Seeing with the Blind:
Teaching and Learning with Differently-Abled Students

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ABSTRACT This paper is situated at the junction of feminist pedagogy and critical disability theory and draws from the insights gained from interviews with visually impaired students as part of a project on 'body', learning and 'disability theory'. The paper attempts to bring into mainstream discussion, tertiary teaching amongst the visually impaired, compelling us to rethink their corporeality within our classes. The paper works through the methodological approach of narrative analysis and suggests that teaching the visually impaired calls for recognition of a more specific kind of productive pedagogy that works to embrace the (social) learning experiences of this category of student. While critical disability theory speaks to the political insights and issues of power (or lack thereof) within contexts of material and social impairment, feminist pedagogy speaks to a democratic (co)creation of knowledge, and participatory teaching and learning in classrooms that we seek to construct as being inclusive.

INTRODUCTION

Saavedra reminds us that the 'body' as a focus of educational research is able to reveal how inextricably intertwined both the body and pedagogy are in education (Saavedra 2006: 40). This reminder underpins the fact that various relations are created in and out of education through particular understandings, or non understandings of the body. This paper in turn works with the differently-abled body of the student and is situated at the intersection of a feminist pedagogy and critical disability studies and draws from the narrative insights gained from interviews with visually impaired students. My claim is that quite often the visually impaired, who is a 'differently-bodied' and differently-abled within in our classes, is also the '*liminal*' being situated at the token outskirts of our lecture halls, if not spatially, certainly pedagogically speaking, and for many of us our teaching responsibilities 'appear' to end with getting our material to the Disability Unit. The Disability Unit in turn is seen as being tasked with re-preparing the material in a (retrievable) consumable format for the visually impaired (VI) student.

The paper thus attempts to bring into mainstream discussion, tertiary teaching amongst the visually impaired, asking how to re-integrate their corporeality within our classes. The paper suggests that teaching the visually impaired calls for recognition of a more specific kind of productive pedagogy that works to embrace the social learning experiences of this category of student. While feminist pedagogy, at its core, can be claimed as attempting to empower students, seeking egalitarian relationships, and striving to teach at the margins (Blizzard and Foster 2007: 226), an ableist pedagogy works within the frame of a social model of disability and seeks inclusivity that strives to bring the margins, to the centre.

Synder and Mitchell's Notion of Counternarratives

The researcher borrows from the work of Mitchell in asserting that, in certain contexts, shared stories are better comprehended as 'counternarratives'. Narratives that consider disability-other than those engaged in solving the so called '*problem*' of disability are critically examined by Mitchell and Snyder (2000: 15), who employ the metaphor of a '*narrative prosthesis*' as an aid for the nondisabled to better understand the lives of contemporary disabled populations. The notion of a narrative prosthetic is intellectually exciting. For the recovery and re-interpretation of disability 'normalcy narratives', allows us to contest the limited interpretations of disability afforded in the literature (see Ware 2002), as it allows us to hear from the differently-abled themselves. Linda Ware draws our gaze to the nascent field of Humanities Based Disability

Studies which has similar goals. Humanities Based Disability Studies aims to re-imagine disability by "challenging collective stories through a cultural lens" so that we can retrace the "divergent institutional and communal histories that inform the varied construct that we recognize as disability" (Ware 2002: 143). The narratives presented here that have emerged in the study are thus to be seen as part of an ongoing exercise in "ethnography of physicality" (see Shakespeare and Watson 1995: 16; see also Shilling 2003), meant to grant us a window into the embodied experience of the visually impaired. These stories are for me and the anthropologist in me, powerful empirical points of reference. Likewise these counternarratives are offered as a kind of excavation of shared stories that can be re-interpreted and re-assembled for meaning, but re-assembled and reconstructed *with* the insights that the narrators and the narratives offer us. Here too, the stories can be taken as prosthetics that we can use in attempting to get inside the students' lived story and experiences of themselves and their 'phenomenal bodies' in the university classrooms. The aim is that, through these counternarratives, we attempt to bring into mainstream discussion, tertiary teaching amongst the visually impaired, and probe how we could rethink the re-integration of their corporeal being within our classes. Teaching the visually impaired very possibly calls for an 'awareness' that can productively disrupt notions of privileging with regard to the differently-abled. Rather, the dominant story about disability shifts to the notion of engendering abelism. And the dominant concern shifts to fully mainstreaming persons with disabilities, in these cases visual impairments, into our classrooms, so that they do not feel exiled or excluded.

METHODOLOGY

Fifty-five (55) blind and partially sighted students made up the sample group. These were students studying from the Humanities and Social Science subjects. This filtering was seen as important as these subjects are assumed to be relatively speaking, less image dependent than subjects such as biology or mathematics, which are more dependent on diagrammatic models and algebraic symbols respectively (see Golledge 1993; Hall et al. 2002; Jones et al. 2006; Chubbuck and Michalinos 2008).

The students were identified through the university disability unit. Informed consent was obtained after carefully explaining the study to them, paying attention to stressing that participation was wholly voluntary and that participation could be withdrawn at any point if they wished. While the researcher conducted the bulk of the interviews, some interviews were conducted by a research assistant, especially when the disability counsellors pointed out that the student might be more comfortable with a fellow student interviewing. As the research assistant was also a tutor in the department, she was able to identify several visually impaired students who were in her tutorials and who were known to her on some level. Once a level of rapport was established with the research assistant, they were invited to further follow up meetings with me which were set up as 'informal conversations'.

While most of the interviews were conducted in the counsellor's rooms at the disability unit, other interviews were conducted in the coffee shop or in lecture theatres, basically any place that the students felt comfortable. In a few instances, upon the request of the participant, the disability counsellor was present at the interviews.

Additionally, the lecturers with experience of teaching the blind and partially sighted, as well as staff at the various Disabilty Units at Howard, Westville and Edgewood campuses were interviewed. Here, two student assistants were used to collect the data and conduct the initial interviewers from these categories of respondents. As both students and staff were usually busy with classes and work, we were cognisant that the interviews could not be inconveniently long. Thus interviews with the disability unit staff and with lecturers were an average of 30 minutes, while interviews with the students averaged 45-60 minutes. The interviews were fluidly constructed and semi structured allowing for the respondents to freely share their experiences. Given this fluid nature of the meetings, there were occasions that respondents were keen on 'sharing', and in these instances amenable to longer interviews. These respondents were given longer times, or follow up meetings.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The '*questioning*' in a significant number of instances, stems from personal questions that

one seeks answers to. In this instance, the questions were *how* body and embodiment shaped and sculpted how we are seen and *how we are meant to be seen by others*. It was also how this embodiment influences how teaching is done, and learning effected. And while teaching and learning happens against a vast canvas of political, ideological, theoretical and pedagogical imperatives and conscriptions and prescriptions, there is of course in ones immediate critical gaze, the *doing* of teaching and the *receiving* of one's teaching, and the facilitating of learning. It was at the level of this 'everyday' that the initial questionings were cast with the students.

As classes and teaching becomes, for many educators, increasingly seduced by multimodal technological enhanced lecture material delivery, many teachers are guilty of forgetting the materiality of the visually impaired students. Feminist pedagogy, *as a praxis*, is the synthesis of self-reflective thought with concrete actions in establishing a collaborative learning environment. However, in large classes, the differently-abled student, the blind and the partially sighted are not always visible, unless he or she sits right in front, under ones nose so to say, and even then constant visual prodding, or repeated sight of the students is needed to keep them in mind for the full period of the lecture. These students become, increasingly excluded and 'disappearing bodies' in the classes. White et al. (2001) assert that many may even pass as being able-bodied. The point they make is that the differently-abled appear before us sometimes 'barely marked' and only 'fuzzily' apparent, with their disabilities not easily discernible. Given our pedagogical commitments, this is of course no reason to be 'blind' to the various communities of students that inhabit the learning spaces, regardless of how small this cohort may be. As classes move increasingly towards technologically innovative teaching aids that use image heavy PowerPoint presentations and podcasts, video footage etc., the visually impaired student becomes further exiled within our classes. The aim of this kind of research is to begin to engage in exploring embodiment, teaching and learning by using insights generated from the students themselves. The endeavour is also to narrow the gaze on how the lecturer may better facilitate, engaged learning amongst this category of differently-abled students, and how to perhaps afford greater agency to the student, *within the classes.*

The epistemologies of the body in educational research, allows us to examine the ways in which the body has been constructed in education and in other pedagogical settings. The key question around which was constructed the vital ancillary questions, was in turn deceptively simple: *How did the blind and partially sighted feel they fit in at class?* Rather than pose the question in a suggestive manner that would tip the vein in which the response would be framed, the students were asked rather to speak about their experiences in classrooms; to what extent they felt that *learning* happened in the classroom, against how much they felt took place afterwards, as they sat and listened to their notes on the recordings. In this way the idea was to delicately prod around their experiences of learning in the classrooms.

Student: "Not enough is done to make us fit in … lecturers don't even know how to communicate with us …how can they hope to teach us … This other day we were sitting in class wearing our glasses and the lecturer asked why we are wearing sunglasses and the whole class laughed at us".

The notion of visibility was something that featured strongly in the stories of the blind and partially sighted students. They felt strongly that they were the *"ones with sight problems"* and *"yet others were blind"* to them. Activists and scholars working in Disability studies talk and write at some length about 'visibility' because disabled people are still not very visible in our culture (see Brueggemann et al. 2001: 368). The point made is that disability is something that often comes under the radar, and is *invisible* in a sense. Certainly the many students interviewed indicated a sense of helplessness and frustration at 'not being seen' and said that they felt disempowered by this experienced invisibility.

Feminist pedagogy seeks student empowerment. Ideally, such pedagogy should empower students through intellectual content as well as through the personal experience (of the students). This in turn underscores a teacher-student partnership in the democratic process of knowledge creation (Blizzard and Foster 2007: 227) Feminist pedagogy as a teaching approach, has to do with 'flattening' out the power differentials between teacher and student, and as such is meant to be less hierarchical, and is often described as student-centered, as opposed to subject or teacher-centered (Blizzard and Fos-

ter 2007: 227). Yet the visually impaired student is rarely sufficiently engaged in class for him/her to become involved enough so that the notion of student-centeredness embraces them. The students' narratives indicated that when the general body of students in the classes were asked questions, they (the visually impaired) were rarely called upon to answer. This was even so in the smaller tutorial classes they claimed. One student summed up the feelings of many others when she said, *"I always try to listen carefully so that I can follow the lectures. Sometimes it works, and sometimes I feel it was just a waste of time going to lectures"*. Such feelings of frustration and *"feeling left out"* speak to intense feelings of liminality, a sense of being present, yet absent, *neither there, nor not there*. *'Liminal'* features fairly popularly in the current lexicon of anthropology, yet only gained popular purchase in the 1960s when much of Van Gennep's work was translated into English (Van Gennep 1960) and many of his theoretical concepts, like' liminal' was adapted by Victor Turner (Turner 1967, Turner 1974) for his analysis of ritual. *Liminal'* as a "sociological useful concept" (Wels et al. 2011) refers to an in-betwixt state, of neither here nor there. I found that this sense of 'liminal' succinctly summed up how many of the students experienced themselves in the classrooms.

Another student echoing these sentiments of the liminal added; *"Partly because when this happens, I feel cheated and left out ... it's like I am in class, but not in class...and so I sometimes lose focus and don't concentrate in class"*. The student continued and shared, *"We try to fit in like every other student. Because we are the same ... the only difference is that we cannot see clearly so they should be able to identify that ... and make us comfortable"*.

The sentence, *"I don't fit in"* was a sustained refrain that featured very often in the narratives. This response and immediacy of experience is highly disconcerting. It has been pointed out that disabled students form a "sizeable and significant, if underrepresented, minority of higher education students" (see Hall et al. 2002: 216). The same study by Hall and his colleagues reveals that there is compelling evidence to indicate the extent of exclusion of disabled people from higher education. The study points out that the exclusion works on several tiers, such as at the level of practically accessing the built environment and spaces of the higher education in-

stitutions. But just as importantly, this exclusion coheres at the level of teaching, learning and assessment experiences and at the level of social experiences (Hall et al. 2002: 219).

Bringing our gaze to such exclusionary social practices and experiences is the comment of a blind first year student who says, *"I don't think there should be a need for us to even ask the lecturers for notes ... or to ask them to ask the class to lower their voices since ...we need to listen to as much detail as possible. It's tough enough to get to class sometimes... not all the venues have access for us... but once there, we struggle to hear, especially in the larger, noisy classes"*.

Student: "I'm a first year student and even though I've been here for a good six full months I don't feel well accommodated... apart from still not knowing my way around the campus. I just wish the lecturers were more understanding, at times I sit and feel like I'm dreaming into space because of the way the lecturer is going on and on drawing on the board almost as if he wants to exclude me or to remind me that I cannot see ..."

Critical theory, according to Sim and Van Loon (2004: 164) is a "principled intervention into political, economic, and cultural practice". It challenges hegemony and "cultural discursive institutions which undergird visible practices of exclusion and misrepresentation" (2004: 164) encouraging an ongoing commitment to the lives implicated in cultural and political practices.

Critical disability theory in turn does not portray persons with disabilities as passive victims, to whom things merely happen, but are beings with agency (see Pothier and Richard 2006: 13). However, context is important to critical disability theory and one cannot but nod agreement with Pothier and Richard (2006: 9) that it is an embodied theory that emerges from the bottom up, from the lived experiences of persons with disabilities and that these lived experiences reference an impoverished learning experience compared to those of their able-bodied peers. Thus, it is not that one wishes to paint the visually impaired respondents in this study as passive victims. The very act of recovering their insider narratives is seen as part of an agentic and empowering process that affords voice to those considered at the margins. This was also the perceptions of many of the participants who shared that they felt empowered in being

able to "*tell*" their stories. Some of the students became even visibly emotional when they spoke about their experiences. Rethinking teaching from the standpoint of different student 'bodies' compels us to ask if they are able to "achieve their learning outcomes" (Hall et al. 2002: 227) in ways that are "inclusive of the diversity" of their bodies.

While the narratives from the students presented might well be seen as *insider* and so prone to be personal experience renditions by the students, that are somewhat over-privileged, we can triangulate the students' experiences by referring to the *'outside in standpoint'*, offered by lecturers teaching the visually impaired (see Finkelstein 1996: 34). Advocates of the *'outside in'* perspective do not deny the importance of direct experience, but argue that, *by itself,* it sometimes falls short of what is required. In this context Finkelstein argues that while the direct experience of disabling barriers from insiders, our students in this case, is important, it has to be located within a coherent analysis (from outside). This *outside* is provided by our responses from the lecturers, as those *outside* the directly lived experience of the students.

Many of the lecturers' narratives speak about a kind of subjective withdrawal of student involvement, or a Goffman-*esque* 'role distance' that speaks to a perceived existential hurt of exclusion that is validated by the students' own narratives. The lecturers' response also gives voice to 'the invisibility of disability'. As counter narratives, shared stories disrupt the received messages about disability that we may have inherited. They challenge us about those we name 'disabled', and they demand reflexive self-critical *asking* of the meaning of *teaching at the margins.*

In answering the challenge, perhaps the most obvious starting point is of course where we can construct visuality for them. One of the partially sighted students interviewed told us, *"It would help... maybe if lecturers can be trained to understand the needs of disabled students... we need things described to us so that we can see them in our head. But I don't think the lecturers know us and our needs. Some of the lecturers we only meet in the classroom, and that's it"*. Likewise many students in the interviews articulated, appealed even, for greater description in the classes. The idea of descriptive classes, cropped up many times from the students *and* from the lecturers who felt that they needed to be more descriptive, in a bid to include the students and not abdicate this responsibility when resorting to Power points and video presentations. Many lecturers *appeared* to know this as something that they needed to work on, *rather than what they were already doing in their classes*.

A lecturer's statement of;
"I think we need to start setting our mindsets into being descriptive and treat each class as if there is or are VI students" finds its counterpart in a student's utterance of; *"Lecturers can use a lot of verbal descriptions and use a lot of real examples from daily life in explaining the concepts, as this will help us understand better"*.

Of course this research was not about how the students learned *outside* the classes, within their private spaces or within the institutionally supported spaces of the Disability Unit, and the technologically supported LAN spaces, with the popular software such as Zoom Text and the reading programme, Jaws. It was about their learning experience in our classrooms while we as teachers were with them, teaching them. And yet it was within the spaces (classrooms) designated as learning spaces, that the students claimed to feel most exiled. Interviews with a secondary sample community of students with other experiences of disability, such as hearing problems and mobility problems, did not articulate the same degree of exile and exclusion that the partially sighted, and most especially the blind, referenced in relationship to the teaching and learning in class. While all the students articulated their varying challenges with negotiating the built environment, nowhere was the sense of exclusion as heightened as it seemed to be for the visually impaired student in the classes. This speaks powerfully to the general sense of non-belonging within the learning community of many disciplinary modules, and much of our classroom teaching. Many students did name the support of the staff and mentors from the disability units and lecturers who afforded them supplementary consultations, and in rare instances, supplementary tutorials. However, there was, for these students a yearning almost, to belong and engage in the classroom teaching.

The average number of differently-abled students for the period 2008-20011, are approximately 300, across all campuses of the University where the study was conducted. On one of the

Campuses, in Humanities, there are approximately 15 blind students and 48 partially sighted, mostly concentrated in the disciplines of Community Development (11) and in Anthropology (10). Rather than these small numbers steering us away from prioritising their needs, it should catalyse us into embracing some of the suggestions that have emerged from amongst the teaching staff (and students) themselves. It is of course not sufficient to point to departmental indices of budget and staffing as indexical realities that allows an abrogation of teaching this category of students. The responses and narratives from the respondents speak to particular notions and simple yet concrete ways of forging pedagogical relationships with this category of students that attempt to *render them more visible* and *more known to us*.

Statements from lecturers indicated that many were aware of the praxis around such simple pedagogical steps, although yet to carry them out. Some lecturers articulated;

"Getting to know and understand them at a personal level is a start, finding out from them how they want us to teach".

Or a lecturer's statement of, *"If you have created a relationship with them it is not possible for you to forget about them".*

Or *"They cope well when they are integrated into mainstream participation. Their own understanding is to be shared also amongst the other students".*

Such statements disrupt authoritative imperatives that tell us that all the answers lie with the teachers, with the student on the receiving end. For often the so called traditional disciplines are claimed as possessing "institutionalized markers of authority and create hierarchies" that are supported by a belief that those with greater "mastery of a disciplinary canon" are the 'experts' (Muñoz et al. 2008: 295). An engaged pedagogy presupposes instead that all members, teachers and students of a learning community-are responsible for classroom dynamics. Recognizing that canonised authority and experience can exclude and silence, the teacher needs to move away from her/his own voice to that of including that of the students'. The 'expert blind spot' hypothesis offers the claim that educators with advanced subject-matter knowledge of a discipline tend to use the powerful foundational organizing principles of a particular discipline as guiding principles for their students' conceptual development and instruction. Such organisational principles about how to pedagogically order disciplinary teaching, shapes how we go about our teaching. Frequently this approach works in isolation to the specific learning needs of particular communities of students, such as the differently-abled (see Golledge 1993; Hall et al. 2002). We can't of course have all the answers to teaching the visually impaired in our classrooms, but *perhaps* the start is to consciously construct pedagogical practices that work at building collaborative relationships between the differently-abled and higher education, at the level of how we meet them in our lecture spaces.

One such initiative would be to see how far we can push the pedagogical envelope within the context of our departments and universities. As a labelled example, universal design education is larger than a single pedagogical approach, where education is grounded in a belief that intellectuality is heterogeneous. To this we can add that bodies are equally heterogeneous, yet all demanding and deserving equitable access (to education and intellectuality). It is the focus on this sense of heterogeneous and the accompanying belief in full inclusion, that universal design education and feminist pedagogy find a shared goal. Both approaches advocate the practice of educating at the margins, where the least empowered students may *benefit at the same time that all are educated*. By applying this core strategy from universal design and feminist pedagogy, we can possibly strive to create what is termed the 'riskable classroom' in which students are encouraged to face their fears and limitations, while at the same time promoting a healthy and supportive space for learning. This, 'riskable classroom' a concept put forward by Deborah Blizzard and Susan Foster (2007: 227) offers an exciting pedagogic praxis. The 'riskable classroom' is seen as a safe space where we as teachers, are encouraged to confront and face our own fears of *doing new ways of teaching.* This pedagogical approach is about creating 'curb cuts' in the classroom. Said otherwise, curb cuts are ramp-ways designed primarily for wheelchairs, but able to be used by all (Blizzard and Foster 2007: 226). Underlying these principles is the theory that by creating an environment that is accessible to students with varying special needs, the teacher will create a classroom that is more *accessible to all students* (Blizzard and Foster 2007: 226).

Curb cuts become imperative as the privileging of the 'visual' renders other bodily capacities relatively less important, and this, according to Hall (Hall et al. 2002: 218) constitutes a form of disembodiment and renders other ways of knowing somewhat less important. To move beyond the 'invisibility' of differently-abled person, is to disrupt and debunk concepts of 'normalcy' and 'ideal bodies' in the classroom (Brueggemann et al. 2001: 382) and to disrupt the (established) binaries of 'abled' and 'disabled'.

CONCLUSION

The epistemological and methodological bases of the social and natural sciences are unfortunately characterized by a naturalized hegemony of the 'visual' over that of the other senses. As one student shared in emotional terms, *"Our inability to see does not mean we are a hopeless case, it does not mean an inability to learn"*. The disability counter-narratives offered by the visually impaired students in the study lay bare an immediacy of social experience around learning, that brings to our critical gaze, how body and education become entwined in ways that pedagogically exclude and render us blind to the learning of particular categories of students. As strong counter-narratives however, they also offer powerful empirical reference points of how we can begin to excavate and attempt to construct a more productive pedagogy that seeks to render these students more visible to us.

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