

Chapter 2. Defining Disability Intersectionally

Just as we have definitions (working, explicit, or both) in our courses that define what work must be done, what standards must be met, or what learning objectives we are focusing on, we also would do well to have explicit definitions of “disability.” Such a definition affects the grading ecology since it too structures the ecology through such things as labor expectations. In Chapter 4 of her book, calling on Kryger and Zimmerman’s similar concerns, Carillo demonstrates how an intersectional approach to understanding our students, their labor, and their experiences of time in laboring can account for disability and neurodivergency (Carillo 36-37; Kryger and Zimmerman 3). How a teacher defines disability for their classroom is crucial to any kind of standards that a teacher might use. While I have not ignored the intersectional ways that my students operate in my LBG ecologies, I haven’t given disability enough room in my discussions of the grading practice. Moving forward, I believe an explicit definition of disability can help fill part of this gap.

As Kimberlé Crenshaw explains in her groundbreaking work, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” oppression can and should be understood along multiple social dimensions simultaneously, such as race, class, gender, and disability (1242). In their book on intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge offer a useful definition of the term and frame it as an analytical tool for understanding oppression. They explain:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves. (6)

This means that engaging in socially just assessment ecologies requires an intersectional understanding of our students. As Carillo, Kryger, and Zimmerman argue separately, teachers must understand how numerous social dimensions limit and afford students their ways of laboring, which affect the various ways

they can labor in and for the course. And so, how we create and maintain any labor standards and expectations in a grading ecology can be understood as intersectional work. This work includes our assumptions and definitions of disability.

Drawing on Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall's work to understand the various ways intersectionality has been applied across many fields, Collins and Bilge emphasize that intersectionality is a tool for analyses, thus they explain that using the term is not a requirement for intersectional work (4-5). This also means that the absence of the term in a discussion does not indicate the absence of an intersectional approach to identity or oppression. Thus, intersectionality might be better understood not just as an analytic tool for scholars but an orientation for students and teachers in classrooms, one that can be encouraged through a grading ecology, particularly in defining operating terms and policies that affect grading.

For instance, in contract negotiations and other discussions over a semester, students and teachers might consciously consider the multiple dimensions of themselves that constitute their ways of laboring. What does any measure of labor mean to each student? What is reasonable and equitable to expect in labor from students in the course balanced next to other factors, such as course objectives, students' personal goals, and institutional guidelines for work in the course. Every group of students each semester or term is different in who they are, what conditions make their learning environments, and what they have the capacity to do. Thus, framing and negotiating labor expectations from an intersectional orientation allows the grading ecology to consider explicitly numerous factors in students' lives that create boundaries and pressure in their work and learning.

“Disability” Defines the “Normal” and the “Deviant”

As much of the literature in Disability Studies discusses, our understandings of disability also create the boundaries of what is “normal” and “deviant” in schools, classrooms, society, and of course, in our grading ecologies. This is a kind of definition by antithesis, where something is defined by its opposite, or by an assumed, or socially circulating, binary pairing of concepts. While it's common to critique such false binaries in academic circles, such defining still occurs tacitly in the ways we habitually group or categorize people. What is often defined as racially White is circumscribed by Blackness and other racial categories, just as male and female restrooms call on each other in their definitions which assume a simple, even if false, gender binary choice in their use. Economically poor and affluent categories influence the way people generally understand these groups as well. And the ways we believe most of our students' brains work, assumptions that tend to deny or ignore neurodivergent individuals in any group of people, can create ways we understand what is “normal” or “abnormal” in our classrooms' assessment ecologies, particularly around what appropriate labor looks like.

Thus, like all sociopolitical categories, how a teacher defines “disability,” and thus ability, in their classroom is not a bias-free enterprise. It is part of the politics

of the course and its grading ecology. It is, in fact, central to what we do in writing classrooms when we establish any standard or expectation in writing or work. Such definitions engage in and assume a set of politics that we can make explicit and pay attention to. Alison Kafer offers a political and relational model for defining “disability,” one that critiques a reliance on a purely medical definition and helps us understand the nature of the politics in such definitions. Medical definitions of disability, she says, focus on the individual, and are often used falsely as a bias-free framing of disability. Kafer explains:

the definitional shift away from the medical/individual model makes room for new understandings of how best to solve the “problem” of disability. In the alternative perspective, which I call the political/relational model, the problem of disability no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being . . . the problem of disability is located in inaccessible buildings, discriminatory attitudes, and ideological systems that attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies. The problem of disability is solved not through medical intervention or surgical normalization but through social change and political transformation. (6)

For Kafer, the key to defining disability in more meaningful, ethical, and equitable ways is to understand that the biases we have and use to build our definition of disability also build our environments—that is, physical and other structures, policies, classrooms, and I’ll add our grading ecologies. And those environments and ecologies come from, among other things, our ideas about the role of disability in our future, or what Kafer calls our “imagined futures” (28). Similar to the epigraph by Bailey and Mobley, Kafer compels me to ask: *What imagined futures about my students’ ways of laboring have I used to build my past grading ecologies?* What alternatives might my students and I imagine together? My second question assumes that I still need to imagine my students’ futures, only *with* my students, not for them, and we might use a political/relational model of disability that Kafer offers to help us, one that isn’t about fixing people but understanding ourselves and our present conditions.

In her discussion of “cripping time” in writing classrooms, Tara Wood identifies the limitations of the medical and legal definitions of disability. Drawing on scholars like Jay Dolmage and Patricia Dunn, Wood explains that those models of disability are “individual-based fix-its applied to specific students in specific situations” (262). Such definitions and their classroom accommodations may also assume “imagined futures” that are predicated on present assumptions of medical disability that are in our minds and habits and the structures that make our built environments. These structures often assume able-bodiedness as an ideal, a norm, or a desirable end

(Kafer 2-3; Wood 264). They imagine that all students, when moving through a writing course, will ideally move in a particular fashion, at a certain speed, and attain or demonstrate a predefined “outcome.” This logic suggests that at that endpoint, that imagined future, our students are fixed, healed, or improved.

Race and Disability

Defining disability from an intersectional orientation for our grading ecologies also means accounting for the ways race is already implicated in such notions of (dis)ability. Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley argue for a Black feminist disability framework that “highlights how and why Disability Studies must adopt a comprehensively intersectional approach to disability and non-normative bodies and minds and explains why Black Studies should do the same” (19). Drawing on a range of scholars and historians, Bailey and Mobley argue convincingly that “[r]ace—and specifically Blackness—has been used to mark disability, while disability has inherently ‘Blackened’ those perceived as unfit” (24). This includes the ways the legal system has created what Edlie L. Wong calls “Black legal disabilities,” meaning the full rights of citizenship have been kept from Black people through laws and court decisions that function to specifically disable them legally (Wong 137). As Bailey and Mobley sum up, “[r]ace marks Black people as being inherently disabled, fundamentally other,” and therefore, “race and disability are mutually constitutive” (24).

Considering the history of slavery and Jim Crow in the US, the consubstantial nature of race and disability is not so strange. Citing Harriet Washington’s *Medical Apartheid*, Bailey and Mobley explain that “Black desires for freedom were curtailed—either through medical diagnosis (in the case of drapetomania) or via physical domination—intentionally disabling enslaved people (through amputation, physical marking, or limb restriction) to prevent escape, assert dominance, and exert bodily control” (Bailey and Mobley 25). In her discussion of the imagined futures that dictate the politics of “endless deferral” that are based on “curing” those who experience disability, Kafer highlights the history of eugenic projects in the US, which have blended together race and mental disability, making race and “feeble-mindedness” often as synonymous (Kafer 30).

Similarly in his history of writing assessment in the US, Norbert Elliot shows how literacy testing has played an integral part in eugenic movements and arguments for who is feeble-minded. In *Systemic Racism and Educational Measurement: Confronting Injustice in Testing, Assessment, and Beyond*, Michael Russell details the deep ways that racism and eugenics have been foundational to the fields of psychological measurement and statistics (232). During the early part of the 20th century, Carl Brigham, a military psychologist, and later Princeton professor, concluded that race and culture were important factors in the intelligence of groups of army recruits tested, who were mostly non-English speaking immigrants (Elliot 69-70). Brigham claimed that Black people among other groups, in

fact, were not as naturally smart as “Nordics,” which led him to argue for eugenic movements, even suggesting that “[m]any of them should be in custodial institutions” (Elliot 70). While Brigham would change his position (Elliot 76), it is telling that he jumped to such conclusions that connected so tenuously race and intellectual ability, conclusions that many around him eagerly accepted, even acted on by legislating public and immigration policies (Elliot 71-72).

From the history of literacy and intelligence testing, it is not hard to find support for the claim that Bailey and Mobley make, that Blackness has been, and often still is, falsely equated to feeble-mindedness, or in today’s terms, “college ready.” It’s a part of White language supremacy and antiblack racism. It may even be an aspect of Black racial implicit biases. While today no one would make this kind of claim explicitly, most of us do so tacitly and unintentionally through our ideas and definitions of disability and language that influence our ideas about what makes for quality in language use. Through the ways we use our language standards, we often unintentionally equate racialized Englishes, such as Black English or multilingual Englishes, with not having the ability to do college or think in the ways we ask students to do in college—that is, we equate a student’s use of a non-standardized English with linguistic inability because we use a single standard of language that comes from some other place than where the students do. We structure our assessment ecologies in ways that make raciolinguistic aspects of students as disability. This is the point that Kafer makes. Disability is not a flaw in someone. It is made in our ecologies, structured and created by our language standards and rubrics, our outcomes and habits of language and judgement, and our expectations around laboring.

Quoting scholarship on the connections between race, health, and hygiene, Kafer describes the “always already whiteness” that is a part of “regimes of health and hygiene” that mark racial difference, which are similar to the discourse of intelligence testing that Elliot reveals:

Health and hygiene have long served as “potent symbolic marker[s] of racial difference” in terms of both immigration policies and conceptualizations of disability and illness [Horton and Barker 785]. Anna Stubblefield details, for example, the ways in which the label of “feeble-mindedness” worked in the early twentieth century to signify a whiteness “tainted” by poverty and ethnicity; “[T]he racialized understanding of cognitive ability was used to signify not only the difference between white and non-white people but also the difference between pure and tainted whites.” [Schweik 185] Whiteness, in other words, depended on the linkage of race, class, and disability for meaning. (Kafer 32)

Similarly, Bailey and Mobley conclude that throughout U.S. history, the “tropes utilized to distinguish between supposedly superior White bodies and

purportedly inferior bodies of color have relied on corporeal assessments that take the able White male body as the center and ‘norm’” (27). Today, in our writing classrooms’ grading ecologies, we must be vigilant at rooting out the ways our standards of languaging, learning, and laboring participate in White supremacist, and in many cases antiblack, eugenic histories. These histories inform the policies and structures, the pedagogies and assessment practices, that come out of the “regimes of health and hygiene” and the legal and academic ways our educational systems create disability from the richly diverse students who enter our courses. Conversely, in antithetical ways, they also reference all the would-be students who are kept out of our courses, the people who never get there.

Thus, when understanding disability from an intersectional view, it is impossible to separate what disability is or means from Blackness, non-Whiteness, illness, and poverty. It is equally impossible to separate historical ideas of language and learning abilities in classrooms, and the markers we use to grade or evaluate such performances, from Whiteness, Blackness, and disability. Thus, it is impossible to separate our societal notions of disability from those of race, gender, class, economics, intelligence, health and illness, as well as our ideas about neurotypical embodied ways of living and being. These insights have a direct impact on labor expectations and conceptions of the laboring student in any grading ecology, but specifically LBG ecologies. As Kafer reiterates from past critics, “the futures we imagine reveal the biases of the present” (28). These harmful biases in our grading ecologies—in my own past LBG ecologies—come from, as Kafer explains, our societies’ desires for the future, which always frame disability as failure (Kafer 29).