Conference on Disability Studies and the University

Introduction

"THE WHOLE EARTH IS OUR HOSPITAL," T. S. ELIOT WROTE IN "EAST Coker," displaying a sense of exaggeration fit for the weary generation of the interwar period. For people with disabilities, however, Eliot's words read not as hyperbole but as a lament aimed at the difficulty of persuading others not to view us only and always as medical patients. The world as hospital is a powerful metaphor, but disabled people often complain that this metaphor is their reality, reinforced by the authority of a paternalistic medical establishment and its stigmatization of disability, because it is nearly impossible to escape the medicalizing gaze of those around us. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 challenged the seemingly compulsory medicalization of people with disabilities and threw open the doors of the hospital. It states that we can no longer be classified as defective citizens because of our impairments, that reasonable efforts have to be made to accommodate our bodies and minds, that we have the right to leave the hospital and to travel the earth.

People with disabilities are on the move, thanks to the ADA, and one place in particular to which we are on the move is the university. The Conference on Disability Studies and the University, sponsored by the MLA and Emory University, conceived itself as a response to the historical migration of disabled people to centers of higher learning. After years of being probed and studied, disabled people have begun themselves to probe and study. The last ten years have seen the emergence of programs and courses in disability studies at the University of California, Berkeley and Los Angeles; the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa; Hofstra University; the University of Illinois, Chicago; the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and Flint; Syracuse University; the

© 2005 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X52347 Published online by Cambridge University Press

University of Toledo; and the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Every one of these programs relies heavily on the humanities to guide its mission, curriculum, and theoretical orientation. The alliance between disability studies and the humanities shifts emphasis from a medical context that seeks to classify and cure individual impairments to a new context that exposes the ways in which impairment has been constructed, stigmatized, and embodied in human beings whose relation to disability and nondisability is often arbitrary. Disability is no longer a matter exclusively of medical science or applied fields such as physical or occupational therapy. The emerging field of disability studies provides a critical framework that reorients the basic assumptions of various fields of knowledge, from political science to architecture, from engineering to art history, from genetics to law, from biology to poetry, from public policy to education.

The arrival of people with disabilities and of disability studies at the university is challenging ideas about how people learn and teach. Disability studies views disabled people not as objects of study but as knowledge producers whose common history has generated a wide variety of art, music, literature, and science. It is obligatory that the university as an institution respond to the presence of disabled students, staff members, and teachers if it is to benefit from their knowledge about the world. The conference framed this response in two ways. First, the participants asked, What have we learned about disability? with the expressed purpose of achieving greater literacy among students, teachers, and administrators about how people with disabilities live and learn. What are the major stereotypes by which disability is misunderstood? Are there paradigms of diversity that might facilitate access to the university and accommodate the needs of disabled students, staff members, and teachers? Increased literacy about disability is mandatory if people with disabilities are to feel welcome in institutions of higher education. Second, the conference participants asked a question that reverses the challenge usually posed by disability: What has disability studies taught us about learning? Disabled students are not obstacles in the classroom. They have as much to teach the academy about learning as it has to teach them. Their teaching is not limited to revising ideas about the organization of classrooms and the habits of learning or to requiring the modification of curriculum and canons of study, although these changes are necessary. Disability studies reconsiders the epistemology, language, and symbolic networks by which we define the transmission and construction of knowledge. If ability is socially and symbolically produced in the manner of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, then we can no longer conceive of disability as individual physical or mental defect. The defect is located in the environments, institutions, languages, and paradigms of knowledge made inaccessible to people with disabilities, and we have a responsibility to remove it.

The MLA has been in the forefront of efforts in the humanities to make the environment of higher education more accessible to people with disabilities and to give the new field of disability studies an academic home in the university curriculum. Formed in 1995, the MLA's Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession (CDI) was charged with "considering the needs and interests of scholars who have disabilities and with addressing issues of accessibility at the convention." The CDI implemented accessibility guidelines for the MLA's national and regional conferences and utilized new electronic and print technologies to make *PMLA* and its international bibliography readable for sight-impaired members. In 2002 the MLA published the first overview of scholarship in the field, *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, edited by Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. The momentum generated by this volume and by the publication of other books and articles on disability issues in the

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X52347 Published online by Cambridge University Press

profession motivated the CDI, with the encouragement of the then executive director, Phyllis Franklin, to plan a national event that would explore the specific implications of disability studies at the university.

The goals of the conference were three: to introduce disability studies as a new, interdisciplinary field; to address the impact that disability studies might have on curriculum and pedagogy; and to explore new developments in electronic technology, distance learning, and media that benefit students and staff and faculty members with disabilities. The participants at the conference included scholars and students in the humanities, but a special attempt was made to invite administrators, human resources personnel, and public policy experts often responsible for creating disability awareness on college campuses. Conference participants considered how disability may be studied in the humanities classroom (the representation of disabled characters in literature and the philosophical and political meanings of disability), how disability challenges traditional pedagogical protocols, and how students with disabilities can achieve greater knowledge about and access to the university at large. The conference combined plenary sessions on general topics and breakout seminars on narrower topics to give newcomers to the field a sense of the pertinence of disability studies and to show scholars already working in the field how their research might connect better to the institutional needs of disabled students.

As the first national conference on disability organized by the MLA, the event had to be pervaded by the spirit of accessibility. We wanted to create a safe space that was physically and intellectually accessible to everyone, where new and different ideas might be engendered and expressed. The planning committee, consisting of G. Thomas Couser (chair), Michael Davidson, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Cindy LaCom, Simi Linton, Carol Padden, and Tobin Siebers, worked closely with the Emory Conference Center and with the MLA executive director, Rosemary G. Feal, and director of convention programs, Maribeth T. Kraus, to ensure that participants would encounter few barriers at the conference. Although there were some difficulties with physical layout and sign-language interpretation, the conference center became a nearly ideal environment for accessible learning. Its spacious meeting rooms and guest lodgings were wheelchair-accessible, and extensive technological resources made possible state-of-the-art communication among participants. All sessions had American Sign Language interpreters, video displays, and real-time captioning, and times between sessions were lengthened to allow persons with mobility impairments ample opportunity to move from place to place. Two events in particular came to symbolize the spirit of accessibility at the conference. First, the historian Paul Longmore presented his paper and responded to questions via a two-way teleconferencing link between Atlanta and San Francisco. Second, Homer Avila, the nationally celebrated modern dancer, who had lost a leg to the cancer that would soon take his life, gave a final and stunning performance at the plenary event on Saturday evening. Participants were also fortunate to hear from distinguished disability advocates in public policy, including the legal scholar Harriet McBryde Johnson; the president of Gallaudet University, I. King Jordan; and a former commissioner of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Paul Steven Miller, as well as from many artists and performers, notably the painter Riva Lehrer, the performance artist Carrie Sandahl, and the deaf performance group Flying Words Project.

The conference made clear the contribution of the humanities to the evolution of disability studies, although many participants came from allied fields in history, psychology, legal studies, and the social sciences. In plenary papers, Paul Longmore focused on celebrity telethons, and Sander Gilman surveyed attitudes toward obesity. Carol Padden dis-

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X52347 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cussed the links—and differences—between people with disabilities and the Deaf community, stressing the problematic meanings of "voice" in the new cybernetic environment. Several workshops dealt with the implications of disability in the academy—from creating readable student-service publications to forming disability programs. In a number of papers, the connections between disability and other disciplines offered an opportunity to expand the concept of identity politics, as in Robert McRuer's discussion of queer and crip theories or in Simi Linton's, Michael Bérubé's, and Lennard Davis's plenary talks. The breakout sessions allowed participants to deal with curricular and pedagogical issues relating to incorporating disability into the literature classroom (Diane Price Herndl), to teaching life writing (G. Thomas Couser, Anne Finger, Georgina Kleege), and to forming a disability studies program (James Ferris, Susan Schweik, Sharon Snyder). As often happens, conversation spilled over after the sessions into the hallways and foyers of the conference center, prompting the participants to debate crucial questions. How does the disability community name itself and its central concerns? What is unique about these concerns, and how do they relate to those of other minority groups? How have people with disabilities been represented in the past, and how would they like to be represented in the future?

The papers collected in this *PMLA* conference report are meant to provide a glimpse of future directions in the ongoing and evolving collaboration between disability studies and the humanities. In fact, the conference has already sparked new activities in disability studies. Participants brought together by the event made plans for sharing resources among academic institutions in close proximity, and some of these plans are going forward. The conference was also the backdrop for at least one documentary film: Sharon Snyder's *Self-Presentation: The Art of Riva Lehrer*, now in distribution, richly visualizes the energy and feelings experienced by everyone at the event. May the spirit of the conference live on in this collection, serving as a call to the membership to emulate at their own institutions the pathbreaking efforts of the MLA to welcome disabled people and disability studies to the university and to make learning universally accessible. Then might all students and teachers dedicated to higher learning declare without exaggeration, "The whole earth is our university."

Michael Davidson
University of California, San Diego
Tobin Siebers
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Acknowledgments

THE IDEA FOR THE CONFERENCE ON DISABILITY Studies and the University had its origins in the work carried out by the Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession during Phyllis Franklin's executive directorship. It was a privilege to help bring the idea to fruition with the enthusiastic collaboration of the conference planning committee, the Executive Council, and Emory University faculty members and administrators. For more information about the Committee on Disability Issues in the Profession, please visit the MLA's Web site. In the following pages, summaries are provided for three presentations for which texts were not available.

Rosemary G. Feal
Executive Director, MLA

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081205X52347 Published online by Cambridge University Press