

## **DISABILITY AND THE RHETORIC OF INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION**

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[This is the penultimate draft of an article that appeared in *Journal of Further & Higher Education* (2004), 28, 4, pp. 353-358.]

### **Abstract**

The social model of disability states that many people have many impairments, but that it is only by the ableist society in which they live that they are disabled. In considering just how inclusive Higher Education is for said people, this short paper proposes a long-overdue modernisation of the ableist way in which undergraduates are taught. As a traditional, gold-standard university subject, direct reference is made to the study of English, but the conclusion will be pertinent to other disciplines. Similarly, though the paper cites the case of people with impaired vision, the findings are relevant to Deaf people and to people who are disabled in general.

### **Introduction**

A quarter of a century ago an enquiry into the education of disabled children and young people could go no further than to report, 'Some universities and polytechnics have taken steps to enable students with disabilities to pursue courses' (Warnock, 1978, p. 177). Not until fifteen years later, on 1 April 1993, was the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 implemented. This act divided financial responsibility between the Further Education Funding Council and Local Education Authorities, both of which became obliged to ensure that education was provided for young people and adults (Cooper, 1996). Implemented in stages

from December 1996, moreover, the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 set out new responsibilities for further and higher educational establishments. The true significance of this act was unclear initially, but, after years of campaigning against a reluctant Conservative government, years of trying to get disability on the agenda in further and higher education, the Labour government of 1997 was keen to enter into dialogue (Dryden, 1998).

Nevertheless, it was during the early years of the Labour premiership that the Royal National Institute of the Blind asked a number of colleges and universities to complete a questionnaire about the provision of specialist equipment and support, the results of which revealed good will but a need for more resources (Crosby & Maher, 1998). Indeed, notwithstanding the optimism of 1997, the multidimensional problem of education for people with impaired vision was still prominent on the brink of the twenty-first century. For example, a survey found that 47% of university students did not usually receive material in an accessible format, while 39% were said to struggle when using libraries (Royal National Institute of the Blind, 2000). In order that the significance of these barriers can be appreciated, it should be borne in mind that of the written material that is readily accessible to the majority of learners, only 5% is likewise to those with severely impaired vision (Royal National Institute of the Blind, 2003).

Owing to the introduction of legal rights for disabled people, the rhetorical aspect of inclusive education was met with a significant challenge in the Disability Discrimination Act Part 4 (2002). Yet, the Higher Education Statistics Agency found that the number of disabled students only rose from 4.1% in 2000/2001 to 4.65% in 2001/2002 (Victor, 2003). According to general population trends, the rise was indicative of the fact that only half of the expected number of disabled people entered higher education (Victor, 2003). That the lack of access was, and still is, a major deterrent cannot be denied. It is for this reason that Waters refers to

the 'great emphasis and awareness of the Government's current push to widen access for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds', saying that it could be harnessed to improve opportunities for disabled people and other groups that are under-represented in higher education (Victor, 2003).

The paper will further illustrate the multidimensional problem of disability and inclusive Higher Education with reference to the actual content of degree courses. This research is important because the Disability Rights Commission stated that disabled people should have 'access to educational curricula which positively promote equality and cultural diversity' (2002, clause 2.6). The example of literary studies will be used throughout the paper, but the conclusion is applicable to any subject that considers issues of representation.

### **The Diversity of Literary Studies**

Thanks to the literary studies scholars who have made psychosocial and psychocultural issues the focus of their work, the white, middle-class, heterosexual male is no longer assumed supreme, or even authoritative, no longer posited as Self in literature, without contention. Accordingly, when advertising their undergraduate English courses, numerous British universities refer overtly to interpretation that is appreciative of ethnicity, sexuality, class and gender. For all of this cultural diversity, it has been asserted that 'most scholars still consider disability an anamorphic lens displaying distorted or grotesque subjects who are rather more "them" than "us."' (Davis, 2002, p. 44). This divergence between the attitude towards disability and those towards ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality is illustrated by the sample of ninety-six institutions that is provided in the UK University Ranking/League Tables (United Kingdom Student News, 2003). According to the on-line prospectus, students at Lincoln University (2003) explore the literature of migration, race and gender. They consider

what eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature meant in terms of class division.

Southampton University (2003) offers prospective undergraduates the opportunity to engage with culturally distant, sensitive or complex areas, such as postcolonialism, gender and the Holocaust. Edinburgh University (2003) is said to consider topics ranging from medieval women's writing in England and Scotland to contemporary black American fiction.

Nottingham Trent University (2003) informs prospective students that they can choose from subjects such as gender and writing, postcolonialism and gay and lesbian texts. The modules offered at the University of Aberystwyth (2003) include Gender and Romanticism, Demons, Degenerates and New Women and Society, Sexuality and Subversion in the Middle Ages.

Salford University (2003) offers Female Gothic, Fictions of Femininity and the Postcolonial Novel. In addition to the latter of these three modules, Leeds Metropolitan University (2003)

offers Reading Gender, Feminine Storylines and Women's Short Fiction. Brunel University (2003) offers Gender and Writing, Post-Colonial Writing and The Women's Movement and

Twentieth-Century Writing. Sheffield Hallam University (2003) offers A Class of Her Own, Women Writers and the Working-class Experience, Language and Gender and Contemporary

Women's Writing and Cultural Identity. Westminster University (2003) offers Marxist Critics, Writing and Gender, Gender and Sexuality and Postcolonial Literature. The list goes on and

on, but to summarise it is the case that of the 78 institutions that advertise an undergraduate English course in their on-line prospectuses, at least 55 refer to gender, women's writing or

feminism, at least 40 refer to ethnicity, race or post-colonialism, at least 13 refer to class or Marxism and at least 12 refer to sexuality.

The fact that the class-based approach is not considered to be a selling point by the majority of universities is in itself revealing, as undergraduates from "lower" socio-economic backgrounds are still in the minority. That said, since gender and ethnicity are treated as

selling points by the majority of universities, and bearing in mind that sexuality is considered within both feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, these statistics can be interpreted in terms of progress. After all, to some degree, the majority of universities are actively promoting an ethos of inclusion.

### **The Exclusion of Disability**

When reading through the sample of course-content summaries, the problem on which to focus is the complete absence of a theoretical approach that is sensitive to disability, an approach that is critical of ableist representation. A significant reason why lecturers in Higher Education 'should be interested in becoming more theoretically informed about disability is that they will have increasing numbers of disabled students in their classrooms' (Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001, p. ix). However, pertaining to actual content, the only explicit reference to disability was made when Aberdeen University (2003) stated that the field work aspects of its English course may pose difficulties to students with disabilities and that alternative arrangements will be made available. In other words, the only manifest inclusion constitutes yet another latent exclusion.

It might be argued that this research is only cursory, that the omission, the exclusion, of disability from the introductory pages of so many university prospectuses is purely titular, purely superficial, for relevant issues are bound to arise from discussion about identity, prejudice, social status, sexual attraction, alterity, ontology and so on. This argument does nothing to negate the pending question about why university web sites, which are the first points of contact for so many prospective undergraduates, refer directly to gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity, but not to disability. Is this indicative of the notion that disabled people are grotesque subjects, more "them" than "us"? The point is that extrinsic or extraneous

consideration does not constitute inclusion. Ableism, like racism, sexism, homophobia and bourgeois oblivion, should not be the approach of any university, but an issue that therein is approached.

It might be postulated that the omission, the exclusion, only reflects the lack of disability that is found in primary reading matter. This argument can be refuted even if, again, the vast majority of impairments are not considered, when attention is paid to portrayals of people with impaired vision alone. Sheffield University (2003) offers a module about contemporary literature that involves the study of four key texts, two of which contain central blind characters - namely, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late*. Other universities offer English modules that consider works including Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Light That Failed*, George Gissing's *New Grub Street*, J. M. Synge's *The Well of the Saints* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, all of which contain blind characters. Indeed, canonical representations of people with impaired vision have been created by Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Victor Hugo, Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, Jack London, H. G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, André Gide, D. H. Lawrence, Bertolt Brecht, Dylan Thomas, Daphne du Maurier, Raymond Carver, Brian Friel, Margaret Atwood and so on. In other words, unlike the disability studies approach, the literary representation of people with impaired vision is in itself far from being marginal.

It is quite right that literary studies advances so much about the sexist ideology that underpins Shakespeare's *King Lear*, for example, but similar ought to be true of the ableist characterisation of Gloucester, for this is no more the exclusive domain of disability studies than the characterisations of Cordelia, Regan and Goneril are of women's studies. Like

femininity, like ethnicity, class and sexuality, disability is frequently reduced to a trope, a metaphorical vehicle; it derives from an ableist metanarrative and as such is most definitely pertinent to the scope of literary studies, to the content of any undergraduate English course. Indeed, without disability studies the taxonomy of approaches to literature is outmoded.

### **Conclusion**

The specific conclusion that emerges in this paper is that disability should no longer be an incidental aspect of literary studies. It is imperative that disability is posited alongside gender, ethnicity and class in the prospectus of each university that offers English, alongside gender, ethnicity and class as a key component of the Level One approaches to literature module, alongside gender, ethnicity and class as an option for specialisation at Level Two and Level Three; and, consequently, alongside gender, ethnicity and class as no reason for an English undergraduate to feel that her or his inclusion is rhetorical.

It is by no means the case that disabled people alone will benefit from actual, rather than rhetorical, inclusion. In accordance with the Disability Rights Commission policy statement on education and learning, '[i]ncreased choice' for students with disabilities 'will benefit others in education' (Disability Rights Commission, 2002, clause 1.1). Indeed, as Davis (2002) illustrates, with further reference to the study of English, the riches of diversity will be pocketed by all:

The exciting thing is the emergence of a whole new field in literary studies at the moment when many felt that there was nothing new under the hermeneutic sun. The survival of literary studies may well belong not to the fittest, but to the lame, the halt, and the blind, who themselves may turn out to be the fittest of all. (p. 46)

Something of a parallel can be anticipated if consideration is given to an assertion made by the University of Lincolnshire and Humberside, that the study of women's writing often proves to be one of the most popular modules on an English degree. Indeed, judging by the popularity of courses about women writers, there is even potential for the creation of modules that focus on authors with impairments. The list of eminent candidates with impaired vision alone includes Homer, John Milton, James Joyce and Jorge Luis Borges.

The principles of disability equality must become integral to education in general, for this is the predicate of a society in which people with impairments can participate as equal citizens, a society that does not render those people disabled. The Disability Rights Commission stated that education and learning 'play a vital role in shaping society, the way it perceives itself and its culture and values' (Disability Rights Commission, 2002, clause 4.7). Since universities and colleges are 'likely to remain the seed-beds for tomorrow's politicians and policy makers' (Barnes et al, 1992, p. 256), the ramifications of a lack in critical approaches towards ableism should not be underestimated. People may be impaired for many reasons, but it is always and only an ableist society that renders these people disabled. By limiting, diminishing and negating potential, the ableist society disables a proportion of the individuals therein, the result of which is damaging to the whole.

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