

## CHAPTER 12

De/Constructing 'Learning Difficulties'  
in Educational Contexts:  
the life story of Gerry O'Toole

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### **Introduction**

Education is an ideological battlefield for disabled people (Apple 1982). For people with 'learning difficulties', child and adulthood involves participation in education and training contexts that are full to bursting with professionals. This chapter examines those educational and training cultures, occupied by people with the label of 'learning difficulties', that remain oppressive and disabling, even in the current climate of new disability policy and legislation. Firstly, I will present the life story of a person with the label of 'learning difficulties' – Gerry O'Toole – in order to explore his and his peers' experiences of education and training contexts. Secondly, to allow for an examination of the story I will draw upon some ideas from a theoretical arena (poststructuralism) and an approach to analysis (discourse analysis). Third, I will examine Gerry's story in terms of what it can tell us about education and work contexts. Three findings from this analysis will be discussed: (i) education creates 'learning difficulties'; (ii) education regulates and governs; (iii) education can be resisted and challenged. In order to bring together theory and practice in the social model of disability, it is argued that much can be gained by turning to the stories of people who occupy educational places and the poststructuralist analyses that accompany their experiences.

The term 'learning difficulties' is used in this chapter to describe people who have been labelled at some point in their lives as requiring specialist 'mental handicap services' (Walmsley 1993: 46). This term is chosen instead of other synonyms such as 'mental handicap', 'mental impairment' or 'learning disabilities', because it is the term preferred by many in the self-advocacy movement. As one self-advocate puts it: 'If

you put “people with learning difficulties” then they know that people want to learn and to be taught how to do things’ (quoted in Sutcliffe and Simons 1993: 23). Moreover, this chapter suggests that the very phenomenon of ‘learning difficulties’ is constructed by institutional practices, such as education.

What should concern us is the mystifying fact that so many social scientists ... do not regard mental retardation [sic] as a social and cultural phenomenon. I say mystifying, because nothing in the probabilistic world of social scientific reality is more certain than the assertion that mental retardation [sic] is a socio-cultural problem through and through (Dingham 1968: 76).

### **A narrative: the life story of Gerry O’Toole**

In this chapter, I will be drawing upon the narrative of a person with ‘learning difficulties’. This story is the product of an ethnographic approach in which the story of the primary narrator (Gerry O’Toole) is supplemented by narratives of significant others – comrades with ‘learning difficulties’. The methodological, ethical and analytical considerations are dealt with in more detail in Goodley et al. (2004). But suffice to say, ‘Gerry’ is a person I got to know over the years through my voluntary work and research. He has always intrigued me. Here was a person who boasted a rich and varied life. Unlike many of his peers, Gerry dipped in and out of educational and training settings. While many people with ‘learning difficulties’ inhabit these contexts from group home, to Day Centre, to MENCAP organised disco on a Tuesday evening, Gerry entered these places only from time to time. His life appeared to say something to me about existing differently to his welfare-located peers. Maybe he appealed because his ordinary life of family, friends and work seemed so extraordinary in view of the years of institutional living experienced by so many of his friends. Crucially, his story – and those of his peers – said some dramatic things about the educational / training cultures that they were involved in. As we consider the contemporary policy, professional and political context of disabled people, and the social model of disability’s response, it is worth keeping in mind the lived realities of people with learning difficulties. By turning to one story we are reminded of the very real implications for many.

### ***Gerry O’Toole’s life story*** (abridged from Goodley et al. 2004: 3-14)

Here are some of my precious stories – events that shaped me. *You* won’t have heard of them. Its time to start listening to what *we* have to say. Sooner or later, you’ll listen. *You* will have to. Its difficult to explain to you about places you may have never experienced. You have seen

people like me, though. In the shopping malls. In fast food restaurants. In minibuses with steamed up windows. In small groups, shadowed by senior, more competent adults; middle aged women or young trendy blokes with goatee beards. Our cultures sometimes cross swords. You have words for people like me. Retard, Joey, defective, idiot, spaz, mong. You might not use these words now but if pressed you would shamefully recall a childhood vocabulary that flourished with such insults.

*'Frog', Paul shouted, 'Frog'. The gang fell about, giggling. ('Frog' was all Paul really said, that and 'I love Jonny Vickers', much to Jonny's embarrassment. He once spent the day spray painting 'I love Vickers' on lampposts around the town. He was one of only two lads in our secondary school who had support workers around them at all times. He was a minor celebrity but people laughed at him.)*

*Then Paul pulled down his pants and asked us, 'Do you want to see it wee?' 'Yeah – ha, yeah. I want to see it wee!' shouted Tez. And so Tez did – Paul neatly peeing into the drain. And we all laughed, all eight of us in Litton Close, a cul de sac near our primary school – recalling a place where our prejudices weren't so vicious.*

Now, things are more subtle, I guess. You will feel it inappropriate to catch my eye, to smile or to acknowledge me. And if you do clock me, you'll probably wonder afterwards if it was the right thing to do. You can't win and neither can I. We are – how do they put it – always batting for different sides?

*I am a resident. You reside.*

*I am admitted. You move in.*

*I am aggressive. You are assertive.*

*I have behaviour problems. You are rude.*

*I am noncompliant. You don't like being told what to do.*

*When I ask you out for dinner, it is an outing. When you ask someone out, it is a date.*

*I don't know how many people have read the progress notes people write about me. I don't even know what is in there. You didn't speak to your best friend for a month after they read your journal.*

*My case manager, psychologist, occupational therapist, nutritionist and house staff set goals for me for the next year. You haven't decided what you want out of life. Someday I will be discharged ... maybe. You will move onward and upward. (Extract from 'You and Me', an anonymous poem publicised by Values into Action, London,*

<http://www.viauk.org/>)

What do you feel when you see us? When you saw that 'mongey guy' in the street? Is it pity, sadness, a sense of fortune? Well, you might be right in having those feelings of concern. But the reason you feel like you do is less to do with my 'condition' and more down to the world that creates me in its own vision. In spite of or because of these difficulties we have in relating to one another, people like me – my comrades and I – we have been quietly getting on with changing things. You just never knew anything about my story and all the others that have come from this new burgeoning, exciting, radical movement called People First. But our successes are never easily achieved. Some difficult terrain has been tread.

*It was freezing and as I entered the outdoor market, Gerry was, as always, conspicuous. Red, white and black bobble hat that just hid his long straggly thinning hair. A greying stubble made him look 10 years older than the 39 that he actually was, though lovely warm piercing green Irish eyes ensured that you were charmed. A beige canvas bag full to bursting with papers and documents weighed down Gerry's left shoulder to the point that he worked with an uneven gait. Scruffy green combat jacket, brown waistcoat, cream shirt, brown trousers and new white trainers completed the 'vision'.*

*'How are you Gerry?'*

*'Fine. There is this chap who wants to come to the People First meetings' 'Who is he?' 'I don't know' 'Is he a member of staff from the centre?' 'I don't know' 'Is he a researcher wanting to find out about self-advocacy?' 'I dunno' 'Is he a person with 'learning difficulties'?' 'Dunno – didn't ask him'.*

My father was a tall, strong, vocal man. He smoked Woodbines and loved a pint in the local working men's club. He was funny and imposing. When I was 18 he took me and my older brothers to the club to celebrate.

I am now a paid up card-carrying member. The Friday after my dad died I went in. At the bar, Clive the secretary tells me that I need to pay for my membership. 'You're a member in your own right now Gerry. Now your dad has gone, God rest his soul, you can't be his guest, you need to be a proper member'. I asked him how much it was. '85 to you'. 85 quid I thought, 'can I pay in instalments like me Mam does with the washing machine?' '85 pence you daft bugger!' laughed Clive. They often get me like that.

Somehow, there was always someone around. If my Mam and Dad were at work then there was an older sister there to make my tea, run my bath, tickle me until I burst. Every morning when I was young my Dad walked me to school. We would stop at the dual carriageway across from the school and watch as my schoolmates were ferried past in ambulances. When they finally arrived at school, they were sick as dogs from the rough journey. Jeremy would crease me up, telling me how they'd have to hang onto the stretcher that was kept between the rows of seats. Of course, when they went round a corner the stretcher would move and they'd be pulled to the back of the bus, scattering those that stood up, kids flying into one another. Once in school, things were never so bad for me. I have friends now who never had a family, a safe haven. Sophie's mother couldn't cope. Sophie was ordered off to hospital when she was young.

I was in and out of special school and eventually left at 15. They were strange places, funny buildings, you were labelled as soon as you got there. Lessons were boring, colouring-in books that were already covered with the crayon scribbles of previous years' students. Class after class with the headmaster playing piano. Asking us which piece of classical music he was murdering. Keen, lively, young teachers joining us straight from teacher training college only to promptly leave by the end of their first or second term. Broken people. Students sound asleep in class, drooling onto the desks where they rested their heads. My mother would complain, 'Why can't Gerry be taught proper mathematics and English', she would tell the teachers. They told her I was struggling so much that I wouldn't be able to do the things my brothers and sisters were doing. Daft really, because when I worked with my Dad on the markets I was really good at counting up the change people needed. One teacher said to my mother that I would never be able to read and write. I did, though. At home. It wasn't the best of places. One day, I broke into the caretaker's office. I nicked a spade. Some time later, the teachers caught me trying to dig myself out of the school – I was trying to escape under the fence. I got into trouble a lot at school for talking or having a laugh in class. Some big lads off the estate eventually burnt down the school. After I had left, some of my mates managed to get themselves into the 'normal schools'. They told me that they had loads of parties, drinking with the other kids in the pubs in town.

*The 6<sup>th</sup> form had some new members – 12 people with 'learning difficulties' from the Day Centre. Kevin – Down Syndrome lad was the only one who was school age. Kevin followed Bant around, much to the amusement of Bant's fellow sixth formers. Bant was popular – stupid*

*but popular. And then when Bant got bored he would play to the crowd.*

*'Whose your favourite, Kev?'*

*'Bant'*

*'Who do you love?'*

*'Bant'*

*'Course yer do'.*

*And then Bant would run out of the classroom for a ciggie. Too quick for Kevin, who would bury his face in the seat – sobbing his heart out.*

Others joined the special needs group at the 'tech'. I was never going to be packed off to some 'life skills class'. As a teenager, school meant little to me. Well, I was on the market stalls at the time, so it wasn't really interesting. I really started to get into the market stall work. Some of my mates either went to the Day Centre full time or, if they were lucky, got a job (if that's what you can call not being paid to work) farming, t-shirt printing or decorating old people's houses. My brother jokes that we are part of the Irish Catholic mafia. A job was always going to be there for me.

*The boys' toilets. Lunchtime. Brid [18 yrs, small in stature, long hair, eyes too small for his face], Jano [20 years, large frame, short haired, piercing brown eyes] and David [short, overweight, mouse like, scared, thick rimmed glasses.]*

*Brid: So, twatter – is it true? Is it true, then? 12 toes 'ave ya? Ya freak.*

*[Brid pushes David into the cubicle, David covers his face with his lower arms.]*

*David: No ...*

*Brid: Jano, shut door, man.*

*[Jano firmly closes the door and rests against the door. He is laughing.]*

*Brid punches David hard in the stomach, and struggles with David's shoes, eventually prising them off, as he forces David to sit on the toilet seat. David is howling. Awful screams echo.]*

*Brid: Fucking hell [laughs] look at this Jano, look – it's the elephant man! Jesus, that's horrible [laughs]*

*[Jano moves into the cubicle and squeals with delight. Brid and Jano catch each other on and run out of the toilet, their laughter echoing in the toilet while ringing out over the factory floor.*

*David pulls himself up from the seat by the door and stoops down to collect his shoes and socks. As he moves out of the toilet we catch a reflection of him in the mirror. We can make out the mirror image of chalk marks scrawled on the back of his long grey coat 'I am a*

*knobhead.  
Kick me!']*

David was bullied for two years. He had a meeting with his mother, his keyworker, an occupational therapist and the work supervisor. The occupational therapist asked him if he wanted to take a holiday. He said yes. He hasn't worked since, that was 12 years ago. I heard that David has spent the last three years at home. He never leaves the house, even though his Mum and sister want him to get out, to make friends. He stays in bed, all day, every day.

For me work has always been a laugh with my cousins, my brothers, and our pals. Five am start, breakfast in the market café at eight and back in time for the punters. Lots of 'craic'. Weekends we get off somewhere different – York, Newcastle, Glasgow, Rotherham, all the different markets. I am well known, always asked if I need more work. From time to time I collect glasses in Mulligans, which is a really cool Irish pub. A trio plays rebel songs every Friday night and it is packed with regulars as well as students nursing a pint or two. One Saturday night, Trevor the landlord asks if anyone knows of a right wingback that could play for the pub football team. I overheard him. So did my brother Callum. 'Our Gerry's got a sweet right foot, you want to ask him'. I am now a regular. Scored two last match.

Last Wednesday I rushed down to the Day Centre. Quick coffee. Then, we spent ages helping each other with our aprons – Steve's difficult to dress in his wheelchair. Then June, whose staff, bakes a cake. Mixing up the ingredients, adding dried fruit, whisking away, talking us through her handiwork. She does it all. Always has done. We are her willing audience. We wait in relative silence watching the cake rise through the glass of the oven door. Rebecca asked me why I even bother – 'can't cook, won't ever be allowed to bloody cook' she mocks. I tell her – I come to see my mates. Questions?

### **Making sense of Gerry's life story: poststructuralism and discourse analysis**

Gerry's story allows an insight into educational and training cultures. But how do we make sense of it? In this section, I will introduce an approach to analysis – discourse analysis – which has its roots in the theoretical arena of poststructuralism.

## ***Postmodernism and poststructuralism***

Poststructuralism has finally entered the paradigm of disability studies (Hughes and Paterson 1997; Allan 1998, 1999; Corker 1997; Shakespeare 2000; Corker and Shakespeare 2002). Poststructuralism has been viewed as a methodology for capturing the workings of late capitalism, postfordism, the knowledge society or postmodernity (Bell 1973; Jameson 1984). Postmodernism – the study of postmodernity – is a term ripe for social scientific debate. It continues to receive passionate support and scathing criticism. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1979) challenges what he terms the ‘grand narratives’ of modern societies. These narratives have three features:

- 1 They aim to be overarching – so scientific narratives on ‘learning difficulties’ aim to understand and treat all people so-labelled.
- 2 They boast foundationalism – they desire to base knowledge on claims that are ‘known’ with certainty, such as scientific measurements of intelligence.
- 3 There is an optimistic faith in progression – ‘truths’ progress the world, and people with learning difficulties are rehabilitated or, ‘at best’, cured.

For Lyotard, grand narratives are increasingly open to question. Following Assiter (1996: 17), how can we still unquestionably cling to the progressive qualities of grand narratives – enlightenment projects such as ‘science’ – that foundered on the rock of tragedy that was Auschwitz? Grand narratives are not and never were benevolent offerings for all. Poststructuralism, the methodology of postmodernism (offered by writers such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan), interrogates the workings of grand narratives in a number of ways.

- Grand narratives are viewed with scepticism as they reflect the manipulative powers of ‘discourses’ (which serve particular societal and institutional functions).
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- The universalising theorises of grand narratives are rejected because they actually marginalize certain social groupings to the status of ‘other’.
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- The main aim of modernist narratives – understanding human beings – is viewed critically; there is a price to be paid in understanding human beings.
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- Institutions and knowledge disciplines – such as psychology, education, rehabilitative disciplines – aim to know but also control.
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- Individual human beings are viewed as creations and constructions of institutions, power and discourses – ‘the individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of the relation of power exercised over bodies’ (Assiter 1996: 9).

If we take Marx’s (1845) argument that human essence is the ensemble of social relations, then poststructuralism can be viewed as a methodology that is in tune with contemporary knowledge societies of late capitalism. There are people out there who are constructed by society and its institutions (such as education). Our job as disability thinkers is to challenge disabling visions of personhood owned by those institutions.

### ***A poststructuralist method: discourse analysis***

Discourse analysis provides a social account of subjectivity – of how we understand and see ourselves and others (Burman and Parker 1993). Rather than viewing subjectivity as in the heads of individuals, discourse analysts turn to the texts, practices, knowledges, documents, experiences and stories – discourses – by which subjectivity is accounted for and constructed. From this position, then, Gerry’s story is viewed as a text that contains a whole host of discourses of disability, ‘learning difficulties’, education, employment, competency and adulthood. Discourse analysts have problems with the notion of the ‘individual’ and ‘the body’ and their modernist association with the natural. In a seminal paper, Hughes and Paterson (1997) introduce a poststructuralist gaze on the body. Following Donna Haraway (1991) they note that neither our personal bodies nor our social bodies may be seen in the sense of existing *outside* of human behaviour. While the classic social model distinction of ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ is politically useful, the former remains a biological, individual and embodied phenomenon (e.g. Thomas 1999). In contrast, discourse analysis turns attention to the ways in which *bodies are made*: how surfaces of the body are monitored and how the body is regulated (Hughes and Paterson 1997: 330). Regimes and truths about disabled bodies have been central to their governance and control:

Meaning follows the name (or diagnostic label) ... The power of the name penetrates the flesh and maps out for it a performance (Butler 1993; cited in Hughes and Paterson 1997:

333).

Poststructuralism and its method (discourse analysis) critically examines those discourses that create particular views of objects (the label of 'learning difficulties'), subjectivity (having 'learning difficulties') and the human subject (a person with 'learning difficulties'). Such discourses can be found in educational contexts (Ball 1990).

### **Education in the life of Gerry O'Toole: de/constructing 'learning difficulties'**

Discourse analysis allows us to make sense of the ways in which human beings are constructed, shaped and moulded via the power of discourses and how these very discourses are used to make sense of ourselves and others. With Gerry O'Toole's story in mind, we will turn to three discourse analyses.

#### ***Education creates 'learning difficulties'***

Gerry's narrative opens up possibilities for viewing the ways in which disabled people are regulated. Following Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1995: 3), the aim is to explore what it means to be a person with 'learning difficulties' in this postmodern tale, by interrogating those discursive practices that constitute versions of self. 'Learning difficulties' tends to be viewed as an objectified, naturalised phenomenon (Goodley et al. 2004). Yet, this 'thingification' of the world, persons and experience produces a phantom objectivity and denies and mystifies the body's fundamental nature as a *relation between people* (Titchkovsky 2002: 105). People with 'learning difficulties' are formed through the binding of complementary discourses: such as 'medical', 'psychological' and 'individual'. These discourses are especially conducive – and become almost commonsensical by nature – to specialist institutions of group home, day centre, special school, learning support unit, segregated or supported workplace. Crucially, people with 'learning difficulties' are objects. If we take the stories of Bant and David we can see the person with 'learning difficulties' as plaything and object of abuse: not as active person or human subject, but passive object. People with 'learning difficulties' are aware of this process of objectification, hence, the move towards the label of 'People First'. The former speaks of a history of being viewed solely as an object of ridicule, control and disposal. The latter – People First – collectively identifies people as subjects rather than objects.

Impairment construction, through objectification, has contributed markedly to the exclusion of people identified as those objects (Tremain

2002). For people with 'learning difficulties' the very construction of their impairments – and associated notions of 'incompetence', 'maladaptive functioning', 'low intellect' – is at the heart of their experiences of disablement: the constant social (re)construction of 'learning difficulties'. Education creates the passive object of 'learning difficulties' rather than the active human subjects that may exist behind the label.

### ***Education regulates and governs***

Gerry's story is also about regulation and governance (Foucault 1973a, 1973b, 1977, 1983; Burman and Parker 1993). Michel Foucault illustrated the ways in which discourses and practices masquerade as 'truths'. These practices are particularly noticeable in what Rose (1985) terms the 'psycomplex' – seen most vividly in welfare and knowledge systems that have contributed to practices and treatments associated with the rational treatment of the irrational mind / body. There is a sense that Gerry is very much aware of the psy-complex in institutions such as special schools – 'funny buildings, strange places, labelled as soon as you got there'. However, the psy-complex does not remain in professionalised institutions. From Reality TV, to self-help books, therapy and increased reflexivity, domineering discourses of our 'selves' – and how our selves should be – are felt and experienced in everyday life. People with 'learning difficulties' are 'village idiots', 'the funny backwards chap', the weird guy in the working men's club. Understanding ourselves – a key progressive aim of a civilised, modern society – allows us to 'know' a 'handicapped person' just from looking at them.

This knowing of self – and how self should be – has been termed governance. This can range from governing others (such as gazing at the abnormal with David's story), through to more elusive self-governance ('now things are a lot more subtle'). David was free to make a choice, to go on holiday, which then resulted in long-term exclusion. In making sense of ourselves, we draw upon discourses, which may give us a sense of agency. However, we are free only to govern ourselves. As Kurtz (1981: 14) puts it, 'acting like a retarded person [*sic*] can soon become second nature' – governance is often about self-restraint. The modern human subject is provided with discursive resources that allow them opportunities for making sense of themselves in particular ways. The end of this process is subjectification; experienced as an inner consciousness, created by drawing upon available discourses. While common sense may have us believe that an increased knowledge of ourselves – and resultant subjectification – results in enlightened individuals and developed societies, there is a price to be paid.

Subjectification may render bodies docile: perhaps most graphically captured when students fell asleep in Gerry's class.

Gerry knows his place in the cooking class at the day centre, excuses it as an opportunity to see friends – but is this a knowing acceptance? For many people with the label of 'learning difficulties', their daily lives are regulated and controlled by professional intrusions. Education is increasingly multi-layered in terms of the increasing forms of professionalisation:

While the ambulances and large-scale institutionalisation of Gerry's childhood might have disappeared, the advent of a whole host of specialist services (psy-complex), discourses of self-knowledge (governance) and their application (subjectification) create a new horrific realisation: at least when slammed up in the old hospitals inmates' minds had wings (Goodley et al. 2004: 128).

### ***Education can be resisted and challenged***

Narrative has had an uneasy relationship with disability studies. For some, personal stories re-emphasise old enemies of case file understandings of disability and impairment (Finkelstein 1996). Similarly, Barnes (1998) states that most of this writing represents either sentimental biography. A post-structuralist narrative / reading does not have these naturalised hang-ups. Discourse analysis is a resistant approach to analysis: resisting static, structuralist and immovable views of discourse while embracing resistant, performative acts of human subjects.

Foucault (1977) suggested that where there is power there is also resistance. A poststructuralist discourse analysis understands the categories of 'person' and 'learning difficulties' as phenomena formulated in power relationships of language. Now, 'man-made' things can often be demolished and rebuilt. Although certain people have more access to the raw materials of discourse than others, opportunities exist for all to reconstruct versions of personhood. One key area of resistance lies in the multiple identities of a discursive world (Goodley et al. 2004: 128-29). During the day you may move between the different subject positions of parent, partner, colleague, consumer, player and lover. Each of these positions has power connected to it. Gerry's narrative is characterised by the many different subject positions – from day centre user, to worker, to key family member, to membership of the working men's club. The character of this narrative is someone allowed to move

in and out of institutionally created subject positions. Often, there are very direct acts of resistance with tremendous symbolism – like when Gerry wanted to dig himself out of school! Other characters in Gerry's narrative find that external (material) barriers challenge their subject movement. It is therefore even more remarkable to see people who are so objectified by the professional gaze finding spaces to escape subject positions – such as Gerry O'Toole. For some their new subject positions might have to take place away from the professional gaze. Perhaps, this is key to Gerry's narrative – to enter contexts away from the professionally populated spaces of learning difficulty services.

Gerry is a remarkable character. He slips in and out of service settings. His life is rich and varied. Many of his friends do not enjoy such freedoms. We are reminded that modernist projects such as professionalisation have not been eclipsed with the diversity, tolerance and liberty of postmodernity (Hughes 2002). But, rather than rejecting educational professionals, we should be aware of professional resistance. When Gerry talks of 'broken teachers' he demonstrates how professional subject positions are not all encompassing. Professionals are also often caught up in the disabling world of the psy-complex (Parker et al. 1995; Parker 1997). It is no surprise then that members of the self-advocacy movement have spoken about those members of staff who have broken the professional mould to offer support (Goodley 2000). Gerry's story, therefore, is as much about professionals of the disability industry as it is about people with learning difficulties.

## **Conclusion**

A pressing concern for disability studies (and the developing social model) is to take seriously the ways in which many work and educational contexts, by their very nature, contribute to the exclusion of people through their institutional practices and discourses which are so compelled to construct versions of subjectivity and with them the objects of disabling discourses. Educational and training zones are symptomatic of a late capitalist society that values, promulgates and divides knowledge and access to knowledge. In order to promote enabling theory, practice and politics, much can be gained through a turn to the texts of narrative and discourse.

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