

Guest Editor's Introduction:

Disability and the Shape of School

THE DISABILITY RIGHTS MOVEMENT HAS ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT OPEN words. Using words to develop pride in disability identity, to challenge discourse that devalues, to foster collective self-representation. Using all of the pneumatic power of words to remove barriers to access. Hammering most aggressively at those barriers that have kept people with disabilities out of social institutions like colleges and universities. Central to this history has been the idea that disability is created in part by a social, physical, and educational environment shaped in ways that exclude. *Open Words*, the journal, shares the mission of reshaping all that is exclusive about higher education.

My first encounter with the disability rights movement happened when I was a child, and my brother, who was disabled, was being bussed to a segregated school in another community every day. My parents fought the school board for his right to go to school in his neighborhood, with his friends and brother and sister, and to be included in regular classes. We lost this fight in the Ontario (Canada) Superior Court. So we moved. We found a city and a school board where he could attend regular classes. There was simply no way that my brother was going to be denied his right to an education. Through this experience, I came to see school itself as a powerful concentration of communal and social ideals. Looking at who is “schooled”—and who is not—offers a profound reflection of shared attitudes. To understand how a society teaches is to understand its deeply-held values. Still today, when we look closely at schooling, we see that our culture—in the main—has only a tokenized commitment to the true inclusion of all of its members in this, its most important social structure.

So, understandably, my initial experience with higher education was unsettling. It felt strange and wrong to be one of the “select few” who would get to go to university. I was encouraged to see myself as superior, to strive to further distinguish myself and rise above others. Higher education is extraordinarily ableist. The dominant educational paradigm still sees college as a place to sort society based on the education of the “deserving” few. And these values then reflect and reinforce pervasive cultural attitudes about human worth. We can either go with this flow or fight against it.

So, what if we saw colleges and universities as places to elevate all of society based on the education of all of its citizens? What if we believed that, given access, anyone could learn? What if we believed that this access is worth fighting for, that equitable education requires a constant critique and persuasive re-shaping of what we do as teachers?

The journal *Open Words* stands for exactly these educational values and has critical-DOI: [10.37514/OPW-J.2011.5.1.01](https://doi.org/10.37514/OPW-J.2011.5.1.01)

ly interrogated the forces that work against inclusion, equality, and access. So it is no surprise that articles on disability issues have already appeared in the journal. And of course, a full issue devoted to disability is a perfect fit. I am honored to be part of this partnership.

Here are a few themes that I see as central to this issue, central to the mission of this journal, and central to disability issues in higher education:

First, as mentioned above, colleges and universities are built of ideas. From their curriculum up to their architecture, they are deeply interested and invested places. This means they can also be rebuilt—retrofitted, annexed, or reconstructed from the bricks up. *Open Words* is about using our words to rebuild academia. Lynn Bloom shows us how this can be done with curriculum in "Able, Disabled, Enabled: Mainstreaming the Disability Course"; Lois Agnew and Zosha Stuckey provide a rhetorical framework for reshaping bodily attitudes on campus in "Rhetoric, Ethos, and Unease: The Re-Negotiation of 'Normal' in the Classroom and on the Quad."

Secondly, disability itself is used to shape school. The spaces of higher education frame bodies and minds profoundly—schools don't just subtly form students through education, they also freeze and fix cultural attitudes about human worth. Through educational techniques and regimes, and even through academic research, disability is used as a broad and flexible, easily applicable marker of stigma—the automatically unwanted. If we want to rewrite the values of education, we need to challenge the idea that disability is the haunting inverse image of higher education. In "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Returning Veteran: The Rhetorical and Narrative Challenges," Bekah Hawrot Weigel and Lisa Detweiler Miller challenge the ways that this stigma has gathered around returning veterans. Tara Wood also troubles predetermined rhetorical valences of disability in "Overcoming Rhetoric: Forced Disclosure and the Colonizing Ethic of Evaluating Personal Essays." These essays also offer means to recognize disability more positively and thus to shape new possibilities.

Finally, disability must be rewritten by its rightful authors. People with disabilities, because they have been historically excluded from all major social institutions, have also been disproportionately (and very detrimentally) shaped by these institutions. People with disabilities have been objects of research, not researchers. People with disabilities haven't been seen as writers, they've been written upon. People with disabilities haven't even been taught, let alone seen as teachers. Instead of being educated, people with disabilities were institutionalized (imprisoned, abused, sterilized). So, the script needs to be flipped, and the power of writing disability—and rewriting educational values—needs to be given to people with disabilities. In "Inclusive Teaching: Perspectives of Students with Disabilities," Nancy Johnston and Tina Doyle do just this. Linda Rubel and Rose Marie Toscano's "I Am My Language: Representing and Misrepresenting Deaf Writers" likewise gives voice to students.

Finally, Nancy Viva Davis Halifax's "Scar Tissue" offers a teaching narrative that challenges the messages we are so often given as teachers: that we must appear superbly able and invulnerable.

Let's be honest. Being a teacher or administrator in higher education is one of the most problematic positions in our society in terms of disability. We are asked to be the arbiters of ability and privilege. We are where we are because we have, throughout our lives, been encouraged to see ourselves (or to pass) as better than others; we've been asked to perform easy mastery (no matter how hard we've had to work to do so); we've been invited to join exclusive clubs—and these are now the nebulous castles that we somehow work the drawbridges to.

The authors in this issue interrogate these problematic positions. Following their lead, we can all look for opportunities to rewrite our institutions with new, powerful, inviting, open words.

Jay Dolmage

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