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Critical Disability Studies

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End of Semester Reflection: Valuing Storytelling and Narrative in Academic Conversations

I remember coming into this class on the first day and actually feeling very nervous – I felt fearful of not knowing how to talk about disability and feeling like this class would be completely uncharted territory for me. As a non-disabled person, this class was so not the end-all be-all for learning about issues around disability, but rather an experience that encouraged me to start asking the questions I needed to be asking. I think one of the most important parts of this class for me, then, was just entering the conversation in a real way rather than thinking about disability and accessibility vaguely or abstractly as I had in the past. This class showed me the urgent stakes in imagining and creating a more accessible world, stakes that had been made invisible to me because I had never experienced them. I didn’t know what I didn’t know at the beginning of the semester, and now I feel l have a much better idea of how to pay more attention to and ask the right questions about the very inaccessible world around me.

This is largely the story my Serendip posts tell: that is, a main thread that unfolds is an interest in storytelling, narrative, and making and navigating genuine connections as I speak about disability, rather than relying solely on the theoretical or abstract. From unpacking the problems with Peter Singer’s argument, to thinking about collectivity in Deaf culture, to reflecting on the intimate experience of the moment “before we step outside,” to even writing about my partnership with Vinetta, I was continually focused on how a more embodied and experience-focused methodology might be crucial to an academic study of disability and other social issues more broadly. Reading a piece like Melanie Yergeau’s or Harriet McBryde Johnson’s carried a different weight for me than reading Peter Singer’s piece. In fact, Yergeau and McBryde Johnson’s work added stakes to disembodied and “objective” theory such as Theory of Mind. Academic work that treats disability as a thought experiment or hypothetical situation still has stakes and harmful implications which are perhaps strategically erased.

Working with Vinetta at CCW, watching Teresa Burke’s practices to make her talk more accessible, watching the narrative of Simi Linton’s early life, and other experiences that made calls for accessibility urgent rather than abstract to me, made me feel as well as think, were the most transformative to me this semester. They made clear that my choice of whether or not to enter conversations about disability was a privilege in itself, and a choice with consequences in so many people’s lives. This process of rooting Disability Studies in lived experience largely informed my final project of starting conversations with non-disabled folks about disability. My UDL lesson plan attempts to center narrative both of participants and of experiences surrounding disability and language. The objective of my final project is to draw non-disabled people into conversations about disability as I was drawn in, by understanding that words are not only abstract entities but entities that actually enact something in the world.

For this reason, I think it will be hard to shake the page of Margaret Price’s *Mad at School* in which she shares the “incoherent” handwritten draft of her work. I felt so connected with Price and her brain when I saw that page, and her words took on a new life for me. There is so much, as Price describes, in academia that encourages to disembody and disconnect our thinking. But if we treat conversations as thought experiments, I believe we lose something important. Moving forward, I’ll be paying more attention and speaking about disability with intention. I’ll think of accessibility as a world I want for the people I really love and care about.