May 2022

The Threat of Returning to "Normal": Resisting Ableism in the Post-COVID Classroom

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In the following Critical Reflection, Elizabeth, an undergraduate student, and Sarah, an Assistant Professor, offer a two-voiced account of a student-faculty research project undertaken in Summer 2021. Our stories capture what we learned about our ourselves in the process of speaking with 16 disabled students about their experiences of ableism in the classroom before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Transitioning to Virtual: Elizabeth's Student Story
My first year in college was also the first year I used my wheelchair daily. I noticed that professors and peers seemed uncomfortable around me. Infrastructure was a challenge; doors were heavy, automatic buttons were frequently broken, ramps and elevators were often hidden or non-existent; and classroom aisles were too narrow to navigate. When I asked for a mobility accommodation to participate in campus or class activities, my requests were usually deemed "impossible."

My sophomore year, I decided to reject all aspects of my disability. I refused to take any of my cardiac medication and no longer used a mobility aid. Professors and peers who knew me from the year before were so happy that I was "cured," congratulating me for having gained enough "strength" to no longer use a wheelchair. At the same time, it became harder to be taken seriously when I told students or professors that I needed to sit during class and music rehearsals. My symptoms became close to unbearable.

When we shifted to online learning during the pandemic, I felt like I could breathe again. At home, I sat at the computer screen with everyone else, like we were on equal ground. The virtual environment removed both the physical barriers of aging infrastructure and the need to deal with being seen as "the woman in the wheelchair." Finally, I felt like I was part of the community. I wondered, were my disabled peers experiencing the same thing?

Researching as Witnessing: Sarah's Professor Story
"Dr. Parsloe, if I have to write a reflection, you should, too," Elizabeth tells me. "Oh, you're right," I say. "I should probably reflect on what it means for me to be part of this research as a non-disabled professor," I pause, "I mean . . . I do have anxiety."

In my voice, I hear the same hesitation our participants expressed when deciding whether they were disabled enough to "deserve" accommodations. Everyone Elizabeth and I interviewed described "masking"—the invisible labor of trying to appear "normal" in classroom spaces where they felt physically and socially unsafe. Their accounts resonate with my previous research exploring experiences of people on the autism spectrum (Parsloe & Babrow, 2016). They also

remind me of my first semesters as a new professor, when imposter syndrome collided with simmering anxiety developed in the pressure-cooker of graduate school. Teaching often involved donning a façade of confidence that I could not feel, leaving me drained.

Being able to learn at home and turn off their cameras gave students breaks from masking; they could take refuge behind screens, rest, move, eat, stim[1], and release the pressure to look "normal." Some professors adopted flexible deadlines, providing students with unpredictable health conditions and chronic fatigue greater agency in managing their energy and time. For me, the abrupt shift to virtual helped me to unclench my death grip on perfectionism. While some colleagues experienced new pandemic-related anxieties, I felt a distinct wave of relief. Who could expect me to be the "perfect" professor in the middle of a pandemic?

However, while some professors became more flexible and creative in response to pandemic uncertainty during the shift to virtual/hybrid teaching, others grew more rigid. Our participants described "tough love" professors who doubted their diagnoses, denied their accommodations, refused extensions, and called them out for not conforming to "typical" classroom behavior when they moved or communicated differently. Professors' assumptions about what communicative behaviors constitute an "ideal student" privileged neurotypical ways of thinking and participating (Brenneise, 2020; Canary & MacGregor, 2008). In classrooms like these, students with disabilities are forced to undertake the tricky and exhausting communication labor of self-advocacy.

Participants' accounts of ableist microaggressions echoed conversations with colleagues who inadvertently frame accommodations as charity begrudgingly extended to students who can't hack it (Krebs, 2019). During the pandemic, my colleagues and I debated creating a college-wide attendance policy. In these discussions, the ability to be "absent" was often described as a privilege or benefit. At the same time, virtual attendance was viewed as "suspect." We talked as if students were actively seeking ways to escape our classrooms, rather than recognizing that students with disabilities and chronic illnesses are often fighting to find a way to stay in them—either in-person or virtually.

These assumptions are embedded in the rhetoric of returning to "normal," which frames traditional, face-to-face learning as the gold standard. Elizabeth and I listened as students shared fears about "losing footholds" gained while learning from home. In the lead up to fall 2021, we watched as our institution issued a policy prohibiting students from joining class virtually unless they were quarantining or COVID positive. What would this normal-not-normal semester hold for Elizabeth?

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[1] Stimming or self-stimulation behaviors are repetitive actions or movements that individuals with developmental disabilities and/or autism use to cope with sensory overload.

Returning to "Normal": Elizabeth's Story, Continued

As I returned to in-person classes using my wheelchair, I returned to infrastructure challenges. I had forgotten how difficult it was just to get into the classroom and get situated. Professors or peers often help by moving tables. Still, every time I go into a new space, I wonder if I will be accepted or dismissed. I am still excluded from experiences that are deemed "inaccessible," even though gatekeepers rarely consult me about my actual needs. Fortunately, I have begun to finally meet peers who were accepting of me in the virtual space, and now interact with them in-person. These connections continue to help me navigate daily challenges as a disabled student. Instead of internalizing my exclusion and assuming that I am "less-than" those without a disability, I now see these interactions for what they are—ableism.

Altering "Normal": Sarah's Story, Continued

As I watched Elizabeth prepare to head back to campus, I noted how our summer of witnessing had changed her. She began following disabled activists online, joining Instagram communities formed by other young people with disabilities who protested their campuses' lack of accessibility. She drafted legislation for the Student Government Association to create more inclusive policies and practices on campus. Elizabeth was becoming a fully-fledged disability advocate, empowered through witnessing her peers' stories and through honoring her own.

Witnessing Elizabeth's transformation changed me, too. I began to recognize the significance of adopting a feminist pedagogy, resisting patriarchal approaches to pedagogy that equate inflexibility with "normalcy." Elizabeth and I were not researching/learning; we were developing an "empowered community" (Shrewsberry, 1987, p. 12) intent on making structural change. We spent fall 2021 laying the groundwork to plan our college's first Disability Empowerment Week, leveraging relationships developed through our work together. Students I had never met before began reaching out to provide ideas for disability-related events or to raise an issue of accessibility on campus.

To be a feminist teacher is to model the "moral nature of leadership" (Shrewsberry, 1987, p. 12). Feminist teacher-leaders acknowledge that "they have responsibility arising out of the relationships they have with those with whom they share a community" (Shrewsberry, p. 12). The privilege of witnessing my students' stories comes with the responsibility to act—not only to remedy inequities, but also to help students like Elizabeth to realize their own capacity for self- and collective-advocacy.

References

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