Disability Studies as a Liberatory Project:  
Implications for the Classroom  

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Disability studies’ project is to weave disabled people back into the fabric of society, thread by thread, theory by theory.

—Simi Linton, “What is Disability Studies?”

Introduction: Disability Studies and Liberationist Projects

Although disability studies (DS) coalesced as a field of critical theory in the late 1980s, DS has yet to gain widespread acknowledgement and acceptance among critical theories, university curricula, and the academy. From the perspective of liberation theology, DS destabilizes, problematizing race and ethnicity as the current bases of minoritized identities. That liberation theology is viewed as a “thing of the past” indicates the tenacious hold of an unspoken center of privilege. Though highly contextualized, unexamined privilege continues to operate as though universal, objective, and neutral. If liberation theology is spoken of in the past tense, what are the implications for minoritized identities, generally, and disability as a little-recognized minority identity, in particular? Universal Design for Learning.
(UDL) stands at the intersection of liberationist projects and disability studies. Disability studies offers a vantage point from which to question assumptions about pedagogical practices in the classroom, and UDL provides a liberatory conceptual frame and practical strategies to redress the inequalities in education faced by people with disabilities.

Critical Disability Theory

Critical disability theory questions the construction of human difference, exposing the categories “able-bodied” and “disabled” as part of an ideology of ability that legitimizes an ideal human embodiment. This ideology of ability places “disabled” and “able bodied” at opposite ends of a spectrum—as if these are natural, self-explanatory categories. However, the category “disability,” like humanity, contains a wide variety of physical and cognitive differences.

Models in DS are paradigms for understanding a DS perspective. Though models within DS abound (for example, the charity model, the medical model, and the “money” model), the primary distinctions are those between the medical model and the social model. The medical model views disability as a “defect” located within an individual that can and should be cured. On the other hand, the social model traditionally distinguishes between “impairment” and “disability,” emphasizing the social construction of disability and the disabling effects of the built environment for people who have impairments.

The social model developed from the advocacy work of people with disabilities in the United Kingdom (UK) and tends to operate largely from a social-scientific viewpoint. In the United States, DS scholars tend to work from a humanities-based perspective. Having inherited the parameters of the conversation from the UK, DS in the United States is in the midst of a paradigm shift. The civil rights model of disability—that people with disabilities face social discrimination—resulted in an overemphasis on the social construction of disability to the detriment of the lived, bodily experience of people with disabilities as a site of epistemology. Recognition of the importance of the body allows for a complex understanding of disability where “embodied experience can be embraced while also resulting in social discrimination and material effects (such as pain, discomfort, or incapacity).” Suffering, then, is but one possible part of disability experience rather than the reduction or equation of disability, as often happens, to suffering alone.

A third model, the cultural model, seeks to integrate the benefits of both the social model and humanities-based perspectives.

As with the social model, disability remains a social construction, but the cultural model views it as part of the construction of the very nature of society itself rather than only the result of social discrimination. In other words, according to the cultural model, disability is not only a result of social organization, but integral to social organization itself. Thus, the goal of disability studies becomes not just the isolation and removal of social barriers that disable people with impairments, but the interrogation of how society uses the category “disability” to narrate, interpret, and organize its world.

This model recognizes disability "as a site of phenomenological value that is not purely synonymous with the processes of social disablement." Where the social model treats impairment as neutral, the cultural model recognizes disability “as a political self-naming strategy that distances people with disabilities from dominant definitions of incapacity and dysfunction;” further, the cultural model identifies impairment as “both human variation encountering environmental obstacles and socially mediated difference that lends group identity and phenomenological perspective [emphasis added].” People with disabilities shape and are shaped by their environments. The cultural model recognizes the importance of the experience of people living with disabilities and the influence people with disabilities exert on...
their environments and vice versa, while apprehending the depth of discrimination against people with disabilities as part of the very organization of society.

Institutions of higher education and those who attend them operate, too, within this cultural model. Though civil rights legislation guaranteed access to higher education, the educational environment was slow in changing to meet the physical and pedagogical needs of people with disabilities. Many students who enter the culture of higher education arrive with negative views of disability as something to avoid or hide.

**The Continuing Need for a Liberatory Hermeneutic**

This semester I began a new course in religious studies with a “Social Location Inventory” in order to facilitate awareness of what we as interpreters bring to sacred texts and faith traditions. The inventory upon which I based my assignment poses several questions about advantages and disadvantages within the categories of gender, culture/ethnicity, race, class, and religion. Disability appeared in the original inventory under the category, “Class,” and phrased the question: “Have you ever belonged to an ‘invisible’ class (e.g. displaced, chronically un- or under employed, disabled, etc.)?” To make disability visible, I listed “Ability” as a separate category and added questions like those for each group in the original inventory:

1. Are you a member of the dominant cultural category “able-bodied”? Is this an advantage? A disadvantage?
2. Do you have a disability? If you have a disability, do you pass as “able-bodied”? Is this an advantage? A disadvantage?
3. If you have a disability, do you self-identify as a person with a disability? Is this an advantage? A disadvantage?

While I originally intended the assignment to begin the process of students’ awareness of their own social contexts, I was surprised—and a bit saddened—by their answers to my new category. Of twenty-six students, four, or 15%, indicated that they had a disability but none self-identified as a person with a disability. All four stated that they would not seek accommodations, even one student who had made use of these support systems in high school. Of those who identified as “able-bodied,” many stated how blessed they were that they did not have a disability so that they could be independent and work. I was struck by the negative consensus among my students about having a disability. An estimated 60% of students with disabilities do not self-identify at the college and university levels and, thus, do not seek accommodations. Students who know they have a disability but refuse available support systems continue to operate under negative societal paradigms about disability that require them, in secrecy, to over-perform and over-function in order to learn.

**Universal Design (UD)**

UD was born out of product design. Marc Harrison, a professor of Industrial Engineering and a person with a physical disability, first emphasized the need to design products that could be used by people of all abilities rather than the “average” person. Ronald Mace, an architect and product designer, created the term “Universal Design” (UD) in the 1970’s to describe “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.” Universal Design consists of seven principles:

1. **Equitable use.** The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.
2. **Flexibility in use.** The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.
3. **Simple and intuitive use.** Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, and language skills, or current concentration level.
4. **Perceptible information.** The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities.
5. **Tolerance for error.** The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.
6. **Low physical effort.** The design can be used efficiently, comfortably, and with a minimum of fatigue.
7. **Size and space for approach and use.** Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user’s body size, posture, or mobility.

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12 Ibid., 17.
15 Ibid., 7-8. Burgstahler provides additional guidelines for each principle.
When adapted to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), these principles begin to specify pedagogical practices:

1. **Equitable use.** Making classroom material accessible to diverse learning needs and styles.
2. **Flexibility in use.** The practice of using a variety of instructional methods.
3. **Simple and intuitive use.** Teaching “in a straightforward and predictable manner.”
4. **Perceptible information.** Ensuring that course material is accessible to students regardless of their “sensory abilities.”
5. **Tolerance for error.** Building diversity of learning “pace and prerequisite skills” into course process.
6. **Low physical effort.** Designing instruction “to minimize…physical effort” so that students can attend to essential learning.
7. **Size and space for approach and use.** Engaging the classroom space in ways that addresses [sic] diverse student needs based on “body size, posture, mobility, and communication.”

UDL adds two additional principles:

8. **A community of learners.** Teaching and learning environment supports and encourages “interaction and communication among students and between students and faculty.”

9. **Instructional climate.** All students are encouraged to meet “high expectations” as they are “welcomed” to participate in the course.

These two additional principles encourage greater collegiality among students and within the professor-student relationship while maintaining critical rigor in the classroom.

**Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Higher Education**

Implementing UDL can seem overwhelming due to a lack of familiarity with not only its principles but also actual UDL practices. The face of education, however, is changing. An estimated 11% of students enrolled in colleges and universities identify as students with disabilities. Still, students with disabilities enroll at a rate of 40% less than their peers and enroll primarily at community colleges rather than universities. Yet, some students with disabilities are more likely to enroll in higher education than others. For example, parents of students with orthopedic, hearing, speech, and visual disabilities have higher expectations that their child(ren) will transition to higher education than parents of students with learning disabilities or students on the autism spectrum; when surveyed, parents of students with MR or multiple disabilities answer that their child(ren) will “definitely or probably won’t” pursue higher education. Students with disabilities who transition from high school to higher education must navigate a new system with different legal responsibilities regarding their educational needs. Unlike high schools legally required to provide an individualized education program (IEP) to ensure student success, the responsibility falls upon the student herself who must now work within different parameters to ensure that her educational needs are met at the college and university level. Disability studies is making important contributions to this shifting terrain. In line with the social model of disability, Disability studies reconsiders the epistemology, language, and symbolic networks by which we define the transmission and construction of knowledge. If ability is socially and symbolically produced in the manner of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, then we can no longer conceive of disability as individual physical or mental defect. The defect is located in the environments, institutions, languages, and paradigms of knowledge made inaccessible to people with disabilities, and we have a responsibility to remove it.

As college and university enrollment becomes more diverse, the classroom, too, hosts a wide variety of students who possess multiple ways of learning. In addition to students with disabilities, UDL benefits students who learn in various ways, who acquired English as a second language, older students, and students among racial and ethnic minority groups. Rather than reacting to inaccessible

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16 Ibid., 7-8. Burgstahler provides additional guidelines for each principle.
17 Ibid.
18 Michael Davidson and Tobin Siebers, “Conference on Disability Studies and the University,” *PMLA* 120/2 (Mar 2005): 498-501. For a treatment of cognitive variation and higher education, see Margaret Price, *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011) Kindle edition. In regard to terminology for cognitive versus physical disabilities, some people in the disability community follow the distinctions in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* rather than using one inclusive term such as “cognitive disability.” Price offers a history and critique of the formation of the DSM and prefers the term “mental disability”; see Price, *Mad at School*, 816-902. Like Price, I make use of the term “cognitive disability,” recognizing the wide range of mental variation encompassed by this term.
22 Ibid., 4-1.
23 Davidson and Siebers, “Conference on Disability Studies,” 499.
learning spaces and practices through accommodations, UDL provides a positive, proactive approach to learning without legitimizing and highlighting culturally constructed categories of difference.\(^25\) The same techniques first developed for special education benefit a wide variety of students. Barriers to learning include physical (mobility impairments), sensory (visual and hearing impairments), language, learning (cognitive challenges), social (social challenges), and cultural barriers (a range of backgrounds).\(^26\)

Access to higher education is only the first step to learning. By law, colleges and universities were required to provide access to education for people from racial minorities and people with disabilities, but pedagogical practice has been slow to follow.

Although higher education became more available to historically underrepresented groups, educational practices and culture did not shift significantly to address the experiences and learning needs of the students newly enrolled...creating significant barriers to access, retention, and graduation for many students, particularly students with disabilities.\(^27\)

Educators who implement UDL practices strive for "meaningful access" for all students to educational resources.\(^28\)

**UDL: Practical Strategies**

UDL is a process; however, there are practical strategies educators can use to make learning more accessible to students. The Center for Universal Design in Education (CUDE) at University of Washington-Seattle maintains a checklist of UDL practices that educators can easily adapt to their own pedagogical methods along with guidelines for interacting with students with disabilities in the classroom.\(^29\) UDL emphasizes multiple methods for information delivery, teaching, and assessment that give students multiple ways to demonstrate what they are learning.

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25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., 14.

27 Pliner and Johnson, "Historical, Theoretical, and Foundational," 106. Burgstahler adds that meaningful access for underrepresented groups is necessary for the achievement of colleges' and universities' stated academic goals. Burgstahler, "Universal Design in Higher Education," 17.


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Below is a chart based on the adapted principles of UD for UDL purposes referenced above.\(^30\) This table provides the principles on the reader’s left and examples of practical strategies on the right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equitable use</th>
<th>Create syllabi and use syllabus templates that are accessible to students using screen-readers.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ensure that class websites are accessible to visually impaired students who use text-to-speech software.</td>
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<td>During lecture, speak clearly and use a microphone if needed. Video tape and post lectures on a course website.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Class notes: Provide class notes in print (in class) and electronic formats before the class session in which you will use them. Leave room for notes. Make use of guided notes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility in use</td>
<td>Use different pedagogical methods such as lecture, multiple exams, guest speakers, small group work, full-class discussion, experiential (For example, when teaching Judaism, visit a synagogue.), and final projects that allow students to engage course material while demonstrating their interests and strengths.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple and intuitive</td>
<td>Use simple, clear language to communicate course information. Provide a clear, straightforward syllabus with clearly communicated course objectives, goals, and expectations. Provide a simple grading rubric. Provide clear and straightforward instructions for assignments orally in class and also in writing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Perceptible information | Provide textbooks and additional reading material in print and digital versions.  
| | Choose course textbooks that are also available as e-books.  
| | Provide a choice of course textbooks to students that present the course material in different ways (for instance, highly detailed prose or graphic representations of the material). |
| Tolerance for error | Encourage students to turn in drafts of papers or pieces of final project before the due date for instructor feedback. |
| Low physical effort | Providing an alternate method for taking essay exams, i.e. use of a computer for students with physical impairments that impede writing or use a computer or hand-held spell checker for students with dyslexia. |
| Size and space for approach and use | Finish speaking before turning away from students to write on the board.  
| | Provide a clear line of sight for all students in the classroom, including the use of a circular seating arrangement in small classrooms.  
| | Arrange classrooms so that wheelchair users have ample room to move and turn. |
| A community of learners | Use cooperative learning techniques and peer learning to encourage student interaction.  
| | Schedule voluntary study and discussion groups that allow students to review material and study a topic in-depth or problematize course material. |
| Instructional Climate | Establish a positive learning environment on the first day of class by starting on time, involving students in conversation about learning, and taking informal feedback to acknowledge excitement about learning and address any fears and anxieties.  
| | Create a class contract together that addresses behaviors class members will use in interacting with each other (I find that students already know they will disagree and want a safe, welcoming, and tolerant environment in which to learn.)  
| | Make eye contact and address students by name when they enter the classroom.  
| | Place a sentence on your syllabus that encourages students to meet with you in person to discuss their individual learning needs. |

Through UDL, disability studies as a liberatory project effects greater justice in access and the accomplishment of learning among students with disabilities. At the same time, UDL addresses and begins to redress the inequities in higher education by empowering all students to take responsibility for, participate in, and direct their own learning.