, we hope, in the future, to create contexts which better engage students' dissonance and strengthen opportunities for transformation.

In situations in which there is a short time frame and strong dissonance, students will benefit from a directive approach in which heavy content can act as a frame of reference for critiquing positivist notions and constant reframing of the personal to the social. This is combined with providing students space and an opening to develop criticality as it is meaningful to them, around issues that are a source of connection, not strong sources of dissonance or threat. This is most likely to occur through links with gender, race, ethnicity or other sources of oppression with which they may have experience. The program situated initiative provides enhanced opportunities for both understanding the construction of oppression within a social system, in this case education, and for acting to change it. Whether in a stand-alone course or program of study, we embrace combining critique with opportunities for action.

Disability studies represents an opportunity to address oppression from one of its main sources – higher education and institutionalized knowledge. While it is a significant struggle to counter dominant notions of disability and to raise injustice to the realm of social responsibility, the initiatives described in this paper demonstrate the possibility for change. Some students gained the determination to improve social systems, such as segregated education. Others took action, such as challenging a friend's use of derogatory language and questioning a landlord about accessibility. Learning what it takes to support and further this movement is a process of empowerment for all.

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