

## IDENTITY AND THE DISABLED TUTOR

### The Possibilities Of Re-constructing Selfhood In Peer Writing Conferences

#### Introduction: Disability Studies and the Construction of Disabled Identity

**A**t the heart of disability studies lies the question: What does it mean for a person to be disabled? The answer is deceptively simple: a person who is disabled has a disability. It is a circular answer, and one that goes largely unquestioned even in a culture which supports disability-gearred facilities such as bathrooms and parking spaces. However, a simple list of who is counted among the disabled reveals how unclear a distinction disability actually is. Disability includes such categories as the blind, the deaf, the mute, the developmentally disabled, the learning disabled, the physically disabled, and the mentally ill, many of which are themselves ambiguously defined.<sup>1</sup> The category of disability, then, is premised on the seemingly commonsensical notion that the blind, schizophrenics, and amputee veterans should all belong to the same category. The question dogging disability studies therefore becomes, “What connection actually exists between those identified as disabled?” For disability studies theorists, the answer is a troubling “none,” or more accurately, “none outside of the category of disability itself.” Theorist Brenda Jo Brueggemann articulates this in observing that, “Disability stabilizes most in its instability.”<sup>2</sup> The defining characteristic of the category of disability, then, is exactly that no one characteristic unites it. The common tie is only the category itself.

The idea that there is no objective foundation for the category of disability is one of the main tenets of disability studies. Like its sister disciplines, critical race studies, queer studies and women’s studies, disability studies rests upon the notion of constructivism, specifically that all categories of identity, including disability, were constructed to serve a set of power relations in a specific historical and cultural moment. Disability studies in particular emphasizes the historical and cultural groundings of disability as an identity. It is important to note, of course, that “the very permission given to think of identity as a complex construction also serves to undermine the notion of identity” itself. Because identity is synonymous with the essence of the person, and a construction is by definition non-essential, disability is considered a non-essential category by those in the discipline.<sup>3</sup>

That the category of disability has no essence is an assertion at once both doubtful and obvious. It is doubtful in the sense that unique bodies have always existed, but obvious in that they have not always been called “disabled.” To the ancient Greeks they were “marvels” or “monsters,” to P.T. Barnum “freaks,” and to our contemporary social system, disabled.<sup>4</sup> Constructivist histories chronicle the constructions of identity through time to better demonstrate their non-essentiality. Having identified the construction of disability in this way, the primary concern of disability studies then becomes debunking the current incarnation, what Robin M. Smith refers to as the “deficit-based system” of disability. Disability studies traces the origins of the current

category of disability to medical science, significantly the idea that persons with disabilities are diagnosed according to their bodies' deficits, i.e. what they are seen to be lacking.<sup>5</sup> Being identified according to lacking causes persons with disabilities to be viewed as "abnormal" within an otherwise "normal" culture.<sup>6</sup> Because of the pervasiveness of scientific diagnosis in Western thought, disability studies locate the problem of disability not at a single point but in the culture at large. Lennard J. Davis articulates this as "The 'problem' [being] not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" in the social environment.<sup>7</sup>

While the ambiguity of the problem's location makes the creation of any solution daunting, it is also reason for hope in that there exist innumerable spaces for the construction and possible re-construction of the disabled identity. After all, if disability is constructed—has been constructed—it can also be de-constructed and re-constructed. It is the possibility of disabled identity-making in the specific space of university-based peer tutoring situations that I have chosen to explore here. In particular, I aim to investigate the reading of disabled undergraduate writing tutors' bodies-as-text in one-on-one writing conferences based on data collected largely thanks to the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Writing Fellows Program.<sup>8</sup> I chose to focus on tutors with visible disabilities, i.e. those disabilities which cannot be hidden, in order to eliminate the complexities created by passing and outing in terms of disabled status. I will use these findings to argue for a barely-tapped potential for disabled identity re-construction in such peer conference situations.

### **Assumptions of Disabled Identity Re-construction and the Process of Reading**

At its heart, the idea that the category of disability can be constructed (and re-constructed) rests on two major assumptions. The first is that those defined as disabled did not define themselves that way. The fact that many persons with disabilities choose to pass as "normal" and express resentment towards the roles they perceive themselves to be forced to take on as disabled persons, supports this assumption. Disability studies aims, then, for re-construction of the disabled identity with the purpose of returning self-making to the selves concerned.

The second assumption is that if disabled persons did not create the disabled identity, it follows that other parties did. This process, by which other (often non-disabled) persons observe and identify disabled persons, is what disability studies and its sister disciplines refer to as the reading of bodies-as-text. The reading of bodies-as-text is a process analogous to reading written texts. What I understand by reading is coming to an understanding or interpretation of a text by evaluating certain textual markers. In written texts, for example, a reader faced with a block of poetry may recognize that it is composed in unrhymed iambic pentameter and as a result read/understand the text as blank verse. Another way to put this idea is that the reader *identifies* the text by reading, and by doing so, the reader acquires authority over that text and its identity. While the author of the text may be said to have ultimate authority over the reading/understanding of a text, in the absence of the author, the reader has authority by identifying that text. Because the original author is absent in most circumstances, the reader may thereby create and "author" the text's "self."

A similar process occurs in the observation of human bodies, or bodies-as-text. Reading bodies-as-text is something which most people do every day when observing one another—usually visually, but in other ways as well. Instead of markers like meter, rhyme, or language, markers by which readers evaluate bodies might be height, weight, sex, skin color, or (dis)ability. Disability in particular complicates the reading of bodies-as-text, especially for visibly disabled persons. The difficulty (if not impossibility) of *not* being observed as disabled can cause the disabled identity to dominate over any other readable identity. For example, if a person is observed to be missing an arm, that characteristic of the missing arm becomes much more significant to the reader than, say, the characteristic of her brown hair. The dominance of disabled characteristics is what theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson refers to as "enfreakment," a process by which "the body envelops and obliterates the freak's potential humanity."<sup>9</sup> Enfreakment may appear to be an extreme proposition—most people would likely not consider "obliterating humanity" part of their daily routine—but Jeff Mossman observes that it is in fact an unfortunately common occurrence. By way of example, he notes that many "people do not see the individual child who has Down syndrome; they see only the child as a Down

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<sup>a</sup> "The Undergraduate Writing Fellows Program pairs undergraduate peer writing tutors with writing-intensive courses. These tutors, or 'fellows' read students' drafts of academic writing assignments, make written comments on these drafts, and hold conferences with each student to discuss these comments and help the student strategize about how to revise the paper."<sup>9</sup>

syndrome child, as a stereotype.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, persons with disabilities are dis-abled in their identity simply by being observed. It is the devastating process of enfreakment of those with visible disabilities which makes identity re-construction at once extremely difficult but at the same time extremely urgent as well.

### **The Silencing of the Body-as-Text and the Power of Autobiographical Narrative in Identity Construction**

What is key to the success of the reader in determining bodies’ identities through reading is the silence of that body. According to Garland-Thomson, the freak show was so successful in its heyday exactly because the freaks on display were silenced, i.e. they were not allowed to talk to their observers in order to identify themselves. In their silence, “freaks” were not able to take authority over the making of their own identities. Garland-Thomson argues that Barnum’s first “freak” Joice Heth became “a freak not by virtue of her body’s uniqueness, but rather by displaying the stigmata of social devaluation.”<sup>11</sup> Because she was silenced, Joice Heth could not identify such stigmata as being otherwise, and so was reduced in her identity to solely those “abnormal” physical characteristics, characteristics which were devalued by her readers.

If persons with disabilities are not permitted to speak for themselves, observers of disabled bodies-as-text may easily come to the conclusion that a particular disability is tantamount to that person. Such a situation may occur even though the person does not view herself that way. However, the minute a person is able to employ voice, i.e. authority over the self, new identity-making can take place. This does not mean, of course, that a person may create *any* identity they wish; identity re-construction at the site of a body-as-text is inextricably linked to the physicality of that body. Mark Jeffreys points out that for a visibly disabled person, identity-making at the site of the body-as-text must—for that exact reason—incorporate the disability, because while the category of disability may be culturally constructed, the unique bodies to which it pertains are not.<sup>12</sup> Disability studies hopes, then, not to erase the visible disability in the body-as-text, which would be impossible, but to fashion a new identity incorporating those disabled characteristics and which would center on personhood.

Methods for forming a new person-centered identity in the body-as-text are suggested in the literature regarding identity-formation in written texts. Such

literature points to the promise of autobiographical narrative in identity-construction, which makes sense considering that autobiographical narrative is the writing/expression of one’s self, one’s identity. By communicating personal stories to others, then, people can read their own bodies and form their own identities. G. Thomas Couser further details this idea:

autobiography by definition involves self-representation; as such, autobiography offers an alternative to patronizing and marginalizing (mis)representation by others; it thus provides a medium for counterdiscourse that challenges stereotypes and misconceptions.<sup>13</sup>

One such marginalizing discourse, at least in written texts, might be considered academic discourse. This is significant for Writing Fellows’ bodies-as-text which not only teach academic discourse, but because of their role might also be considered to exist in an academic discourse of the body. This does not mean identity-construction in such an arena is impossible, however. Smith argues that on the contrary, “Academic articles are forms of research stories,” and so may actually contain the possibilities of autobiographical narrative space. As tutors of academic discourse functioning in an academic environment, then, it may be possible for peer writing tutors to open up spaces for identity-making through their work. It is exactly this possibility which concerns me in the following sections.

### **Methods and Findings: The University Setting and Peer Tutoring Conferences as Sites of Identity Formation**

To understand the unique role of the disabled tutor, I examined the experiences of both Miriam<sup>b</sup>, a peer tutor with the Writing Fellows, and those of Dr. Jim Ferris of the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Communication Arts department, both of whom are visibly disabled. Because I was more concerned with understanding spaces for authority and identity-making than the exact properties of silence, I chose not to pursue explicitly the experiences of disabled (non-tutor) students. Paulo Freire among others has theorized that students are silenced simply by the nature of uneven power relations in the classroom whether they are disabled or not. Professors, by contrast, have authority in their classrooms and thereby identity-making power,

<sup>b</sup> Miriam’s name has been changed in order to preserve her anonymity.



Melissa Steckbauer, *Terza*, mixed media, 2004

and tutors demonstrate similar authority in guiding students. I interviewed both Miriam and Dr. Ferris regarding how they negotiate the university setting with their disabilities and which environments work best for them and why. One objection to my research, I realize, might be that Miriam and Dr. Ferris do not share the same disability. Miriam is deaf and wears hearing aids while Dr. Ferris wears a leg brace. However, it is one of the claims of disability studies that although there is no connection between many of those labeled as disabled, because they share the same label, they experience many of the same situations, the same identification at the hands of the same authority.

At first glance, the university setting would appear to be an ideal place for large-scale knowledge exchange and thereby identity-construction. However, theorists James Wilson and Cynthia Liewicki-Wilson argue that the university may instead be viewed as:

an environment intended for nondisabled persons. Often such intentions are built into the literal landscape of a university's inaccessible buildings and classrooms, but such intentions are no less a part of the cultural and mental landscape of its faculty and administration . . .<sup>14</sup>

The university landscape includes language use, especially phrases like "blind" ignorance, ideas fallen on

"deaf ears," and making "lame" points, all of which have negative connotations. These in particular are used so commonly that Davis observes them to be nothing short of "shocking to anyone who is even vaguely aware of the way language is implicated in discrimination and exclusion."<sup>15</sup> However, exclusion is nothing new to the university setting, as I have already mentioned briefly the silencing of students in the classroom noted by Freire.

By contrast, the exclusion applied to visibly disabled professors is unique in that such persons can be read as at once having authority (as a professor) and being silenced (as a disabled person).<sup>16</sup> This duality is not one easily overcome, even with the authority that comes with professorship. Brueggemann has discussed her "worries that students might read her disability identity with pity or might question her intellectual ability or authority because of their perception of missing 'faculties'" even though she has attained a teaching post in the first place.<sup>17</sup> A disabled professor's road to self-making may also be hindered by the environment of the classroom itself which privileges certain types of knowledge. Significantly, intellectual knowledge is favored over personal knowledge, and so even direct autobiographical narratives presented in a classroom context may be devalued.<sup>18</sup> There is no guarantee that visibly disabled professors will not face exclusion themselves.

My initial hypothesis regarding disabled peer



tutors was that they would share the silence of their fellow students, and because of the academic context of their work, would also share in the challenges facing disabled professors. If anything, I surmised that tutors might be more invisible than either in carrying out a role which serves both students and professors by teaching academic discourse.

However, I did not find this to be the case. Wilson and Liewicki-Wilson note that the silence of students and professors may not *always* occur. "While institutional encounters tend to reinforce the unequal power relations inherent in any interaction between individual and institution," they say, "they do not have to: negotiations between individuals and institutions can sometimes be mutually transforming."<sup>19</sup> In my preliminary hypothesis, I did not take into account arguably the most important and potentially transforming component of the success of the reader of bodies-as-text: the silencing of those bodies. Peer tutors like the Writing Fellows are simply not silent. Of course, one might point out, neither are professors, but tutors are unique in their role as both active speakers and listeners. Because of the emphasis placed on collaborative learning, tutors' interactions take the form of conversations, not academic lectures to be conveyed or absorbed by professors or students, respectively. Tutors interact both with their tutees and the professors whose classes they fellow both personally and through their comments, and both comments and conferences provide possible avenues of tutor authority. However, my findings suggest that conferences are far more promising for tutors because of the setting's conduciveness to engagement in autobiographical narrative. While Miriam mentioned briefly that self-expression does play a role in the comments she makes on student papers, Dr. Ferris did not. Both agreed, however, that helping the students write the papers they wished to write was the first priority in commenting. Because of the restrictions placed on this type of writing, commenting on student papers may not be the most productive avenue for disabled tutors' identity re-construction.

By contrast, the authority which tutors have over the conference situation, and the fact that the goal is to impart that authority to their tutees, only serves to reinforce that such tutors wield authority in the first place. This fact holds great possibilities for a disabled tutor, but actually for anyone concerned with constructing their own identity. In Miriam's interview, she discussed how she worries at times about her disability overtaking her identity, that people may see her as

"Miriam, hearing impaired, instead of Miriam, likesnutella-driveslowly-hashearingimpairment-lovestowrite-listenstojonimitchell." This kind of situation, when the disability is given the same weight as the whole person, is exactly the enfreakment that Garland-Thomson was referring to. Interestingly, though, the kind of interaction which Miriam's role as tutor provides may actually stave off enfreakment. Miriam says the following of her experience as a tutor:

I'm lucky because I have control over the setting [of the one-on-one peer conference]. This is a major advantage. I'm realizing more and more that a big 'limiting' factor of my hearing impairment is simply social awkwardness when the other person isn't sure how to act...In the tutoring situation, I've found a place that counteracts a lot of this social awkwardness.

Tutoring, then, is an arena where Miriam can form her own identity through one-on-one interaction because she has authority and can thereby eliminate much of the awkwardness that may otherwise exist for both her tutees and herself, the kind of awkwardness which could have otherwise resulted in enfreakment. She can adapt her tactics to her tutees to help them feel more at ease and understand where she is coming from, and the tutees are likewise able to express their needs to Miriam because of the nature of her authority.

Arguably even more significant than the authority and identity-making potential wielded by the peer tutor is that Miriam has come to understand her disability as a particular asset in conference both for herself and her tutees. Because her disability plays a role in how she tutors, she has found that it does so to certain advantages. She notes that:

I've found that my disability, in subtle ways, engages with the complicated power situation of the peer-tutor/peer-tutee relationship—for the better...I ask the person 'to understand,' to cooperate with me. In a way, I feel like this extra element facilitates and authenticates the back-and-forth model for a conference that I believe is ideal.

All Writing Fellows ask their tutees to engage with and take authority in commenting on their papers, but because Miriam is able to create an identity which includes but is not limited to her disability, she further

facilitates her tutees' acquisition of authority. This is exactly the kind of identity reconstruction that disability studies aims to achieve and by giving students authority fulfills exactly the goal of collaborative learning-based tutoring programs. Miriam, because of the back-and-forth model of a tutoring conference, because she has voice and authority over the situation as a tutor, is in little danger of being viewed solely as her hearing impairment. She is not silent and therefore can self-identify by expressing autobiographical aspects of herself as a person from the start, one that just so happens to be disabled. By doing so, she helps her tutees to create their own space in which to similarly explore selfhood both in the conference and in writing. I would go so far as to say that the Writing Fellow conference is a space of identity-making for both parties because both parties are capable of simultaneously wielding authority and self-making potential.

#### Discussion: Taking the Next Step

Although such findings are promising, it must be acknowledged that the social problems identified by disability studies will not be definitively solved in the near future. Brueggemann notes that we still "face dealing with the erasure of disabled subjects from the public sphere. The apparent invisibility of disabled subjects in places like the academy confronts us."<sup>20</sup> This fact, however, should not be a cause for despair. There are many reasons yet for hope, says Mossman, particularly because of the nature of university setting:

It is through the meaningful critical analysis of classroom practice that such development

can take place, for it is in the classroom, in an aspect of our profession that involves for many the active empowerment of others through pedagogy, that the real subtleties of discrimination, the complicated process of building abnormality can be detected and changed.<sup>21</sup>

Identity-making may be the most important method of changing the construction of disability in public settings like the university. While my findings are certainly suggestive of the possibilities inherent in one-on-one peer tutoring situations, they are by no means conclusive. Further research is absolutely essential in order to more fully investigate the unique role of peer tutor and understand the mechanism by which peer tutors are able to author their own identities and facilitate the same for their tutees. The findings of such research may show how identity-making in peer tutoring might be applied in the service of those marginalized elsewhere.

In addition, the constructivism on which disability studies is based must too acknowledge its location in a specific time and place and yield to other "siege engines" of knowledge. It is by this system of proposal and critique that theories of identity may progress and develop. Davis argues that such forward motion will one day result in the eradication of all identity, because after all, "when all identities are finally included [as normal], there will be no identity."<sup>22</sup> While I can hardly imagine what such a world would look like, I can only hypothesize that the absence of silencing and prevalence of shared authority will make how we got there a story worth telling. Further investigation of the peer tutoring space in disabled identity formation will be a worthwhile step in that direction. ❖

<sup>1</sup> Davis, Lennard J. "Who put the the in the novel?" *Bending Over Backwards: Essays on Disability and the Body*. New York: New York University Press. 87.  
<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, Brenda Jo. "An Enabling Pedagogy." *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Eds. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. MLA: New York, 2002. 319.  
<sup>3</sup> Davis, "Who put the the in the novel?": 83 - 4.  
<sup>4</sup> Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disabilities in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. 56.  
<sup>5</sup> Smith, Robin M. "View from the Ivory Tower: Academics Constructing Disability." *Semiotics and Dis/ability*. Ed. L. J. Rogers and B. B. Swadener. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001. 59.  
<sup>6</sup> Davis, Lennard J. "Constructing Normalcy: the Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century." *The Disability Studies Reader*. Ed. Lennard J. Davis. London: Routledge, 1997. 13.  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 9  
<sup>8</sup> (Steinhoff, fn 1 - 2)  
<sup>9</sup> Garland-Thompson, 59.  
<sup>10</sup> Mossman, Mark. "Visible Disability in the College Classroom." *College English* 64:6 (2002). 379 - 80.  
<sup>11</sup> Garland-Thompson, 59.  
<sup>12</sup> Jeffreys, Mark. "The Visible Cripple (Scars and Other Disfiguring Displays Included)." *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Eds. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. MLA: New York, 2002. 38 - 9  
<sup>13</sup> Couser, G. Thomas. "The Empire of the 'Normal': A Forum on Disability and Self-Representation. Introduction." *American Quarterly*. 52:2 (2002). 305.  
<sup>14</sup> Wilson, James C. and Cynthia Lewicki-Wilson. "Constructing a Third Space: Disability Studies, the Teaching of English and Institutional Transformation." *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*. Eds. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. MLA: New York, 2002. 297.  
<sup>15</sup> Davis, "Who put the the in the novel?": 87.  
<sup>16</sup> Mossman, Mark. "Visible Disability in the College Classroom." *College English* 64:6 (2002). 653.  
<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, Brenda Jo and Debra A. Modellmog. "Coming-out Pedagogy: Risking Identity in Language and Literature Classrooms." *Pedagogy* 2:3 (2002). 315.  
<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 312  
<sup>19</sup> Wilson and Lewicki-Wilson, 276 - 7.  
<sup>20</sup> Bruggeman, 318.  
<sup>21</sup> Mossman, 652.  
<sup>22</sup> Davis, "Who put the the in the novel?": 86.