Enabling the Classroom and the Curriculum:

Higher Education, Literary Studies, and Disability

Abstract: In this paper the tripartite model of disability is applied to the lived experience of twenty-first-century Higher Education. The tripartite modle facilitates a complex understanding of disability that recognises assumptions and discrimination but not at the cost of valued identity. This being so, not only the normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms but also the non-normative positivisms of the classroom and the curriculum are explored. Inclusion is taken as the starting point and the argument progresses to profound and innovational appreciation of disability. The problem addressed is that inclusion, as shown in *The biopolitics of disability*, constitutes little more than inclusion-*ism* until disability is recognised in the context of alternative lives and values that neither enforce nor reify normalcy (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). Informed by this understanding the paper adopts the disciplinary example of literary studies and refers to Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney* as a primary text. The conclusion is that, despite passive and active resistance, disability enters Higher Education in many ways, most of which are beneficial to students and educators alike.

Introduction: All for inclusion

The term *inclusion*, with its glorious connotations of equality and progress, is one that we in Higher Education often use with pride. The trouble is that, implicitly, our very use of the word points to (or else marks out) certain groups of people and thereby contributes to the ideology of their exclusion. This being so, even among progressive educators, the idea of

inclusion may be approached with a degree of scepticism. At the very least, we aspire to what is sometimes termed *meaningful* inclusion (Oliver and Barnes, 2010), and in so doing endeavour to resist the superficiality of approaches to disability.

One of the ways in which Higher Education can reach a more meaningful level of inclusion is to address the fact that too little thought is given to issues such as the often uninspired curriculum and the persistent problematic assumptions about disability (Ware, 2001). In considering this state of affairs a few questions immediately spring to mind. How meaningful is inclusion that does not impact on the curriculum? How inclusive is the classroom that has to be so labelled? How do we move beyond the objectifying nature of inclusion to recognition of diverse subjectivity? In this paper I posit an understanding of disability that addresses these issues by not only challenging assumptions and related prejudicial actions, but also recognising strengths and qualities. While inclusion is a legal requirement in some parts of the world, and perhaps a moral imperative everywhere, it is also an educational opportunity. After all, predicated on the belief that knowledge is socially constructed, disability is sometimes approached as a culturally defined experience, owing its very existence to the beliefs and practices built around the ways in which society responds to human difference (Gallagher, 2004). The aim, then, is to move beyond inclusion and encourage the 'transformation of knowledges including those of the teacher and Higher Education as well as those of the students' (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson, 2002: 306). If we rethink disability and inclusion along these lines, the Higher Education experience can be enhanced significantly.

An important aspect of inclusion in the classroom, Higher Education, and society more broadly is the conception of disability on which so many problematic attitudes and actions are

based. There is no uniformly accepted term for discrimination against people who identify or are labelled as disabled (Harpur, 2012), a form of prejudice consequently referred to as the nameless apartheid (Goggin and Newell, 2003). Nevertheless, Anglophone terms have emerged in the form of *ableism* and *disablism*. The one is more widely used around the world, while the other is favoured in the United Kingdom (Ashby, 2010), which suggests the terms have emerged because of the distinction between person-first and British social model language (Harpur, 2012). That is to say, *ableism* designates the ideology against which a focus on personhood rather than disability is asserted, while *disablism* resonates with the contention that people with biological impairments become disabled because of social barriers. This being so, much recent work is appreciative of the respective merits of the two terms (Campbell, 2008, 2009; Harpur, 2012; Bolt, 2014a; Goodley, 2014). From this perspective, while the terms are loosely interchangeable, *ableism* is associated with the idea of ableness, the perfect or perfectible body, and *disablism* relates to the production of disability, in accordance with a social constructionist understanding (Campbell, 2008). It seems to me, therefore, that ableism renders nondisabled people supreme and disablism is a combination of attitudes and actions against people who identify or are labelled as disabled.

The proposal in this paper is that – judging by the literature, my research, my personal experience of sensory and physical impairments, and my professional experience of Higher Education in the United Kingdom – not only the classroom but also the curriculum can be enhanced by application of a tripartite model of disability that is based on a conceptual distinction between ableism and disablism. My suggestion is that ableism and disablism can be understood as normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms respectively, both of which should be explored, but that consideration should also be given to what are elsewhere designated non-normative positivisms (Coole and Frost, 2011; Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). I

refer to literature courses here, by way of example, but my argument is relevant to a number of disciplines, especially those based in the humanities.

Normative positivisms: The ableist assumptions of society, Higher Education, and the classroom

The first part of the tripartite model pertains to the ongoing affirmation of socially accepted standards – that is, normative positivisms that are marked by ableism. *Ableism* has been defined as a political term that calls attention to assumptions about normalcy (Davis, 1995) and can be traced back to *handicapism* – a term coined nearly four decades ago to denote not only assumptions but also practices that promoted the unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental, and/or behavioural differences (Bogdan and Biklen, 1977; Ashby, 2010). Ableism has been societally entrenched, deeply and subliminally embedded in culture, and rampant throughout history; it has been widely used by various social groups to justify their elevated rights and status in relation to other groups (Campbell, 2008; Wolbring, 2008). Whatever and however we term it, then, ableism is an age-old problem.

As dated as it is, however, ableism remains an issue in Higher Education. Even in the twenty-first century, the university as a 'social space can be read as an environment intended for non-disabled persons' (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson, 2002: 297). These intentions are built into the literal landscape of inaccessible buildings and classrooms, but also occupy the cultural landscape of faculty and administration, 'revealed in pragmatic arguments about cost as well as deeply embedded in traditional humanist concepts such as universality' (Wilson

and Lewiecki-Wilson, 2002: 297). Indeed, although disability studies investigates disability as a socially constructed phenomenon, the literature shows that manifestations of how the disability experience affects the adult learning context are frequently ignored (Clark, 2006). Accordingly, many variants of ableism find their way into the classroom: cognitive ableism is a bias in favour of the interests of people who actually or potentially have certain cognitive abilities (Carlson, 2001); lexism is an array of normative practices, assumptions, and attitudes about literacy (Collinson, 2014); sanism is the privileging of people who do not have so-called mental health problems (Prendergast, 2014); audism is the normative landscape in which everyone perceives by auditory means (Bauman and Murray, 2009); and ocularcentrism is the dominance of visual perception (Jay, 1994). The list could go on and on, for normative positivisms are embedded in every aspect of Higher Education.

A thing to remember is that when educators endeavour to occupy the subject position of ableism, we buy into a myriad of normative assumptions but often do so without premeditation or intent: we do so by acquiescence. While many 'progressive intellectuals' decry racism, sexism, and class bias, it does not occur to most of us that the very foundations on which our information systems are built, our very practices of 'reading and writing, seeing, thinking, and moving are themselves laden with assumptions about hearing, deafness, blindness, normalcy, paraplegia, and ability and disability in general' (Davis, 1995: 4-5). Ableism is a deeply rooted, far-reaching network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a corporeal standard, a particular type of mind and body, which is projected as the perfect human (Campbell, 2001). This network of notions about health, productivity, beauty, and the value of human life, represented and perpetuated by public and private media, renders abilities such as productivity and competitiveness far more important than things like empathy, compassion, and kindness (Rauscher and McClintock, 1997; Wolbring, 2008).

Indeed, so pervasive is this network that educators are likely to pick up a highly detailed working knowledge of ableism through a process of osmosis – that is, via the gradual absorption of ideas that results from continual exposure.

Irrespective of intent, the widespread endorsement of ableism has dire consequences for the classroom, Higher Education, and society more broadly. Many bodies and minds are constructed and positioned as Other, meaning that many people fall outside the dominant norms of bodily appearance and/or performance and thus face social and material exclusion (Ashby, 2010; Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2013). From this perspective, impairments are necessarily negative: they must be improved, cured, or else eliminated altogether; they certainly cannot contribute to the positive subjectivity in which this paper culminates (Campbell, 2008). In effect, ableism becomes a combination of discrimination, power, and prejudice that is related to the cultural privileging of nondisabled people; it oppresses those who have so-called mental health problems, learning difficulties, physical impairments, sensory impairments, and so on (Rauscher and McClintock, 1997; Eisenhauer, 2007). In other words, the normative positivisms of ableism indirectly result in the exclusion, victimisation, and stigmatisation of people who identify or are labelled as disabled.

These normative positivisms find their way into our classrooms via many paths, an obvious culprit being the curriculum. In relation to literature courses, the example I adopt in this paper, it has been remarked that in thinking through issues of disability, we will come to find that 'almost any literary work will have some reference to the abnormal, to disability, and so on' (Davis, 1995: 43). Yet it is still frequently the case that disability is ignored in the critical reading by which the content of many courses is informed. Although the persistence of disability in contemporary writing cannot be denied (Murray, 2012), it often remains

unnoticed (Garland-Thomson, 1997) if not altogether avoided (Bolt, 2012; Bolt and Penketh, 2015). Indeed, the literary example is indicative of a broader curricular deficiency in film, media, history, philosophy, theology, and so on.

In order to illustrate normative positivisms on this curricular level we might refer to Brian Friel's *Molly Sweeney*, which is *studied on* and thus *indicative of* many literary courses around the world. First published in 1994, this contemporary Irish play tells the story of a massage therapist who has been classed as blind since she was a baby. She leads a happy life until, at her husband's behest, her ophthalmologist performs an operation that has bittersweet consequences. Though restoring her sight after forty years of blindness, the medical intervention leaves her institutionalised with what seem to be grave mental health problems. I expand on this example later in the paper, the point here being that the tripartite model renders a literature course in terms of normative positivisms if and when a play like *Molly Sweeney* is studied as a primary text without exploring the many issues it raises about disability – a state of affairs that is marked when, among others, the comparably important feminist and postcolonial approaches are included.

Despite its various manifestations in the classroom, ableism has been referred to as a nebulous concept that evades both identification and definition (Hodge and Runswick-Cole, 2013). What is more, the term has been deemed limited in content and scope on the basis that it should not allude exclusively to disability, but should be used as an umbrella term (Wolbring, 2008), a call for terminological specificity that is answered to some extent by the term to which I now turn: *disablism*. After all, although ableism itself is often obscured, the value it places on certain abilities leads to disablism (Wolbring, 2008; Hodge and Runswick-

Cole, 2013). It seems to me, therefore, that the normative positivisms of ableism result in the non-normative negativisms of disablism.

Non-normative negativisms: The insult to disability

The second part of the tripartite model pertains to problematised deviations from socially accepted standards – that is, non-normative negativisms that are marked by disablism. The term *disablism* is derived from the British social model of disability, whereby the everyday practices of society perpetuate oppressive structures on people who have biological impairments (Madriaga, 2007). Discriminatory, oppressive, and/or abusive behaviours arise from the belief that said people are somehow inferior to counterparts who do not have impairments (Miller *et al.*, 2004), meaning that so-called less able people are discriminated against and different abilities become defined as disabilities (Thomas, 2004; Wolbring, 2008). Disablism, then, involves not only the social imposition of restrictions of activity but also the socially engendered undermining of psycho-emotional well being (Thomas, 2007); it is arguably a more profound and specific development of ableism.

This specificity notwithstanding, disablism is not necessarily explicit. Hence, the term *aversive disablism* denotes subtle forms of prejudice (Deal, 2007). Aversive disablism is often unintentional, so aversive disablists may recognise the problems of disablism without recognising their own prejudice (Deal, 2007). On account of these subtleties I have come to conceptualise ableism and disablism on a continuum that moves from normative positivisms to non-normative negativisms. This continuum is illustrated in the all-too-familiar experience of a student who has arthritis and requests a different classroom than the one allocated for her

course, the reason being that the stairs are inaccessible, while the elevator is distant and often broken (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson, 2002). In the first instance the university in question unwittingly assigns another inaccessible classroom, but after three changes something suitable is found – that is to say, reasonable adjustments/accommodations are made. My point about such a scenario is that the normative positivisms that underpin the initial inaccessibility move to non-normative negativisms not only when the second room is allocated but also when the student's non-disabled peers become annoyed because the first four classes have met in different rooms. Moreover, if the elevator is neither repaired nor relocated, comparable non-normative negativisms are likely to be faced by subsequent students.

This ideological continuum can be illustrated with reference to the classroom experience of educators, too, as I know from my own practice. Given that I have been registered as blind for more than thirty years, I am well aware of normative positivisms in the implicit connection between vision and print as part of an ideology that dominates in our society, the hegemonic privileging of sight (Barton, 1998), and more specifically of the ocularcentric classroom experience, with its conventions of raising one's hand for attention and so on (Kleege, 2002; Michalko, 2001). If we turn for a moment to classic French literary theory, the importance of visual cues in such communication can be explicated by the combinable ways in which science interprets the gaze: information, possession, and relation (Barthes, 1986). What these categories reveal is that gazes are sometimes exchanged in a manner that may be defined as linguistic. This being so, if only one party has sufficient vision for the exchange, only one party has access to the language. In accordance with the tripartite model, then, the normative positivisms of pedagogy move to non-normative negativisms insofar as I, an educator unable to meet the gaze of my students, am largely unable to enter into an important aspect of their communication.

These non-normative negativisms can also be found on the curricular level. After all, disability, as a topic of study, is not new to Higher Education: it has been of interest in psychiatry and psychology since the late nineteenth century, considered on sociology courses about social problems and deviance since the early part of the twentieth century, as well as on programs in so-called Special Educational Needs, rehabilitation, and speech disorders that have proliferated since the middle of the twentieth century (Taylor, 2011). The trouble is that these courses approach disability from a nondisabled perspective, which is why they may be deemed illustrative of non-normative negativisms.

In order to illustrate the point we can return to the use of Friel's *Molly Sweeney* as a primary text. The kind of course that the tripartite model renders in terms of non-normative negativisms is one on which, rather than being ignored, disability is considered in a purely superficial way – most obviously as symbol or metaphor. In secondary reading about *Molly Sweeney* it is often recognised that female representations of Ireland are 'extremely problematic symbols in contemporary Irish literary and cultural studies, as are feminine national abstractions in postcolonial critique worldwide' (Moloney, 2000: 286); however, comparable figurative applications of disability are approached with far less sensitivity and awareness. Hence, it has been asserted that the 'blind Molly acts as a symbol for Gaelic Ireland, the partially sighted Molly serves as a metaphor for the colonized country, and Molly hospitalized for madness represents the postcolonial state' (Moloney, 2000: 286). In courses that follow these and other such readings, engagement with the representation of disability is purely nominal: the experience of disabled people is effectively dismissed.

Non-normative positivisms: A culture of appreciation

With the problem of normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms in mind I turn to the third part of the tripartite model, which pertains to affirmed deviations from socially accepted standards – that is, non-normative positivisms that depart from ableism and disablism. In Australia, for example, although official professional and public discourses about disability and rehabilitation are predominantly negative, many potentially positive discursive and narrative factors are hidden beneath ableist if not disablist ways of knowing, being, acting, and describing in academic, policy, and practice settings (Sunderland *et al.*, 2009). It is not enough to recognise disability along a continuum of difference that defines human variation; it is important to consider how the ideology of neoliberal inclusiveness profits from the instability of previously fixed identities (Jordan, 2013). Disability is now more apparent in Higher Education than ever, a state of affairs that, in part, has resulted from so-called tolerance, or inclusionism (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). However, there is a need for non-normative positivisms because the fight for equality is both limited and limiting in its very scope, while empowering and progressive potential is offered by the profound appreciation of Peripheral Embodiments (Mitchell and Snyder, 2015). That is to say, inclusion becomes more than meaningful when disability is not merely tolerated but truly appreciated.

The continuum of normative positivisms and non-normative negativisms, then, can be disrupted productively by the recognition of non-normative positivisms, which is why the tripartite model is tee-shaped in its conceptual form. A prime example is provided by Brenda Jo Brueggemann, an influential professor of English based in the United States. Her self-identification as deaf/disabled and her use of disability memoir and documentary alongside

representations of disability in literature, film, and popular culture have led to what she designates an 'enabling pedagogy, a theory and practice of teaching that posits disability as insight' (Brueggemann, 2002: 321).[1] Indeed, led by the performance artist Aaron Williamson, a number of twenty-first-century educators have come to reframe the common conception of hearing loss as Deaf Gain (Bauman and Murray, 2009). The example I tend to borrow to illustrate this point with my students is that of the Swiss national snowboard team, which succinctly demonstrates how people who are Deaf can embody education in a way that is beneficial to all learners (Bauman and Murray, 2009). The team in question is coached by a man who is Deaf. He realises that the snowboarders have been listening to the sound of their boards cutting into the snow in order to assess whether or not they are making their quickest stops and sharpest turns. Unsatisfied with this reliance on auditory cues, he asks the team to practice using earplugs, an approach that forces the snowboarders to learn to depend on the *feel* rather than *sound* of the snow. The result of this different style of learning is that the team's performance improves markedly (Bauman and Murray, 2009). This example of multiple learning demonstrates how the concept of Deaf Gain can be productively applied to teaching practice.

The non-normative positivisms of Deaf culture may be followed in many ways, for such constructivist perspectives alter one's understanding of both individual differences and potential for improving practice (Gallagher, 2004); hence, the concept of Deaf Gain has been applied to disability more generally (Garland-Thomson, 2013). The assertion of Disability Gain provides a useful frame for my own teaching practice. For instance, as a result of my visual impairment I have become familiar with a number of audio texts that I sometimes use in class. Accordingly, when introducing the work of the disability studies scholar Lennard

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[1] It is to this work that the title of the present article alludes.

Davis, I may teach about his experience of Deaf culture by discussing a radio play about how his Deaf parents first met. The audio text is not available as a film but provides a useful context for much of Davis's academic work. While the lack of visual content pushes some students out of their comfort zone initially, the course evaluations indicate that, for many, the approach facilitates learning on account of the different type of engagement.

This point about different types of engagement brings me back to the normative positivisms of eye contact and the non-normative negativisms of my exclusion from the related visual language in my classroom. A few years ago I conducted a small research project with some of my students that explored this very topic.[2] Given the well-documented normative positivisms, I must admit I was rather surprised to find that eye contact between tutor and students in the classroom was not rendered in an exclusively positive way. A few of my participants deemed eye contact a useful prompt to encourage contributions to class discussions, but its lack was reframed as gain by many. The reduced significance of eye contact meant that some of my students felt they were listened to more intently and some felt more comfortable when speaking, more confident, under less pressure. What is more, the students raised and praised the increased significance of verbal communication in my classes. Because purely visible gestures are inaccessible to me, the majority of the participants agreed that they came to focus on verbal communication in a way that proved helpful in developing their academic skills. For example, I tend to ask students to identify themselves verbally when in class, especially when contributing to discussions. The primary reason for this request is that I am unable to identify the students visually, but in the research and subsequent

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[2] A group of 25 undergraduates provided feedback on my seminars with a focus on the pros and cons of the reduced significance of eye contact. The initial remarks were collated and used to design the final questionnaire that included the option for participants to explain their responses. These comments proved particularly revealing and it should be stressed that the questions themselves were all based on assertions made by the students.

evaluations I have been informed that, although it feels a little awkward at first, the practice enables them to get to know each other better and gets them used to speaking in class. The consequence is that my sessions are both embodied and highly communicative: much value is placed on engagement with anecdotes as well as with concepts, theories, quotes, clips, and so on.

Numerous related non-normative positivisms can be illustrated on a disciplinary level with reference to courses in film, media, marketing, and education studies, as well as history, philosophy, theology, and so on. In relation to the literary example, a critical perspective that is informed by Disability Studies alters the way in which we read 'not just novels that have main characters who are disabled but any novel' (Davis, 1995: 43). After all, the language and tropes of disability are implicit as well as explicit in literary representations, so an informed understanding will surely help us to uncover the multiple levels of meaning by which literature is often defined. This is precisely the premise of three developments in the field of literary disability studies. First, approaching the 10th anniversary of its publication, the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* is used increasingly to enhance literature and other culturally-engaged courses around the world. Second, *The Madwoman and the Blindman* (Bolt *et al.*, 2012) demonstrates that the field of literary disability studies is more than rich enough to fill a book that focuses on a single work – in this instance, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Indeed, this edited volume has been met with much critical acclaim for the way in which it breathes new life into the study of Bronte's frequently taught classic novel (Bolton, 2014; Bourrier, 2013; Burdett, 2014; Cole, 2013; Fratz, 2014; Frawley, 2013; Gore, 2014; Radko, 2013; Schaffer, 2014; Tankard, 2014; Tweed, 2014). Third, Literary Disability Studies is a new Palgrave Macmillan book series dedicated to the exploration of literature from a disability studies perspective. Its 'most important contribution' is to provide

a 'platform for the kinds of new conversations that will expand the field in years to come'; and 'perhaps it is not too optimistic to imagine that the series will provide scholars in the field with opportunities to revisit — and even to rewrite — the canon' (Stanback, 2014: 114). All three of these projects have set out to enhance literary studies by consolidating and progressing work in the more specific area of literary disability studies. In so doing, they epitomise non-normative positivisms on a disciplinary level.

This progress in the field of literary disability studies predicates the enhancement of literature courses. To illustrate the point we can return once more to the example of Friel's *Molly Sweeney*. The kind of literature course that the tripartite model renders in terms of non-normative positivisms is one on which, rather than being ignored or considered in a superficial way, disability is profoundly appreciated. Accordingly, such a course engages productively with the play's representation of alcoholism, mental health problems, and visual impairment. For instance, the classroom discussion might be informed by secondary texts that are critical of non-disabled renderings of disability, of how dramatic affirmations of blindness based on visual criteria serve to isolate the people they are meant to represent (Feeney, 2009), and of how the play explores the supremacy of visual perception and the construction of blindness as spectacle (Bolt, 2014b). More broadly, such courses are informed by work in cultural disability studies about drama and performance (e.g., Kuppers, 2003; Sandahl, 2009) and books that have now become classics in the field (Davis, 1995; Garland-Thomson, 1997; Mitchell and Snyder, 2000). Many aspects of identity may be explored on these exemplary courses but the key is that disability is neither avoided nor dealt with superficially.

Conclusion: More than meaningful

When we think of disability in Higher Education we are surely right to start by insisting that inclusion is meaningful, but it is reductive and ableist, if not disablist, to ignore the great associated potential. We must not forget that staff and students who identify or are labelled as disabled bring diverse methods to the classroom. Nor should we fail to recognise that disability is generally represented in the cultural texts on which courses in the Humanities draw, from which it follows that such courses are improved by an appreciation of disability theory, activism, experience, identity, and so on – in short, by disability studies. This logic has innovational implications for classrooms and curricular beyond the Humanities. Thus, in twenty-first-century Higher Education, students must be encouraged to 'examine the rhetorical constructions of difference and the dominant cultural narratives that both teachers and students employ', to 'think about the boundaries among academic disciplines, community, and discursive spaces' (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson, 2002: 306). This kind of approach is facilitated by the tripartite model that moves away from one-dimensional notions of disability. The model clarifies that when we think of disability in Higher Education we should think of true appreciation rather than tolerance. This paper only touches on a few examples, but it is clear that when disability enters Higher Education it can and should do so in many ways, the vast majority of which are beneficial to disabled and non-disabled staff and students alike.

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