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An Academic’s Encounter with Chronic Illness

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The Future of Disability in the Teaching of Religion

Deborah Creswell, Iliff School of Theology

The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Eugene V. Gallagher, Chair) sponsors Spotlight on Teaching. It appears twice each year in Religious Studies News—AAR Edition and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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ACCORDING TO THE 2003 U.S. Census, one in seven persons in the U.S. has a disability, a figure that translates to some 37.5 million people, many of whom have severe disabilities. Fifty-three percent of them, or 19.9 million, are between the ages of 21 and 64. As educators, it is essential to be aware of various forms of discrimination as they pertain to equal access and opportunity for diverse groups, especially those groups that have been historically marginalized; and to understand, practically speaking, how laws that safeguard equal access and opportunity, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, apply to teachers in the classroom. The global need to uphold equitable standards of access for people with disabilities was affirmed by the U.N. in 1993 when it adopted The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. This issue of Spotlight is devoted to highlighting the concerns and rights of people with disabilities, many of whom are our students, fellow colleagues, and staff, and to offering pragmatic ways of ensuring that educational practices and pedagogies are nondiscriminatory and inclusive.

Kerry Wynn, Southeast Missouri State University
Guest Editor

From the Editor’s Desk

Tazim R. Kassam
Spotlight on Teaching Editor

The AAR Task Force on Religion and Disabilities was established in 2002 to make recommendations to the Board on how to address the needs of Academy members with disabilities. In order to better ascertain these needs, the Task Force conducted a survey of the AAR membership, wherein respondents with disabilities expressed their various concerns, including the practical challenges posed by the size of the Annual Meeting, the distance between sessions and conference hotels, and the accessibility of presentations made during the AAR sessions. In addition to taking up the question of how best to provide suitable accommodations for its members with disabilities, the Task Force also drew attention to the importance of (a) providing faculty with useful information and practical guidelines on teaching students with learning disabilities; and (b) recognizing religion and disability studies as a subdiscipline within religious studies that deserves to be treated as a distinct and legitimate area of academic inquiry. An important outcome of the Task Force’s efforts is the guidelines on accessibility provided on the AAR Web site, which include tips on how to give presentations, design Web pages, and provide facilities and instructional materials that are disability friendly.

Some practical issues discussed in the following articles include: What are faculty’s legal obligations and what on-campus services are available to assist them in responding optimally to their students with disabilities? What challenges do faculty who are themselves hearing impaired or who have a chronic illness face when teaching or leading classroom discussions? Are the challenges of conveying subject matter saturated with sense-dependent metaphors or visual imagery (iconography, ritual, music) to visually or hearing-impaired students? Are students who have a visual impairment automatically discouraged from pursuing advanced study that would require them to learn Hebrew, Latin, or Arabic? What classroom and career-related practices inadvertently favor the able-bodied?

Intimately linked to the pragmatic questions of properly accommodating persons with disabilities is the task of critiquing cultural and religiously mediated constructions of disability that underlie the manifold exclusions of social, educational, and institutional practice. Prototypical notions of the ideal and/or normal body, and stigmas of abnormality and deficiency attached to bodies that deviate from these norms, are explored in this issue. The myriad biases and judgments embedded in common phrases that rely on metaphors of disability, such as “fell on deaf ears,” “has a blind spot,” or “is morally crippled,” betray the extent to which negative valences permeate attitudes towards disability. Religious and theological texts are deeply implicated in subscribing to bodies that are infirm, ill, weak, and physically impaired meanings that signify ignorance, evil, sin, moral deficiency, and lack of faith, and consequently evoke a mixture of condemnation, pity, and contempt. Scholars are thus invited to consider the multiple ways that the identification of the holy with beauty, perfection, and the good in religious art and imagination casts into exile bodies that are deemed disabled and defective.

For calling the attention of our readership to disability studies, both in terms of teaching pedagogy and as a legitimate subdiscipline, thanks are due to the guest editor of this issue, Kerry Wynn, who chairs the Task Force on Religion and Disability, as well as to the members of the Task Force and the individual contributors. 

1 Thanks to William Erickson, MS, Research Specialist at Cornell University’s Employment and Disability Institute for providing this information. See www.DisabilityStatistics.org and www.edc.cornell.edu.

2 See www.aarweb.org/other/accessibility/default.asp.
Integrating Disability in Religious Studies and Theological Education

Nancy L. Eiesland, Emory University

D ISABILITY IS everywhere once you know how to look for it. The challenge for those who study religion and theology has been to develop constructed frames as a coherent intellectual practice, and pedagogical awareness that investigate disability’s presence, rather than perpetuate the “absent presence” within our work. Disability has been clearly present in our own lives, and in public accommodation in the workplace, in state and local government services, and in public education. The realities that plagued people with disabilities, emerged. Later legislative advances were made, especially with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1975 (later called the Rehabilitation Act, now the Disabilities Education Act), which established the right of children with disabilities to a public school education in an integrated environment. In the next two decades, millions of disabled children were educated under its provisions, radically changing the lives of many in the disability community and radically altering the context of postsecondary education. Our participation in and presence in educational settings necessitated some attention to basic architectural access and to attitudinal biases against people with disabilities.

Within the context of social and political activism, people with disabilities calling themselves “nothing about us without us” — meaning that we were the subjects of our own experience and we deserve the right to speak in any context of all account of disability. Illuminating systemic barriers, exclusionary practices, and cultural stigmas, people with disabilities gave accounts that did not fit within the existing models of disability. While no single account of “what really is a disability?” can be found, increasingly the means for framing the question turned away from biology toward cultures and societies, asking, for example, “what are the shared cultural assumptions about disability and how do they relate to the systemic treatment of people with various disabilities?” Incrementally new and more socially attuned models have emerged, many by survivors with disabilities themselves. Broadly understood, these models view disability as a means for scaling human variation, which help to determine attitudes and practices toward those bodies, their appearance, and then discrimination. Disability systems are integrative regimes of cultural interpretation and social organization, not unlike race and gender systems. Most societies have multiple disability systems, but generally one tends to be dominant. Within it, different disabilities are scaled differently; psychiatric disabilities may be understood to be infinitely worse than paraplegia, for example. Further, not only differences in fundamental structures matter, but also experiences of disability, but also differences in collective cultural interpretation and social opportunity shape how a person experiences his or her own disability. This approach allows us to reintegrate disability so that it is not only about people with disabilities, but rather a systemic means for scaling bodies in society. Understanding disability systems necessitates a careful and full account of the multiple and sometimes contradictory roles of religions and religious systems in creating, sustaining, and undermining them. Too frequently these accounts of religious and moral meaning of disability have been missing.

Historicizing the emergence of disability as a focal intellectual inquiry highlights that religion is an area that could possibly hope to address all or most diverse experiences of disability, cultural context, and religions represented within the contemporary classroom contexts. Yet some of the insights here provide the scholar-teachers with direction and redefined some primary academic areas within religious studies. Since the expansion of scholarship on disability studies in religion has meant that more and more subject areas within religious studies and theological education have at least scholarship that integrates disability. Now, whenever we teach a class, we can reframe to our question “what is a disability studies perspective on this?” by accessing some appropriate content. Though much work remains, integrating disability into religious studies and the theological education curriculum and pedagogy is underway, and these articles further the effort.

References


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Religious Studies News — AAR Edition
Disability Law and the Classroom

F. Rachel Magdalene, Appalachian State University

TWO IMPORTANT PIECES of legislation protect the rights of persons with disabilities and seek to provide equal access to higher education: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Section 504 applies to all schools that receive any federal financial assistance. Virtually all colleges and universities, whether public or private, fall under this law. The ADA regulates public educational institutions, including state universities and community colleges. Together, these acts control a significant number of institutions. In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE, n.d.) reported that these laws covered approximately 4,100 colleges and universities.

Because of the enactment of these laws, postsecondary educational institutions have experienced rapid growth in their populations of persons with disabilities. The DOE (1999) has reported that, between 1978 and 1996, the percentage of full-time first-year students declaring a disability increased from 2.6 to 9%. The percentage of students with a disability declaring a learning disability rose from 15 to 35 (ibid.). It is highly likely that every professor will find persons with disabilities in his or her classroom at some point. Consequently, understanding these laws is imperative for faculty members in higher education. This article will discuss briefly the scope of these acts and their impact on teaching.

The substantive provisions of Section 504 and the ADA are similar in a number of respects. The point of these laws is to prevent discrimination, both intentional and unintentional, against “an individual with handicaps.” They seek to remove any barriers that prevent persons with disabilities from receiving the full benefits of an education and to “level the playing field” between persons with and persons without disabilities. This does not mean that the results between these two classes must be identical in all cases. The aim is to “afford handicapped persons equal opportunity to obtain the same result, to gain the same benefit, or to reach the same level of achievement, in the most integrated setting appropriate to the person’s need” (DOE 2000).

Section 504 defines an individual with handicaps as including persons with any current “physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities.” It also includes persons with an actual or perceived history of such impairment. The U.S. Supreme Court has indicated that, for purposes of the ADA, these terms should be defined broadly (Burke v. Abbott, 527 U.S. 471, 527 U.S. 526). Specifically, the Court has included persons with a serious, chronic, or potentially disabling condition, or a chronic illness may meet the criterion. Hidden disabilities — those not visible to the naked eye, such as low vision, learning disabilities, or diabetes — are covered. During the assessment of the disability, persons are expected to use any available mitigating measures, such as eyeglasses, hearing aids, or medication (Sutton v. United Airlines; Murphy v. United Parcel Service, Title IV specifically excludes homosexuals, bisexuals, those with certain gender identity and service is necessary to make the learning certain compulsive disorders, and active illicit drug users from the definition, but rehabilitated drug abusers are included. Class auditors and international students are protected persons, entitled to the same benefits as domestic or degree-seeking students.

These acts apply to the full scope of university life. Regulated activities include academic calendars, student services, special interest groups and clubs, social and cultural activities, athletics, and transportation, among others. Even activities of a college or university that occur off campus, such as trips and internships, may be controlled.

The institution must provide, upon request, auxiliary aids, benefits, or services to a student with disabilities if failure to provide such items would result in a denial of access to any program benefit. Consequently, with respect to coursework, the school must provide the student with whatever aid or service is necessary to make the learning experience accessible and meaningful. This varies considerably among students, which is a subject other authors take up in this issue of Spotlight on Teaching. The institution must bear the cost of the accommodation unless the student chooses to provide their own accommodations, such as a state vocational rehabilitation program.

Adaptive technology is advancing quickly, and students may request the best and latest of such technology. Although the ADA makes clear that the institution is to give primary consideration to student requests, the school is not required to provide any assistance that is unduly burdensome for it. Nor must it provide the most sophisticated aid or service available, so long as the provided aid effectively meets the student’s needs. The determination of what will be an effective accommodation should involve a cooperative effort between the student and the institution. Such effectiveness must be determined on an individual basis and in the specific context in which the student will use it. For instance, what the student needs in a large lecture hall may be different from what is needed in a small section.

Accommodations may also require making appropriate academic modifications for the student. This can be the most difficult type of accommodation for a faculty member to make. No teacher is required to lower, or make substantial modifications to, the essential requirements of the course. Questions may arise, however, regarding what is essential. Furthermore, certain adaptations to assessment tools may be fitting. The DOE (1998) states: “A test should ultimately measure a student’s achievements and not the extent of the disability.” Substitution of a more helpful assessment tool is permissible and often most appropriate. Faculty might wish to employ a variety of assessment tools in a class, so that no particular academic strength or weakness becomes the entire basis for a student’s grade.

Occasionally, faculty object to the use of provided accommodations on grounds unrelated to the disability, such as the use of a tape recorder because it may infringe on a copyright or the free speech of those in the classroom. The laws demand, in this instance, that the professor allow this. The institution may oblige the student, however, to act in such a way as to protect the rights of others, such as by signing a copyright protection agreement.

Both Section 504 and the ADA place the burden on the student to obtain a diagnosis of the disability and to give notice to the institution concerning the disability. The school has no responsibility to identify students who need assistance; its duty is only to inform students as to the availability of services generally and provide the name of a contact person. Furthermore, an institution may not make a pre-admission inquiry concerning a student’s disabilities. After admission, however, the school is free, if it so chooses, to make confidential inquiries in order to ascertain what services might be needed. Nonetheless, the student has the fundamental responsibility to self-identify. Documentation of the disability is required. Often, schools will request documentation that is more than three years old for conditions that are subject to change. A student may give notice to Disability Student Services (DDS), an appropriate dean, the student’s advisor, or a professor. A notified professor should contact DDS and encourage the student to do the same.

Once the student provides documentation, he or she must assist the school in identifying the appropriate auxiliary aids. This may include supplying a prescription from a qualified professional as to the proper accommodation. The school may, however, in some cases, determine professional determination regarding the need for specific requested aids and services. An advisor gives notice that the student may, be it, or is a person with a disability in need of accommodation, the provisions of the acts apply. The presumption is that the students require the accommodation, which should be provided until such time as it is determined that the student is not, in fact, in need.

Generally, making accommodations for students without involving DDS is ill-advised. First, DDS may ultimately determine that the student does not have a legitimate request. Second, either under- or overaccommodating the student can be detrimental to his or her ultimate success. The DDS professionals are experienced in finding the right accommodation. Hidden disabilities often go undiagnosed. Faculty members are well situated to notice certain learning disabilities and may come to suspect that a student, who has not declared him- or herself to be a person with a disability, in fact has a disability. The law allows professors to approach the student. Breeching the subject, however, is a delicate issue. Many students know that they have a disability but choose not to identify themselves for various reasons — including a fear of discrimination. Others simply are unaware, and the news might not be welcome. Consequently, if the faculty member chooses to approach the student, he or she should do it sensitively. At times, a student provides an excellent opportunity to raise the subject when they come in for academic assistance or to have a deadline postponed. Nonetheless, one may feel free to enlist the aid of DDS before one makes contact.

Faculty members are on the front line of compliance with Section 504 and the ADA. Knowing the school’s legal obligations toward students with disabilities can assist faculty in giving such students a positive academic experience.

References


Accommodating Disability in the Classroom

Kerry H. Wynn, Southeast Missouri State University
Guest Editor

The minimal involvement by the three partners would entail what we might call the “cookbook” approach to accommodation. In this scenario the student provides documentation and registers with DSS, which then determines what the standard accommodations for the disability are in order to meet the student’s needs while insuring compliance with disability law and insurance. Remember that there is an actual disability and that the accommodations given are appropriate without compromising your course.

The first encounter with the notification that you will have a student with a disability in class can cause a jolt of panic.... How much additional work will this mean? Will I have to compromise the integrity of my course? I am clueless about disabilities!

Remember that you are not alone. Accommodating students with disabilities is a three-party team effort: the student is the expert on their experience with disability, you are the expert on your course; and the disabled student services personnel provide expertise on how to bridge the gap between your course and your student’s learning potential. Depending on the size of your institution, this third party may range in size from a multifaceted unit to a faculty member who has taken on the responsibility of learning how to accommodate students with disabilities. Whoever has this responsibility should obtain the proper education on disability law, disability documentation and interpretation, and the appropriate accommodations for particular disabilities.

Disabled student service staff are your friends. They provide the expertise to collect and interpret documentation, to identify diagnoses and the appropriate accommodation, and to make sure that what is required and not required under disability law so that faculty members do not have to determine these issues for themselves. Professionals in Disabled Student Services (DSS) are as committed as faculty to insuring that academic integrity is not compromised. They know that to compromise academic rigor is to compromise the student’s education. Their job is to make sure that students with disabilities have access to the same quality of education as that received by nondisabled students. DSS professionals do not try to second-guess instructors for students with disabilities — they try to make sure that students with disabilities have equal access to opportunities for both success and failure.

All three partners should be involved in the accommodation process. You should know who is responsible for DSS on your campus. If a student comes to you with a request for accommodation and you are not familiar with the procedure by the DSS staff, you should refer the student to DSS to register for services. The student will be required to provide the appropriate documentation from the appropriate diagnostic professionals to verify the disability. This is in compliance with disability law and insurance. Remember that even when an accommodation is the responsibility of the faculty member, the DSS staff is available to advise you on how best to meet it.

Faculty who are committed to teaching, however, will want to move beyond this basic cookbook method. They will want to engage all three partners in designing accommodations that will enhance the learning experience for their specific course. The accommodation list provided by DSS should be considered as minimal. As you become more comfortable with your specific classroom situation may be substituted on consultation with the student. Situations unique to a course can be identified and addressed. The DSS staff is available to assist in brainstorming how to address unique learning opportunities, and they have access to an extended professional community as well. DSS professionals are usually affiliated with the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), which publishes numerous resource materials and manages the Disability Student Services in Higher Education List (DSSHE-L), a list serve that provides an ongoing dialogue e-mail for DSS staff. DSSHE-L also provides an archive of all communications on the list. Topics that have been discussed in the past include how to accommodate biblical languages such as Greek and Hebrew for students with visual and learning disabilities.

While faculty should feel confident in being creative and innovative in providing accommodations, I would offer one word of caution: Remember that you are in the position of power. Students tend to be agreeable with those who hold power over them. They may agree to less-than-appropriate accommodations simply because you are the instructor. This does not mean that they will refrain from charging you with insufficiency of accommodation if they are not satisfied with the final results. The student must feel that an accommodation is appropriate. It would be advisable for you to discuss your innovations with the DSS staff. Again, DSS assist the faculty as well as the student.

The latest school of thought emerging in DSS is “Universal Instructional Design” (UID). UID advocates building diverse ways of addressing various learning styles and disabilities into the structure of the curriculum. It is hoped that as the best teaching methods for addressing diverse learners are incorporated into the classroom, accommodation will be part of the natural structure of the education process. As faculty become more comfortable with addressing diverse learners, they will become more confident in accommodating students with disabilities.

Resources

Information on Disability Services may be found at:

- www.eiit.cec.ece.edu/gi-bi/wlf515-
dubai1
- www.ahead.org
- www.jantarniozu.com
A Student’s Perspective on the Accessible Classroom

Kirk VanGilder, Boston University

The MOST ACCESSIBLE classroom I have encountered as a deaf student in both my MDiv and ThD programs have been those which employ a pedagogy that honors the presence of everyone. As simple as this sounds in principle, the practice of good, inclusive pedagogy is often one of the more complex aspects of teaching. Many professors approach accessibility in the classroom by expressing a desire for clear-cut lists of “dos and don’ts.” When a deaf student is in your classroom, do lecture normally; the interpreters will translate what you’re saying. Don’t talk to the interpreters when you address the student. Do repeat things when the interpreter asks you to. Classroom chances are half the class could benefit from this as well. Don’t stand between the deaf student and the interpreters; they need to see each other. As helpful as these hints are, they will vary from student to student depending on their particular abilities and learning styles. Therefore, accessible classroom cannot be reduced to “helpful hints for professors” any more than theological education can be reduced to “helpful hints for pastors.” Instead, the very act of making your classroom accessible must entail a transformation of what it means to teach and create an atmosphere of learning. This atmosphere for learning will involve the formation of practices which honor the presence of everyone in the classroom and allow for their particularities to shape how communication and learning takes place. It should also challenge each participant to expand their understanding of what course material as they encounter it and in seeing how it is perceived by others in the classroom. Such a classroom becomes a radically inclusive and liberating atmosphere that allows for students of a variety of abilities and experiences to actively learn and contribute to the scholarly discourse.

Presence and Perception in the Classroom

In my own case, my presence often disrupts the classroom. This has a radically different effect from the general assumptions a hearing professor has of what it means to be “deaf.” I see myself as a member of a community and culture of deaf people, as well as a user of a minority language — American Sign Language (ASL). This articulation of being in the minority is often learning disabled, etc., studies by capitalizing the word “Deaf” when speaking of a cultural understanding, and, using “deaf” to speak of the experience of hearing loss in general. I present myself as a culturally-linguistic minority student rather than a student with a disability. Not everyone with hearing loss adopts the cultural viewpoint. Quite often, college-aged students are at a point in their lives where they are discovering who they are and how they exist in the world, and their identity formation may be vague and in flux. Therefore, a deaf/Deaf student may not be able to fully articulate who they are and, even if they do, they will likely present a hybrid identity which moves between the Deaf world and the hearing world, as they are in a hearing classroom. A professor who assumes that a “deaf” student is a student with hearing loss and that all deaf students will have similar experiences will find herself faced contrary to a plethora of identities in various stages of formation. To this complex picture add the fact that many students who are visually impaired, mobility impaired, learning disabled, etc., have begun to adopt a view of themselves which is somewhat similar to the cultural-linguistic minority view of Deaf people. This identity is increasingly being understood as a socially constructed condition rather than something rooted solely in the bodies of people. What makes a person disabled is not that she or he cannot see and, therefore, adaptations must be made, but rather that the classroom experience has been designed around the needs of sighted people in a way that excludes those with limited vision. While this doesn’t carry the full effect of Deaf studies, it does demand that views of a cultural-linguistic minority, it does have the effect of reframing our presence as students in the classroom from placing the locus of the “problem” on the student to placing on what is being presented by the professor, “even if there is a student present whose voice cannot be heard in spoken words, by ‘signing’ (even if we cannot read the signs) they make their presence felt.” Observing hooks’ use of quotation marks to qualify the use of American Sign Language in her classroom as if it were something less than spoken words, she has still honored the “voice” of a deaf student; she has recognized the power of how even the “voiceless” can contribute and shape the meaning of a class when empowered to contribute. In her collection of essays Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, hooks examines how differently in the lives of minority students as compared to majority students. Many white male professors entered college as students finely aware that they are subjected to rituals of shaming to prove their worth, their right to be one of the chosen. As a consequence they may endure these rituals without feeling threatened or destroyed. Not so for the vulnerable students from marginalized groups who may enter college with no awareness that ritualized shaming may take place. Rituals of shaming may create in them a true crisis of spirit where they doubt both their own worth and their reason for being in college (2003). Deaf students and students with disabilities often experience similar fears and moments of shame when confronted with such situations. We find ourselves “outsiders” to the world of the classroom in ways that students of majority populations in society do not. Therefore, the specter of failure in the classroom is often a moment of crisis which reaches deep into our identities, as we come to question the legitimacy of our presence there and whether we have the right to enter this “foreign world” or not. In conclusion, when working to create an accessible classroom, professors need to consider how Deaf students and students with disabilities bring particularities to the classroom that challenge the status quo. These challenges need not exacerbate the professor, not leave them feeling helpless, but can become moments of mutual learning and professional growth that shape the very nature of the classroom in a manner that can honor the presence of everyone. Although neither the young student in the midst of identity formation nor the professor who is new to the presence of a Deaf student or student with a disability has a complete grasp of all the dynamics present in the classroom, a careful exploration of the literature on Deaf studies and disability studies will reveal parallels and differences between the experiences of Deaf and disabled students and those of professors that have already encountered while teaching in multicultural contexts. These parallels can assist in making the classroom more accessible and beneficial for everyone.

References


Spotlight on Teaching Solicits Guest Editors and Articles

AAR members interested in guest editing an issue of Spotlight on Teaching are invited to submit the title of a theme focusing on teaching and learning in the study of religion, along with a succinct description (500 words) of the theme’s relevance and significance, to Spotlight general editor, Tazim R. Kassam. In addition to issues devoted to specific themes, problems, and settings, Spotlight on teaching will also occasionally feature a variety of independent articles and essays critically reflecting on teaching and learning in the field of religion. Please send both types of submissions to:

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Therefore, the specter of failure in the classroom is often a moment of crisis which reaches deep into our identities, as we come to question the legitimacy of our presence there and whether we have the right to enter this “foreign world” or not.”

Kirk VanGilder is a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Theology at Boston University's School of Theology. Born hard-of-hearing in a deaf community, he entered college at Boston University in 1997 and currently studies by capitalizing the word “Deaf” when speaking of a cultural understanding, and, using “deaf” to speak of the experience of hearing loss in general. I present myself as a culturally-linguistic minority student rather than a student with a disability. Not everyone with hearing loss adopts the cultural viewpoint. Quite often, college-aged students are at a point in their lives where they are discovering who they are and how they exist in the world, and their identity formation may be vague and in flux. Therefore, a deaf/Deaf student may not be able to fully articulate who they are and, even if they do, they will likely present a hybrid identity which moves between the Deaf world and the hearing world, as they are in a hearing classroom. A professor who assumes that a “deaf” student is a student with hearing loss and that all deaf students will have similar experiences will find herself faced contrary to a plethora of identities in various stages of formation. To this complex picture add the fact that many students who are visually impaired, mobility impaired, learning disabled, etc., have begun to adopt a view of themselves which is somewhat similar to the cultural-linguistic minority view of Deaf people. This identity is increasingly being understood as a socially constructed condition rather than something rooted solely in the bodies of people. What makes a person disabled is not that she or he cannot see and, therefore, adaptations must be made, but rather that the classroom experience has been designed around the needs of sighted people in a way that excludes those with limited vision. While this doesn’t carry the full effect of Deaf studies, it does demand that views of a cultural-linguistic minority, it does have the effect of reframing our presence as students in the classroom from placing the locus of the “problem” on the student to placing on what is being presented by the professor, “even if there is a student present whose voice cannot be heard in spoken words, by ‘signing’ (even if we cannot read the signs) they make their presence felt.” Observing hooks’ use of quotation marks to qualify the use of American Sign Language in her classroom as if it were something less than spoken words, she has still honored the “voice” of a deaf student; she has recognized the power of how even the “voiceless” can contribute and shape the meaning of a class when empowered to contribute. In her collection of essays Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, hooks examines how differently in the lives of minority students as compared to majority students. Many white male professors entered college as students finely aware that they are subjected to rituals of shaming to prove their worth, their right to be one of the chosen. As a consequence they may endure these rituals without feeling threatened or destroyed. Not so for the vulnerable students from marginalized groups who may enter college with no awareness that ritualized shaming may take place. Rituals of shaming may create in them a true crisis of spirit where they doubt both their own worth and their reason for being in college (2003). Deaf students and students with disabilities often experience similar fears and moments of shame when confronted with such situations. We find ourselves “outsiders” to the world of the classroom in ways that students of majority populations in society do not. Therefore, the specter of failure in the classroom is often a moment of crisis which reaches deep into our identities, as we come to question the legitimacy of our presence there and whether we have the right to enter this “foreign world” or not. In conclusion, when working to create an accessible classroom, professors need to consider how Deaf students and students with disabilities bring particularities to the classroom that challenge the status quo. These challenges need not exacerbate the professor, not leave them feeling helpless, but can become moments of mutual learning and professional growth that shape the very nature of the classroom in a manner that can honor the presence of everyone. Although neither the young student in the midst of identity formation nor the professor who is new to the presence of a Deaf student or student with a disability has a complete grasp of all the dynamics present in the classroom, a careful exploration of the literature on Deaf studies and disability studies will reveal parallels and differences between the experiences of Deaf and disabled students and those of professors that have already encountered while teaching in multicultural contexts. These parallels can assist in making the classroom more accessible and beneficial for everyone.
Hector Avalos is associate professor of religious studies and director of the U.S. Latincana Studies Program at Iowa State University where he was named Professor of the Year in 1996, and a 2003-04 Master Teacher. He is currently at work on the second volume of a trilogy, Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East.

If reference works measure the status of a field, then one need only read the article “Lame” in The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (1962) to gauge how many biblical scholars conceptualized disability in the 1960s. The main preoccupation for the author, Roland K. Harrison, was in diagnosing the disability in modern medical terms. Thus, the lame man in Acts 3:2 suffered from “weakness of the astragalus and metatarsus bones of the foot.” The person healed at Lystra (Acts 14:8) probably “suffered from some form of paralysis.”

Another stream of scholarship had a more ethnocentric and “orientalist” approach. Merrill F. Unger’s article “Diseases” in Unger’s Bible Dictionary (1966) tells readers: “Insanity is much more rare in the East than in the West. This is doubtless due to the freedom from the strain which so severely tests the endurance of the more active minds of the Japhetic stock.”

If we fast-forward to more recent reference works (e.g., The Anchor Bible Dictionary), we find mixed results at best. In fact, most biblical scholars, critical or not, still see disability in essentialist medical terms, and view their job as translating biblical descriptions into modern medical terminology.

Justifying Disability Studies

A survey published by David Pfeiffer and Karen Yoshida (1995) showed that not a single Disability Studies (DS) course was taught under the sponsorship of a religious studies program or department in 1993. A 2003 survey compiled by Steven J. Taylor and Rachael Zubal-Ruggieri of the Center on Human Policy at Syracuse University shows that not much has changed since 1993 in this respect.

My own unscientific survey of the key term “disability” in the archives of the American Academy of Religion Syllabus Project found 13 matches, and none referred to actual course content about disability, but rather to accommodations for the disabled. I was unable to find a single course in biblical studies in my search that had even a reference to disability studies.

An obvious reason for this situation is that DS compares with many approaches already in place, not to mention others that could also be introduced. There are only so many weeks in a semester or quarter, and there are potentially dozens of perspectives that deserve attention. The two main types of selection topics has always been subjective and adaptive. For example, literary source criticism is deemed important in a grapho-centric culture. Yet, not all people in the world are literate, and most societies in biblical times were not grapho-centric.

If demographics alone could justify disability studies, we could note that 100 percent of people live in an “embodied” state in literate or nonliterate cultures, ancient or modern. Indeed, one important creation was integrating disability studies into almost any subject, including teaching the Bible, is helping students become aware of how their bodies are conceptualized, disempowered, and valued by society. Disability studies should be an important part of biblical studies for at least two other reasons: 1) the Bible has exerted tremendous influence on how we have conceptualized and valued the body in European and American societies; and 2) biblical authors use “disabilities” to promote theological and literary agendas in their narrative and discourse. Accordingly, much may be missed in the literary analysis of the Bible if attention is not paid to disability discourse.

How to Integrate Disability Studies

While there is a plurality of disability studies models for conceptualizing disabilities, most of them are a response to an essentialist medical model of the “normal body.” Many disability studies scholars emphasize that “disabilities” are created when societies obstruct the ability of persons to perform certain actions, rather than when certain physical features render persons unable to perform certain actions. Other scholars may emphasize that the disabled should be accepted for the body they have rather than be rehabilitated to conform to the “normal” body.

Given the plurality of models and perspectives that one could emphasize, integration of disability studies may range from including DS materials in opportunet moments of a course, to a course devoted fully to a disability studies perspective. Regardless of the level of integration, there are at least five approaches to integrating disability studies into undergraduate courses on the Bible:

1. An “attitudinal approach” may be introduced as the class encounters relevant texts. For example, students may be asked to meditate on how “blindness” is viewed in Deuteronomy 28:28, which suggests that it can be the result of sin. Discussion about the assumptions of this biblical author can generate further discussions of whether any modern societies see disabilities as the result of sin. Many of my students note how some in the society see AIDS as a punishment for sin, which then engenders discussion about other conditions. The Book of Job, which denies that sin is a necessary cause of disability, can be used for comparison with the views expressed in Deuteronomy.

2. The literary role of disability can also help students understand how authors “use” disabilities to tell their stories. This is an insight systematically explored by David Mitchell, who argues that disabilities play a central role in narratives and film. One example may suffice: Deuteronomy 6:4 (NRSV) says, “Hear, O Israel, our God, is one YHWH.” Although the selection of “hearing” may seem innocent at some, the use of this “sense” may be part of a systematic privileging of hearing over seeing that one finds in other parts of the Deuteronomistic History. We are specifically told, for example, that the Israelites did not see Yahweh, but rather heard him (Deut. 4:12). The verse 1 Samuel 9:9 contains the seemingly odd note that prophets were formerly called “seers” in ancient Israel. The prophet Ahijah (1 Kings 14:1–7) is portrayed as perceptive despite the fact that the story specifically emphasizes that he is unsighted. Ahijah’s correct information comes from hearing God’s message rather than from seeing. The last example specifically shows how the author uses one disability, “blindness,” to tell a story about the privileged nature of “hearing” of God. At the same time, such differential attitudes toward the senses may also help the student understand how the privileging of specific “abilities” (perceiving without “seeing”) are constructed by theological and social agendas. In a full-scale course emphasizing disability studies, one can study systematically how different biblical corpora view disability and privilege some sense above others.

3. The fact that biblical scholarship itself reflects ideological investments in the body can be illustrated by comparing writings from various periods and perspectives within biblical scholarship. Merrill F. Unger’s view of “insanity” can be contrasted with other views of madness/insanity. We may note that Unger and other scholars were not concerned with how biblical authors empowered or disempowered the disabled through their rhetoric and theology.

4. Books and/or articles may be assigned that include discussion of disability from the perspective of disabled scholars. John Hull, for example, writes about blindness in the first person from the perspective of an unsighted scholar.

5. Sociological studies may be introduced that focus on how modern persons of faith use the Bible to address their own disabilities. Lisa Coppen of Best Ministries, for instance, develops devotional literature to aid the disabled in living productive lives. Even one does not agree with her theology, such resources are useful in studying how some disabled persons use the Bible on more practical levels.

As noted by a number of disability scholars, experimental, inclusive, and action-oriented approaches can also be useful. One’s experience as a disabled faculty member can be a model for empowering disabled students. The plasticity of the disabled identity can also be important to note. Due to chronic respiratory problems caused by Wegener’s Granulomatosis, I experienced highly restricted mobility for a significant portion of my life, but now surgery has increased my breathing capacity to near “normal.” Thus, I sometimes address how one can move from “abled” to disabled identities and vice versa.

Conclusion

Disability studies is at least as deserving of attention as any other approach to biblical studies. It can be seen as part of a larger body of experience that may be called “corporate studies” or “corporate criticism,” which focuses on how different cultures value and conceptualize the body. If education means knowing more about the world in which we live, then students of the Bible should know more about how the most influential book in history addresses our embodiment. Yet, there are still many challenges and obstacles in the way of a thriving (systematic) disability studies approach to biblical studies. One desideratum is a corpus of scholarly literature that addresses disabilities in the Bible and the ancient Near East in a more systematic manner.

References


For how some persons of faith integrate the Bible in their thinking, see: http://www.restministries.org/pro-devotion.htm.

For how some persons of faith integrate the Bible in their thinking, see: http://www.thelm.org/fish/equality accomplished.html.

For how some persons of faith integrate the Bible in their thinking, see: http://www.renministry.org/faith-devotion.htm.

The literary role of disability can also help students understand how authors ‘use’ disabilities to tell their stories.
1. What is a “disability”? Who is “disabled”? Who decides?

Is “being disabled” a simple, natural fact about a person, comparable to their height or eye color? Or is it more socially constructed, like “being a resident of Michigan”? Some have argued for the distinction between an “impairment” and a “disability.” An impairment is some restriction or disadvantage based in one’s structure and/or technological development. Five hundred years ago, I, with poor vision bordering on legal blindness, would have been seriously disabled. In our society, I need merely put on my glasses to see almost perfectly. My “impairment” is here. We generally do not think of babies as “disabled,” even though they cannot see or hear. But at what age would my glasses compensate for my impaired vision? At what age would my wheelchair compensate for my impaired mobility? At what age would mycanes compensate for my impaired walking? Is there an age when it would be fair to say “he’s not disabled” anymore? When does the discrimination cease? When does the stigma cease? When is someone defined as disabled?

2. What is autonomy? What is intelligence?

Clearly people with certain disabilities are handicapped. A 20-year-old will do fine if the elevators are out of whack, but someone in their 70s might not be able to walk up 14 floors. Given the universal fact of human aging and the way the extent and nature of that dependency can vary over a lifetime, why is it so critically important to distinguish between the disabled and the rest of society? What is gained by making some kind of categorical separation between the two?

As for intelligence, it is true that my daughter, who has a variety of distinct physical and mental special needs, cannot read the Times, do long division, or understand the nature of representative government. These are losses, and should not be either denied or ignored. Yet they are not the only kind of losses we face. Societies controlled by people of “normal” (or even “superior”) intelligence have created a world in which enormously clever technical accomplishments combine with monumental failures of care, equality, and simple common sense. (One need only think of nuclear weapons and nuclear waste, landfills, the hole in the ozone layer, or the fact that 29,000 children die each day from malnutrition or preventable diseases to see what I’m referring to.) Again, could it be that focusing on what my daughter lacks is a distraction from our own limitations? Could it be that “normal” society is riddled with such monumental obtuseness that it might never lead to a global devaluation of the person with the impairment, nor an unwarranted acceptance that it is not possible to make “smart” bombs or live with current pollution levels. Yet we also should not gloss over the differences. Could “normal” society be a “difference,” like being from a different race, culture, or gender. A person who cannot walk simply should not be treated exactly like someone who can, at least when it comes to the design of a building.

Second, the need of people with disabilities for extensive forms of personal care creates political issues for their caregivers, as well as those with disabilities themselves. The intense physical and emotional nature of care-giving labor, as well as its devaluation in our society, creates a socially and morally problematic situation. Those who care for the extremely dependent carry a burden far in excess of the normal subjects of political life. Because the labor in service of dependency is poorly paid and assigned to racial minorities, and because doing it requires a unique blend of personal involvement and moral commitment, dependency workers often lack the time, energy, and resources to represent their personal interests in a public sphere designed for autonomous individuals. Thus, even political reforms based in other structures may not be adequate to the task. For instance, although women can vote, own property, and become brain surgeons, they will lack real social equality if they are de facto expected to take primary responsibility in the care of their autistic (or other disability) child, their father with Alzheimer’s, or their paraplegic sister.

3. How does “disability” relate to issues of justice and politics of identity?

Together with other social issues, disability can be thought of in terms of justice and recognition, both the protection of rights and the granting of respect and care. Along with other groups from peasants, workers, and women to homosexuals and the colonized, those with disabilities have been marginalized, stigmatized, denied equality, and literally not seen. Because of this shared experience, both the condition of and the resistance by the disability community can be explored by applying the familiar vocabulary of democracy, rights, freedom, and respect. In this investigation it must be remembered that human identities are multiple: no one is simply a woman, a Hispanic, or blind. Each person’s identity is formed by several social identities: class and race, gender and nationality, sexuality and forms of ability/disability. Further, as white and black women have racialized experiences of patriarchy, so within the disability community there is a hierarchy in which those with only physical impairments have more status and recognition than those with mental or emotional ones. There are also (at least) two ways in which disability issues are unique, and therefore require radically new concepts and policies. First, unlike being female, African-American, or gay, having an impairment is a real deficit: there is an inability where there might have been an ability. This fact should never lead to a global devaluation of the person with the impairment, nor an unwarranted acceptance that it is not possible to make “smart” bombs or live with current pollution levels. Yet we also should not gloss over the differences. Could “normal” society be a “difference,” like being from a different race, culture, or gender. A person who cannot walk simply should not be treated exactly like someone who can, at least when it comes to the design of a building.

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4. How do we teach this stuff?

Along with historical and theoretical writings on disability and justice, it is essential for students to get a sense of the actual life experience of those who must face these challenges. Memoirs, biographies, and film can provide some insights into the particular lives of people with disability. Strategies for developing awareness are as important as reading books and writing papers. Here are some possibilities: 1) own a keeping in which the student pays attention to the way these issues surface in daily life, around campus, in the news — in everything from the use of “retard” as a put-down to the presence or absence of wheelchair ramps; 2) have students reflect on their own experiences of difference — how they felt “different,” “unable,” “less than,” when they were bad at sports, later to learn how to read, or lacked friends (students might write paragraphs on this topic and then the teacher may read them aloud anonymously in class); 3) have students share experiences of disability from their own lives or their families: who has a brother with Down’s syndrome, a mother with chronic fatigue, or their own unusual condition? 4) have students “become disabled” for a day or a week: use a wheelchair, wear a scarf over their eyes, tie all the fingers of their right hand together; 5) have students connect to someone with a serious disability and interview them, or have the person lecture to the class. In short, make it real.

References

Jane Hurst is the chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Gallaudet University, the world’s premier university for deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing impaired students. She has taught there for nearly 24 years using sign language. She received her PhD from Temple University.

On my campus, a beautiful, bucolic oasis in Washington, D.C., all my students are deaf. This is how they describe themselves in our campus culture, though sometimes with a capital “D.” Deaf. A high percentage of our faculty and staff are also deaf. This is how we view the world, through the eyes of deaf culture. In this environment, I am a hearing person, am the one who is disabled. My eyes are sometimes slow to receive the language that is visually presented to me, my brain sometimes does not process fingerpatterning well at all. I have trouble reading the various sign language “accesses” of some of my students, and when I express myself I am not perfectly fluent. Worse, I think like a hearing person. I can be clueless to the deaf point of view. By virtue of my hearing status, I am always an outsider, I am always the Other. I am always somewhat marginal. In my nearly 24 years of teaching deaf students, I have had to become used to a more direct style of communicating than I was used to in the culture of my academic training. To share this acculturization with you, this essay is written in a style that could easily be translated into visual language.

At Gallaudet, deaf people do not consider themselves disabled. After a cultural minority group within the larger hearing society. Gallaudet University sees itself as a deaf parallel to our neighbor Howard University, whose students and faculty are predominantly African-American and whose mission focuses on African-American culture and concerns. Deaf people use visual communication, and where this is readily available there is no disability. Our president, Dr. Kim Bamberger, who was chosen after the powerful and peaceful world congress “Deaf President Now” protest in 1988, has said, “Deaf people can do anything except hear,” and the vast majority of deaf people agree with him. With advances in technology, such as TV captioning, Internet messaging, and text messaging, access to clear communication has opened up the wider society to what deaf people can do.

We do have disabled students on campus, and the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSWD) serves their needs. Those who have learning disabilities or have visual impairments are the most commonly served by this office. Students can take tests at the OSWD with extended time or with the size of the font magnified. OSWD also provides close vision interpreting so that students whose visual range is only a few feet have someone to sign the classroom conversation at that distance.

Based on my years of teaching in this environment, I have a few practical suggestions for those of you who are new to deaf, hard-of-hearing, or hearing impaired students. First of all, let the student tell you which designation from the above list he or she prefers. Like the terms African-American, black, and Negro, terms that describe hearing loss are culturally loaded and very political. As a hearing person you can stay out of the fray, as well as show respect, by letting each student self-identify.

Second, when I asked my students for their suggestions for hearing teachers of deaf students, they told me that it is most important to stay aware of visual communication in the classroom. A lifetime of habits of communicating only orally may have to be broken. Good visual communication means making eye contact when speaking to someone, and not talking while writing on the board or looking at examples. It means being open-ended to the deaf point of view and to the suggestions for better communication that your deaf students might give you.

In deaf culture, avoiding eye contact with those you disagree with is considered an insult! I have gotten so used to eye contact in the classroom that when I gave a speech at a hearing university nearby, I was shocked when the entire class broke eye contact and looked down at their notes. How had I offended them? Had I lost the whole class at once? I had to laugh at myself, because they were simply taking notes. In a deaf classroom, the lecturer should stop talking while students write notes. For this reason, I usually distribute copies of my own notes to the class to save time waiting for them to write everything down. This is also why deaf students may need hearing students to take notes for them so you do not have to pause the entire class while your deaf student writes things down.

My third suggestion is to learn to use interpreters wisely. A sign-language interpreter serves as your eyes and hands. He or she will put into sign language your oral communication and voice the signed questions of your deaf students. You speak directly to the deaf person, not the interpreter, even though the deaf person will not be looking at you but at your “hands,” the interpreter. In subjects such as religious studies, which are based not simply on a presentation of facts but are highly nuanced and abstract, it is important to have an interpreter who can work at this level. I usually come up with examples, and analyze them with the sign itself adapts the sign for “influence” or “cause” moving away from and then back toward the signer. At this point someone usually asks, “Isn’t it karma punishment for the things you have done wrong in the past?” But the sign for punishment is quite different, and does not show a clear cause and effect relationship. deaf students from Buddhist countries have an input here, since some of them have been taught this concept as children. Now we have an opportunity to come up with interpretations that use signs applying the sign concept. But we must take the time to find out where the students are coming from, rather than simply lecturing on the subject.

Most importantly, the flexibility required as I teach students who are so different from me in their experience has raised the question of who we truly are beyond our physical presence in this world. Is there a commonality that we share beyond our perceptions and self-understanding as deaf or hearing, blind or sighted, disabled or able-bodied? Can we extend this understanding across the boundaries of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation? I’m going to ask my students these questions on Monday. I expect a lively discussion.

Fourth, be aware that students can have multiple disabilities, and that you must do your best to accommodate those. A sign-language interpreter who can work at this level will not go into depth here, but will just point out that this is important to keep in mind.

Fifth, I suggest that you see the presence of disabled students in your classroom as an opportunity to develop mental flexibility on your part. You will have to change some habits, drop some assumptions, and adapt your teaching style to reach these students. What you did in the past in a classroom with homogenous communication will certainly have to be adapted for those with different communication modes. This is a wonderful chance to rethink your approach to teaching. I have found, for example, that the proper habitus of etiquette that carry all the levels of meaning that I want my class to understand!

My final suggestion comes from the existential issues raised for me as a college professor who has devoted her professional career to teaching deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing impaired students. This is not what I expected to be doing! I was prepared for a traditional academic career, but the exigencies of the job market, and I must admit the challenge of the situation, led me to Gallaudet. I have not regretted this commitment, though I have experienced plenty of conflicting emotions about my career and my students. I have had to keep learning, which sometimes my aging self resists. For example, one visually impaired student would sign to me point his finger within a foot of my face when I was signing the word “you.” This seemed so rude to me until I realized that he had no depth perception, and had no idea how close his sign was to my bifocals. Still, I had to overcome my annoyance each time I talked.

As I teach what are perceived by the mainstream world as “disabled students,” I have learned to go beyond conventional ways of thinking about the study of religion, especially the use of language. For example, I focus more on key concepts than a barrage of information, which can be visually exhausting in sign language, and is often better understood in written form. In the classroom, I use speech and sign simultaneously, which keeps my brain synapses humming and is mentally very challenging. Every abstract concept I must introduce is accompanied by many examples and interactions with my students to be sure they have understood. Here the basic interactive classroom approach, with much focus on discussion and small group work, will be helpful.

For example, in introducing the concept of karma, my students easily grasp the cause and effect nature of karma since the sign itself adapts the sign for “influence” or “cause” moving away from and then toward the signer. At this point someone usually asks, “Isn’t it karma punishment for the things you have done wrong in the past?” But the sign for punishment is quite different, and does not show a clear cause and effect relationship. deaf students from Buddhist countries have an input here, since some of them have been taught this concept as children. Now we have an opportunity to come up with interpretations that use signs applying the sign concept. But we must take the time to find out where the students are coming from, rather than simply lecturing on the subject.

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The Introductory Course

May 1993
Teaching African Religions

November 1992
General Issues of Teaching Religious Studies
Students with Learning Disabilities

Kent A. Eaton, Bethel Seminary San Diego

Office of Disability Services works with the student and the instructor to find ways in which the learning requirements for the class and degree program can be met by disabled students. This may include working closely with students to develop learning strategies, access accommodations, or even amending the course requirements. In the context of religious studies, for instance, the instructor may work with the student to design a learning plan that accommodates their disabilities. In some cases, this may involve adjusting the course structure, such as changing the mode of assessment or providing extra time for examinations.

In summary, the Office of Disability Services is committed to ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, have the opportunity to succeed in their academic pursuits. By providing equitable access to learning opportunities, the Office of Disability Services plays a crucial role in fostering an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

References


Rebecca Raphael, Texas State University-San Marcos

I had to ask myself, ‘Should I leave academia just because I’m deaf?’ The ability to communicate in a classroom is essential to teaching. But is communication equivalent to a physical sense?

I know the Hubs are a story for a book. For now, I don’t think I would like to raise the tougher question for my colleagues. I had to ask myself, ‘Should I leave academia just because I’m deaf?’ The ability to communicate in a classroom is essential to teaching. But is communication equivalent to a physical sense? Ask yourself whether your academic merit would change if you suddenly lost your hearing tomorrow. I don’t think it would. So, let’s generalize my question to ‘Should academia exclude deaf people?’ I ask this in a provocative form because I hope that your instinctive answer is a resounding No. However, a simple feeling on the part of individuals will not, by itself, include deaf people. Concrete actions and policies are necessary. For example, I’m sure no one would say that deaf people should be turned away at the door of the Annual Meeting because of their deafness. However, in 2004, the first year in which the AAR provided any accommodations to deaf people, it consciously chose to provide only ASL and not CART. For me five years ago, this was like having the door closed in my face. Should the door to the classroom also be closed? If not, it must be opened by the understanding that communication and academic merit don’t require physical hearing. The hearing academy will have to do something it has not done well before: listen to us.

The author kindly provides the equivalent in the following key to the vowel sentences: in order, Mark 4:9, Is 6:9, Is 19:14, Ps 38:14, Jn 4:19.

References

An Academic’s Encounter with Chronic Illness: Teaching, Collegiality, and Scholarship, and Students with Chronic Conditions

Mary Jo Iozzio, Barry University

CHRONIC ILLNESSES, like arthritis, asthma and emphysema, cancer, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, diabetes, COPD, Gulf War Syndrome, heart disease, HIV/AIDS and immune deficiency disease, hepatitis, neurological and neuromuscular diseases, and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, to name a few examples, vary considerably from person to person in symptom expression and in severity — as is true of most illnesses, as well as most disabilities. This variability causes misconceptions on the part of observers about the incidence and progress of illness and disability, as well as significant periods of denial on the part of the subject-person with the condition about the extent to which the condition is self-defining. Further complicating these misconceptions and denial is the fact that while these are symptomatic episodes, the person with the condition often disappears, even though others continue to hold on to expectations that classes will be taught, committee work fulfilled, articles written and published, and assignments handed in on time.

How can a person experiencing episodic symptoms meet these expectations and when is it appropriate for oneself or others to adjust those expectations? Many but not all of these conditions result from social, environmental, and viral factors to which all people are increasingly exposed, with which many will develop a disabling condition, many will develop a disabling condition, and with which communities, broadly defined, must respond in a manner different from the dismissal, marginalization, and exclusionary practices predominant of the past and still in force today.

Academics, like any other professionals, will probably encounter chronic illness in themselves, in their colleagues, and in their students. Each of these encounters requires its own contextualized response to the questions of expectations, yes, and also to the questions of accommodation, solidarity, support, human families and friendships, a shared sense of human frailty, interdependence, common purpose, prosperity, and human flourishing. These latter questions permit explorations into the theological, philosophical, biological, sociological, psychological, economic, and scientific implications of illnesses and of disabilities. People with chronic illnesses and people with disabilities — and their advocates in disability studies — have only begun to expose some of the answers to these broader questions and the issues entailed in questions that resize or exclude them. People with chronic illness have fared only a little better in contemporary society and the modern workplace than their counterparts with mobility, sight, and sound disabilities.

The teacher hospitalized for intensive chemotherapy will rightly be permitted a substitute teaching plan; the colleague undergoing coronary bypass surgery will rightly be given recuperative time in the office; the teacher undergoing physical therapy following a sport injury will rightly be excused from class attendance. Except for the temporary and situational deferrals of expectations, that of their failure to return to the previous level of engagement, and how does “the academic” respond to a persistent encounter with chronic illness?

All teaching professionals and students face a wide range of challenges. From class preparation to class delivery and beyond, one must respond to a variety of conditions, including grading and writing assignments, both the professional and the student engage in time-consuming and mental-labor intensive work. Chronic conditions may very well impede work progress, but they do not necessarily bring all work or productivity to a stop. Moreover, people with chronic illnesses, like people with disabilities, are protected under the guidelines of the ADA. And while accommodations characterize proper human ways of being with one another, accommodations are a civil right. Is “slow” progress an acceptable accommodation? How is the academy to reconcile seemingly disparate degrees of the fulfillment of obligations?

Accommodations and Teaching

In the earliest days of the Greek academies, at the time of Jesus’s brief career instruction with the disciples, and at the medieval houses of study and universities, teachers conditioned their students’ expectations. Remnants of this practice are evident when royalty or the Pope, for example, take their place among the throng in order to pronounce solemnly law and doctrine that are subsequently imposed upon the citizenry or faithful to obey. The one who sits in these contexts exercises a magisterial teaching authority. By virtue of both credentials and employment, college and university professors are the magisters of today. I mention this sitting posture as one way of appropriating in positive fashion a symbolic gesture — the seated authority of the teacher and the chair from which authoritative teaching is promulgated — as an accommodation of fatigue for the teacher with a chronic illness. Likewise, teachers using a Socratic method of instruction not only invite their students to respond, but they also accommodate to a student’s lead class, to direct discussion, to compose examination questions, and to critique or evaluate their own and their student- colleagues’ work. Interactive learning exercises, technologically sophisticated or otherwise, are a proven successful teaching methodology. In addition to classroom opportunities where students lead, distance and Web-based education provide significantly alternative methods of traditional chalk-and-talk pedagogy of course delivery. Where graduate programs are offered, a graduate student assistant may be assigned to the teacher with a chronic illness and this student graduate, under the supervision of the faculty member may be enlisted to conduct class, further developing her or his own craft as teacher, as well as responding to an episodic need. These methodologies may set in motion other creative and purposeful accommodations for the teacher whose chronic illness interferes episodically with course instruction.

Accommodations and Collegiality

Not unlike the accommodations proposed for teaching, accommodations for a colleague concern both workplace ethics and expectations of productivity. Collegiality comes in many forms: as a social support system between peers; as an academic support system between teachers who share a knowledge or cognate scholarly discipline; and as an institutional/departmental infrastructure support system between faculty members sharing a corporate vision about the work that needs to be done. When considered from a collegial point of view, notions of “independent,” “autonomous,” and “exclusive” work lose force as the dominant features of standard operating procedures. The colleague with a chronic illness presents simply the paradigm conditions under which mutuality dominates workplace activities. Ask any administrator and colleagues will evidence suggestions that productivity increases and/or remains stable where collegiality reigns and work is engaged in ensemble.

Social, academic, and infrastructure supports must no longer be considered a concession or a lowering of expectations but as accommodations. These support systems contribute to the success of everyone involved in the curriculum. Socially, peers provide outlets for leisure and frustrations — everyone needs friends. Academically, scholars provide an essential critique of, as well as a potential for, joint investigation and writing projects — academic colleagues need editor-collaborators. Structurally, faculty provide relief to each other in the burdens of committee work — faculty need faculty to discharge their teaching or other educational burden. Ideally, faculty members will be friends with one another, will comment constructively, and will smooth the progress of committees. Realistically, the academic workplace can be unwelcoming, colleagues may be hypercritical or gratuitous, and time-intensive committee work often falls on a single faculty member where full participation would be more productive.

Accommodations and Students

Students present all manner of reasons explaining their difficulty in meeting the demands of coursework. Some of these reasons have everything to do with procrastination and/or a lack of disciplined study habits. Others have a legitimate base, arising from child or adult care, a death in the family, a chronic condition, or a disability. These bases are accommodated by reevaluating a strict attendance policy, by providing course lecture materials in more than one format (e.g., on a Blackboard Web site, or through handouts), by pairing students and assigning teamwork, and by alternating the teacher whose chronic illness interferes episodically with course instruction. Fortunately, most students with chronic conditions take their studies seriously; their very presence in the classroom indicates their dedication to the program for which they enrolled, to fulfill requirements, and to succeed.

The teacher of a student or students with chronic conditions ought to be informed by the student or by Disabled Student Services in order to plan for accommodation specific needs, especially in order to appreciate when the student experiences episodic symptoms resulting in excessive absence or delayed assignments. Teachers and administrators may want to reconsider the traditional duration of a semester’s coursework, perhaps along the lines of European university models where coursework extends through an academic year. This accommodation would help teachers to deal more constructively with the personal and student development matters more than paper products, individually a career in academe. It may provide ways for students to demonstrate mastery in the subject. Without knowledge of a chronic condition, however, teachers will predispose willful negligence on the part of students.

Benefits

Imagine the failure of not accommodating Axl, a student who has a series of episodic needs and disabilities: Mary O’Connor, Virginia Woolf, Stephen Hawking, Ray Charles, Itzhak Perlman, and Stevie Wonder — how much poorer the worlds of arts and letters, astrophysics, and music would be. No more or less than “normates,” people with chronic illnesses or with disabilities may be geniuses. Accommodating the teacher, colleague, and student with a chronic illness or disability provides an opportunity to rethink the law — everyone needs friends. Academically, scholars provide an essential critique of, as well as a potential for, joint investigation and writing projects — academic colleagues need editor-collaborators. Structurally, faculty provide relief to each other in the burdens of committee work — faculty need faculty to discharge their teaching or other educational burden. Ideally, faculty members will be friends with one another, will comment constructively, and will smooth the progress of committees. Realistically, the academic workplace can be unwelcoming, colleagues may be hypercritical or gratuitous, and time-intensive committee work often falls on a single faculty member where full participation would be more productive.
If you accept this claim, what comes next? First, as is evident from these articles, we must continue our struggles for access and inclusion for all people regardless of disability status. Those of us who have grown up with Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as the reactive legacy of the biomedical and civil rights movements, see access to the classroom as a right, not a privilege. It is clear that the work there is not yet done. Additionally, because disability represents a bona fide minority group (or groups), it should be consciously engaged when doing diversity work. We also see that students who are pursuing religious leadership or teaching professions need to be better prepared to work with people with disabilities in their congregations, classrooms, and communities. Seminaries and religious schools (or institutions) ought to regularly offer courses on disability, and abilism (discrimination in favor of the able-bodied) should be addressed side by side with other issues.

These reflections also show that it is time for us to recognize disability throughout all of our courses, rather than just as an afterthought or as a special topics forum. Disability is relevant throughout the curriculum, even in places where it has been previously invisible or unnoticed. If we are attentive, we find its impact in religious texts, church history, and theology (particularly issues such as healing and suffering), congregational membership, and popular culture. When we tell only the able-bodied part of the story and fail to draw on the resources offered by the lens of disability, we are remiss in our role as teachers.

More than just correcting a gap in our research or teaching, though, reflection on disability has a positive contribution to make to the work of our field. This is, for me, the exciting piece that lies ahead for any generation of teachers and scholars. The discipline of disability studies is a rich and exciting one, but until recently it has neither addressed religious topics nor been engaged by scholars of religion. There is much unexplored ground, and much to gain by all of us. Let me tell you of just a few of the ways our two fields can complement and challenge each other.

Disability studies, while still a young field, has the potential to offer valuable insights to the academic study of religion. One significant is the way in which it challenges assumptions about what is normal and the importance of new depth of experience. A person disabled or one in not one, and one would prefer to be not. Yet in actuality, disability is an open category that exists on a continuum of both constitution and chronemics — all of us, regardless of our physical condition, currently experience some degree of impairment (or “handicap”), and, as if we live long enough, are likely to become disabled ourselves. Perhaps “normal” is not so much the norm we have assumed. This can be an important challenge to many theological models that assume a healthy or ideal body as normative, such as accounts of natural or original sin. It compels us to reexamine our understanding of what might be ideal (or even holy), accepting neither perfectionism nor suitable descriptions, and may even challenge ideas of what it is to be human. In these and other ways, disability studies offers new insights on the complexity, fluidity, and general meaningfulness of embodiment.

Another contribution to our contemporary work in religious studies comes from the recognition that each instantiation of disability is unique. It is not the same thing to be c/t, deaf, a wheelchair-user, or to have a learning disability, yet all are typically lumped under the category of “disabled.” Using a wheelchair from birth is a different experience than using it after a mid-life ski accident, and a different experience than using it for one week following elective surgery. Reflection on lived experience of disability shows it to be a somewhat artificial (yet still functional and at times valuable) construction, an interesting model for other identity challenges within and beyond our fields. At the same time, examination of alliances between and across differences (for example, in particular disability rights movements) can be useful as we continue to explore how to live together in religiously (and otherwise) diverse worlds.

Still, the field of religion is more than a consumer of the insights of disability studies — we have essential contributions to make as well. As mentioned above, disability studies has paid little attention to the religious life, consideration which is long overdue. Disability has the potential to become the next liberation field. When we tell only the able-bodied part of the story and fail to draw on the resources offered by the lens of disability, we are remiss in our role as teachers. The insights and methodologies of disability studies can also be engaged by religious topics, we can also offer to religious studies our methodologies and ways, and propose new theological creatures. In addition to explicitly religious topics, we can also engage other scholarship, such as engaging in theological studies about women.

These are only a few of the ideas, questions, and projects that emerge when scholars of religion engage the work of disability studies. It is time now for a deeper and more complex understanding of disability. One that allows the discourse of disability to inform our disciplines just as it is simultaneously (and productively) informed by the insights of disability studies. It is time now for a third way, one that recognizes both bodily and social structures simultaneously opening itself to the instabilities of a postmodern age. We need a model that begins by noting that limits are an unsurprising part of life, that conceptions or constructions of disability are far more complicated than we might once have thought, and that the values we inscribe on limits and limitations must be reassessed. This move is part of the larger postmodern challenge that destabilizes unifying theories and problematizes unity and wholeness, a move which (given the value placed on relationality) ought not be approached in isolation from other disciplines.

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