Grace Toner

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Critical Disability Studies

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Self-Evaluation and Reflection

Looking back on my work from this semester, one large theme that I see from the beginning of the class is a focus on discussing different examples of the social model of disability, specifically how cultures, perspectives and physical environments are what make people disabled, not the individuals. I remember learning about the social model versus medical model of disability a few hours before our first meeting of this class in Professor Mullaney’s lecture at my Bryn Mawr disability studies class. The concept was mind opening to me as I had never taken a disabilities studies course before or really given much thought to the communities that make up disability culture. Ever since that first introduction to the concept, it seems I’ve unintentionally been stuck on it, such as my “Capitalism as Disabling Society” post or “What is Disability Culture in the Time of COVID-19”. I felt inspired to uncover disabling situations I’ve not experienced personally but have been acquainted with in my own life or in the lives of loved ones since I was given the chance to learn this material and not them. This year happened to be one where three of my Bryn Mawr friends left school for mental health reasons while I was abroad in the fall, following the dropout of my ex-girlfriend freshman year for similar reasons. I don’t want to make their personal journeys about me because they aren’t, but truly my entire college career so far has been marked with people close to me leaving or dropping out, and these are highly intelligent individuals who in high school were above average participants in both academic and extra-curricular activities. So what the hell was going on? The decision to focus on mental disability in higher education for my midterm project gave me a space to explore and validate what I was seeing as not normal and not healthy for anyone involved. I grew a lot outside of class time because of the project and being able to discuss my findings with them one-on-one. It was a healing experience for them as well and I appreciate that the coursework in this class was open ended enough to let us have those moments of clarity and justice and to be able to call higher academic culture what it is; disabling.

Something I struggled with, but I know for a fact every college student in the country is struggling with as well, was online participation in class. I attended class obviously and continued with the material, but so much of where learning happens for me is in-class, in-person discussion and lecture. There is a natural ebb and flow that is lost in conversations on Zoom, and I wasn’t willing to be as vocal as I usually am in discussion. However, I think on Zoom I was still able to contribute and give feedback to other people’s ideas and stay honest and truthful about my thoughts on all the sometimes heavy topics we came across. This semester was also the perfect time to take this class because isolation and searching for community online is a huge part of disability culture. I learned that it’s ok to not feel physically connected all the time, and current COVID op-eds that we read or readings we discussed like “Good Kings, Bad Kings” discussed that loneliness is disabling for everyone. There is more to the culture and community than being disabled, and I’m grateful I chose to focus in on an area of study I did not expect to ever cross paths with. I hope to go into the public health field after I graduate, specifically in social services, project management, or public policy. Taking two disability courses at the same time has reminded me how important it is to consider all sides of the story and think beyond the average person with the average life when making public health decisions, specifically with government policy or designing accessible public spaces.

 I unfortunately left my CCW notebook at Bryn Mawr (hopefully they’ll let me come back soon to pick up all my stuff, including my car!). But from what I recall a lot of my entries were again thinking about how the adults and artists we met at CCW move through spaces and what environments or social interactions disable them. For example, I was grappling with the infantilization of mentally disabled adults and how to interact with them in a way that didn’t put their disability in the forefront of my actions. Why does my voice subconsciously change when I talked to Joey for example, in a similar manner as when I talk to a toddler? It doesn’t necessarily help make my communication clearer, or positively contribute to our interactions. It’s a result of stereotypes of how to speak to people who aren’t neurotypical and it was a habit I immediately began to break during my visits. Obviously not being able to have the time at the CCW was the biggest loss from COVID-19 on this class, but I still grew and was able to explore a new area of study that has permanently altered my perspective for the better. Thank you so much for a great class!