

Center for Instructional Development and Research

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Information for People who Teach
at the University of Washington

Including Disability as Diversity in Teaching

"But here, in the blind leading the blind, lies a powerful enabling metaphor. Disability can create knowledge, open doors wider, build ramps to awareness that we all essentially have in us anyway. This happens when any body leads anybody" (Brueggemann, 2001, p. 800).

While the idea of the blind leading the blind is often equated with futility, in the quote above, Brenda Brueggemann argues that the insight of disability can lead us to rethink our classrooms in ways that benefit all students and instructors. Disability is already in our lives and in our classrooms, and including disability as diversity in teaching means creating an accessible teaching environment where all students can succeed.

RETHINKING DISABILITY

Including disability as diversity begins by reconsidering what disability is:

- Disability has social, political, and historical features, and in this sense is like racial and gendered identities. Disability is *not* simply a medical trait or something that needs "fixing."
- Disability is about how bodies interact with existing environments. Some people with disabilities consider their major obstacles to be discrimination and being regarded as objects of pity and charity.
- Disability brings attention to the bodies we all live in. With 49.7 million people living with disabilities in the U.S., nearly everyone has some "connection" to disability. It's a minority group that anyone might join at any time.
- The National Council on Education notes that nearly 10% of college freshmen have a disability. Many such students have "invisible" disabilities, such as learning disabilities.

WHY RETHINK DISABILITY IN THE CLASSROOM?

The relationship of disability and the classroom has often been about what's "required" – and it is true that if a student enters your class with a letter from Disability Resource Services, you are required to accommodate the student. However, thinking ahead about all the different sorts of bodies and abilities that will be in your class leads to an *inclusive pedagogy that enables all students*.

ENABLING YOUR PEDAGOGY FOR ALL STUDENTS

- **Plan ahead to make your course accessible.** Work to have syllabi and course readers ready before class begins. Also, make sure course websites are accessible. See: <http://www.washington.edu/accessibility/>
- **Set the tone on the first day and in your syllabus** by communicating that all students are welcome in the course and taken seriously as learners.

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- **Plan assignments so that students can work toward the same goal in different ways.** All students don't need to do the same activity in order to reach a particular learning goal. Having students approach the material or assignment in different ways can lead to productive class discussions where students can teach each other.
- **Use multiple formats for instruction.** Students learn in different ways, and utilizing oral, verbal, textual, and kinesthetic means is key for stimulating and including all students. Try to overlap approaches; for example, make outlines available for lectures, provide opportunities for electronic interaction, and orally explain all printed assignments. All students will appreciate it.
- **Speak at a moderate pace for interpreters.** A moderate pace can benefit all students' comprehension.
- **Include disability studies in your curriculum.** Bringing disability studies into the curriculum is a great way to make disability a natural part of your classroom. See the website (below) for more details!

DISABILITY RESOURCES (A SHORT LIST)

Additional resources and implications for teaching:

<http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/resources/disabilitystudies.html>

Disability Studies Minor at the UW:

<http://depts.washington.edu/disstud/>

Self-guided web tutorials for instructors:

<http://www.washington.edu/doi/Faculty/>

Beyond Compliance (Information on the Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education):

http://soeweb.syr.edu/thechp/bccc_package.html

This issue of the Bulletin was developed by Amy Vidali, doctoral candidate in English at UW.

Work Cited: Brueggemann, B.J. (2001). An Enabling Pedagogy: Meditations on Writing and Disability. *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 21(4), 791-820.



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CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu, or visit our web site:

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