The Future of Disability in the Classroom

Section 504 applies to students with severe disabilities. Fifty-three percent of Americans, or 199 million, are between the ages of 21 and 64. As educators, it is essential to be aware of various forms of discrimination as they pertain to equal opportunity for diverse groups, especially those groups that have been historically marginalized. As teachers in the classroom, we need to uphold equitable standards of access for people with disabilities. Students with severe disabilities that have been historically marginalized may be less likely to understand, practically speaking, the demographics of the Annual Meeting, the distance between sessions and conference hotels, and the accessibility of presentations made during the AAR sessions. In addition to taking up the question of how best to provide suitable accommodations for students with disabilities, the Task Force also drew attention to the importance of (a) recognizing religion and disability studies as a subdiscipline within religious studies that deserve to be treated as a distinct and legitimate area of academic inquiry, and (b) providing faculty with useful information and practical guidelines on teaching students with learning disabilities. Some practical issues discussed in the following articles include: What are faculty’s legal obligations and what on-campus services are available to assist them in responding optimally to their students with disabilities? What challenges do faculty who are themselves hearing impaired or who have a chronic illness face when teaching or leading classroom discussions? What are the challenges of conveying subject matter saturated with sense-dependent metaphors and visual imagery (iconography, ritual, music) to visually or hearing-impaired students? Are students who have a visual impairment automatically discouraged from pursuing advanced study that would require them to learn Hebrew, Latin, or Arabic? What classroom and career-related practices inadvertently favor the able-bodied? Intimately linked to the pragmatic questions of properly accommodating persons with disabilities is the task of critiquing cultural and religiously mediated constructions of disability that underlie the manifold exclusions of social, educational, and institutional practice. For calling the attention of our readership to disability studies, both in terms of teaching pedagogy and as a legitimate subdiscipline, thanks are due to the guest editor of this issue, Kerry Wynn, who chairs the Task Force on Religion and Disability, as well as to the members of the Task Force and the individual contributors.
Integrating Disability in Religious Studies and Theological Education

Nancy L. Eiesland, Emory University

D

ISABILITY IS everywhere once you know how to look for it. The challenge for those who study religion and theology has been to develop constructed frameworks for analyzing practices, and pedagogical awareness that investigate disability’s presence, rather than perpetuate the systems of nonvisibility within our work. Disability has been clearly present in our own lives, the lives of students and co-religionists, and sacred texts, and social context. Yet until relatively recently, it has not been explicitly incorporated into our religious and professional identities, theories, or descriptions of religion.

Increasingly scholars in religion and theology are creating and adapting new theories about disability within our teaching, research, and professional identities. The emergence of this focus has been accompanied by a growing, spontaneous enlightenment — it has been people with disabilities who have brought these questions to the fore. Just as the presence of women in the classroom and profession has challenged assumptions of gender norms, people with disabilities, ever more present in our educational and religious contexts, have illuminated workings of disability systems. (My use of the term “disability system” draws on and extends that of Rose Marie Garrett-Thomson [2002].) Scholars with disabilities are using their own lives to examine the taken-for-granted symbols and sacred texts of our work. Students with disabilities come to classes with normalized accommodations and commercial facilities. People with disabilities were educated under its provisions, radically altering the social opportunity shape how a person experiences his or her own disability. This approach allows us to reinterpret disability so that it is not only about people with disabilities, but rather a systemic means for scaling bodies in society. Understanding disability systems necessitates a careful and full account of the multiple and sometimes contradictory roles of religions and theologies in creating, sustaining, and undermining them. Too frequently these accounts of religious and moral meaning of disability have been missing.

Historizing the emergence of disability as a focus of intellectual inquiry highlights the fact that the elements that continue to inform us today — as we work toward making disability fully present in religious studies and theological education. First, students with disabilities on our campuses and in our classrooms necessarily raise basic issues about the adequacy of our pedagogical practices, our built environment, and our social arrangements. Second, attention to the systemic treatment of people with disabilities at the “speaking center” — individually and collectively as subjects of their own expert assignment to institutional action. Third, definitions and frameworks of disability need to elucidate the dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, political, and biological factors. While the disability system is understood to be different things in different places, it always functions to scale bodies and provide moral valuations to those differences. A systematic approach permits a willingness to reevaluate our religious practices, theories, and descriptions in light of the disability system at work in them.

Disability studies in religion is, thus, not simply about a religious reference text, but rather about any effort to incorporate students with disabilities into the content and structure of a religion or theology class. Integrating disability studies into religious studies research means broadening our collective inquiry and questioning our assumptions. Today’s students are an integral part of the study of religion and theology. As one of the founding co-chairs of the AAR’s Religion and Disability in Education Section, I have seen the exciting genesis of scholarship in this area. Religious and theological studies are not simply recipients of new ideas generated elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, but are contributing new ideas about how myths of origin and theologies in creating, sustaining, and undermining them. Too frequently these accounts of religious and moral meaning of disability have been missing.

Historizing the emergence of disability as a focus of intellectual inquiry highlights the fact that the elements that continue to inform us today — as we work toward making disability fully present in religious studies and theological education. First, students with disabilities on our campuses and in our classrooms necessarily raise basic issues about the adequacy of our pedagogical practices, our built environment, and our social arrangements. Second, attention to the systemic treatment of people with disabilities at the “speaking center” — individually and collectively as subjects of their own expert assignment to institutional action. Third, definitions and frameworks of disability need to elucidate the dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, political, and biological factors. While the disability system is understood to be different things in different places, it always functions to scale bodies and provide moral valuations to those differences. A systematic approach permits a willingness to reevaluate our religious practices, theories, and descriptions in light of the disability system at work in them.

Disability studies in religion is, thus, not simply about a religious reference text, but rather about any effort to incorporate students with disabilities into the content and structure of a religion or theology class. Integrating disability studies into religious studies research means broadening our collective inquiry and questioning our assumptions. Today’s students are an integral part of the study of religion and theology. As one of the founding co-chairs of the AAR’s Religion and Disability in Education Section, I have seen the exciting genesis of scholarship in this area. Religious and theological studies are not simply recipients of new ideas generated elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, but are contributing new ideas about how myths of origin and theologies in creating, sustaining, and undermining them. Too frequently these accounts of religious and moral meaning of disability have been missing.

Historizing the emergence of disability as a focus of intellectual inquiry highlights the fact that the elements that continue to inform us today — as we work toward making disability fully present in religious studies and theological education. First, students with disabilities on our campuses and in our classrooms necessarily raise basic issues about the adequacy of our pedagogical practices, our built environment, and our social arrangements. Second, attention to the systemic treatment of people with disabilities at the “speaking center” — individually and collectively as subjects of their own expert assignment to institutional action. Third, definitions and frameworks of disability need to elucidate the dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, political, and biological factors. While the disability system is understood to be different things in different places, it always functions to scale bodies and provide moral valuations to those differences. A systematic approach permits a willingness to reevaluate our religious practices, theories, and descriptions in light of the disability system at work in them.

Disability studies in religion is, thus, not simply about a religious reference text, but rather about any effort to incorporate students with disabilities into the content and structure of a religion or theology class. Integrating disability studies into religious studies research means broadening our collective inquiry and questioning our assumptions. Today’s students are an integral part of the study of religion and theology. As one of the founding co-chairs of the AAR’s Religion and Disability in Education Section, I have seen the exciting genesis of scholarship in this area. Religious and theological studies are not simply recipients of new ideas generated elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, but are contributing new ideas about how myths of origin and theologies in creating, sustaining, and undermining them. Too frequently these accounts of religious and moral meaning of disability have been missing.

Historizing the emergence of disability as a focus of intellectual inquiry highlights the fact that the elements that continue to inform us today — as we work toward making disability fully present in religious studies and theological education. First, students with disabilities on our campuses and in our classrooms necessarily raise basic issues about the adequacy of our pedagogical practices, our built environment, and our social arrangements. Second, attention to the systemic treatment of people with disabilities at the “speaking center” — individually and collectively as subjects of their own expert assignment to institutional action. Third, definitions and frameworks of disability need to elucidate the dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, political, and biological factors. While the disability system is understood to be different things in different places, it always functions to scale bodies and provide moral valuations to those differences. A systematic approach permits a willingness to reevaluate our religious practices, theories, and descriptions in light of the disability system at work in them.

Disability studies in religion is, thus, not simply about a religious reference text, but rather about any effort to incorporate students with disabilities into the content and structure of a religion or theology class. Integrating disability studies into religious studies research means broadening our collective inquiry and questioning our assumptions. Today’s students are an integral part of the study of religion and theology. As one of the founding co-chairs of the AAR’s Religion and Disability in Education Section, I have seen the exciting genesis of scholarship in this area. Religious and theological studies are not simply recipients of new ideas generated elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, but are contributing new ideas about how myths of origin and theologies in creating, sustaining, and undermining them. Too frequently these accounts of religious and moral meaning of disability have been missing.

Historizing the emergence of disability as a focus of intellectual inquiry highlights the fact that the elements that continue to inform us today — as we work toward making disability fully present in religious studies and theological education. First, students with disabilities on our campuses and in our classrooms necessarily raise basic issues about the adequacy of our pedagogical practices, our built environment, and our social arrangements. Second, attention to the systemic treatment of people with disabilities at the “speaking center” — individually and collectively as subjects of their own expert assignment to institutional action. Third, definitions and frameworks of disability need to elucidate the dynamic interplay of cultural, economic, political, and biological factors. While the disability system is understood to be different things in different places, it always functions to scale bodies and provide moral valuations to those differences. A systematic approach permits a willingness to reevaluate our religious practices, theories, and descriptions in light of the disability system at work in them.

Disability studies in religion is, thus, not simply about a religious reference text, but rather about any effort to incorporate students with disabilities into the content and structure of a religion or theology class. Integrating disability studies into religious studies research means broadening our collective inquiry and questioning our assumptions. Today’s students are an integral part of the study of religion and theology. As one of the founding co-chairs of the AAR’s Religion and Disability in Education Section, I have seen the exciting genesis of scholarship in this area. Religious and theological studies are not simply recipients of new ideas generated elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences, but are contributing new ideas about how myths of origin and theologies in creating, sustaining, and undermining them. Too frequently these accounts of religious and moral meaning of disability have been missing.
Disability Law and the Classroom

F. Rachel Magdalene, Appalachian State University

TWO IMPORTANT PIECES of legislation protect the rights of persons with disabilities and seek to provide equal access to higher education: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Section 504 applies to all schools that receive any federal financial assistance. Virtually all colleges and universities, whether public or private, fall under this law. The ADA regulates public educational institutions, including state universities and community colleges. Together, these acts control a significant number of institutions. In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE, n.d.) reported that these laws covered approximately 4,100 colleges and universities.

Because of the enactment of these laws, postsecondary educational institutions have experienced rapid growth in their populations of persons with disabilities. The DOE (1998) has reported that, between 1978 and 1996, the percentage of full-time first-year students declaring a disability increased from 2.6 to 9. The percentage of students with a disability declaring a learning disability rose from 15 to 35 (ibid.). It is highly likely that every professor will find persons with disabilities in his or her classroom at some point. Consequently, understanding these laws is imperative for faculty members in higher education. This article will discuss briefly the scope of these acts and their impact on teaching.

The substantive provisions of Section 504 and the ADA are similar in a number of respects. The point of these laws is to provide equal access to higher education: “A qualified person with a disability shall not, by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” N.d. (accessed July 28, 2004).

The institution must provide, upon request, auxiliary aids, benefits, or services to a student with disabilities if failure to provide such items would result in a denial of access to any program benefit.

The determination of what will be an effective accommodation depends on a cooperative effort between the student and the institution. Such effectiveness must be determined on an individual basis and in the specific context in which the student will use it. For instance, what the student needs in a large lecture hall may be different from what is needed in a small laboratory. Accommodations may also require making appropriate academic modifications for the student. This can be the most difficult type of accommodation for a faculty member to make. No teacher is required to lower, or make substantial modifications to, the essential requirements of the course. Questions may arise, however, regarding what is essential. Furthermore, certain adaptations to assessment tools may be fitting. The DOE (1998) states: “A test should ultimately measure a student’s achievements and not the extent of the disability.” Substitution of a more helpful assessment tool is permissible and often most appropriate. Faculty might wish to employ a variety of assessment tools in a class to identify that no particular academic strength or weakness becomes the entire basis for a student’s grade.

Occasionally, faculty object to the use of provided accommodations on grounds unrelated to the disability, such as the use of a tape recorder because it may infringe on a copyright or the free speech of those in the classroom. The laws demand, in this instance, that the professor allow the tool. The institution may oblige the student, however, to act in such a way as to protect the rights of others, such as by signing a copyright protection agreement.

Both Section 504 and the ADA place the burden on the student to obtain a diagnosis of the disability and to give notice to the institution concerning the disability. The school has no responsibility to identify students who need assistance; its duty is only to inform students as to the availability of services generally and provide the name of a contact person. Furthermore, an institution may not make a pre-admission inquiry concerning a student’s disabilities.

When admission, however, the school is free, if it so chooses, to make confidential inquiries in order to ascertain what services might be needed. Nonetheless, the school has the fundamental responsibility to self-identify. Documentation of the disability is required. Often, schools will reject documentation that is more than three years old for conditions that are subject to change. A student may give notice to Disability Student Services (DDS), an appropriate dean, the student’s advisor, or a professor. A notified professor should contact DDS and encourage the student to do the same.

Once the student provides documentation, he or she must assist the school in identifying the appropriate auxiliary aids. This may include supplying a prescription from a qualified professional as to the proper accommodation. The school may help, however, to secure its own professional determination regarding the need for specific requested aids and services. Sometimes, a student does not realize that he or she may be, or is, a person with a disability in need of accommodation, the provisions of the acts apply. The presumption is that the student requires the accommodation, which should be provided until such time as it is determined that the student is not in, or in need.

Generally, making accommodations for students without involving DDS is ill-advised. First, DDS may ultimately determine that the student does not have a legitimate request. Second, either under- or overaccommodating the student can be detrimental to his or her ultimate success. The DDS professionals are experienced in finding the right accommodation.

Hidden disabilities often go undiagnosed. Faculty members are well situated to notice certain learning disabilities and may come to suspect that a student, who has not declared him- or herself to be a person with a disability, in fact has a disability. The law allows professors to approach the student. Breeching the subject, however, is a delicate issue. Many students know that they have a disability but choose not to identify themselves for various reasons — including a fear of discrimination. Others simply are unaware, and the news might not be welcome. Consequently, if the faculty member chooses to approach the student, he or she should do it sensitively. At times, a student provides an excellent opportunity to raise the subject when they come in for academic assistance or to have a deadline postponed. Nonetheless, one may feel free to enlist the aid of DDS before one makes contact.

Faculty members are on the front line of compliance with Section 504 and the ADA. Knowing the school’s legal obligations toward students with disabilities can assist faculty in giving such students a positive academic experience.

References


May 2005 AAR RSV • iii
Accommodating Disability in the Classroom

Kerry H. Wynn, Southeast Missouri State University
Guest Editor

Remember that you are not alone. Accommodating students with disabilities is a three-part team effort: the student is the expert on their experience with disability, you are the expert on your course; and the disabled student services personnel provide expertise on how to bridge the gap between your course and the student’s learning potential. Depending on the size of your institution, this third party may range in size from a multistaff unit to a faculty member who has taken on the responsibility of learning how to accommodate students with disabilities. Whoever has this responsibility should obtain the proper education on disability law, disability documentation and interpretation, and the appropriate accommodations for particular disabilities.

Disabled student service staff are your friends. They provide the expertise to collect and interpret documentation, to identify diagnoses and the appropriate accommodations, and to make sure that what is required and not required under disability law so that faculty members do not have to determine these issues for themselves. Professionals in Disabled Student Services (DSS) are as committed as faculty to insuring that academic integrity is not compromised. They know that to compromise academic rigor is to compromise the student’s education. Their job is to make sure that students with disabilities have access to the same quality of education as that received by nondisabled students. DSS professionals do not try to second-guess students or students with disabilities — they try to make sure that students with disabilities have equal access to opportunities for both success and failure.

All three partners should be involved in the accommodation process. You should know who is responsible for DSS on your campus. If a student comes to you with a request for accommodation and you are not familiar with the services provided by the DSS staff, you should refer the student to DSS to register for services. The student will be required to provide the appropriate documentation from the appropriate diagnostic professionals to verify the disability. This is in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. If you believe there is an actual disability and that the accommodations given are appropriate without compromising your course.

The minimal involvement by the three partners would entail what we might call the “cookbook” approach to accommodation. In this scenario the student provides documentation and registers with DSS, which then determines what the standard accommodations for the disability are in order to meet the student’s needs while insuring compliance with disability law. The faculty member is required and not required under disability law so that faculty members might announce to the class that you have a student with a disability who needs a note-taker. When a volunteer is found, you can ask them to stay after class for a moment then identify and introduce the others to the student for whom you will be taking notes. DSS should provide photocopy services or NCR (noncarbon reproduction) pads for notetakers.

Some accommodations will require cooperation between faculty, student, and DSS staff. The use of an Assistive Listening Device (ALD) is one example. An ALD is a closed FM radio system that broadcasts directly from the instructor to the student. DSS will need to provide the equipment, while the student must wear the receiver and the faculty member must wear the transmitter and the microphone. If a class is discussion-oriented, the instructor should talk to DSS about providing a conference microphone for the ALD system. DSS should provide CART and interpreter services. The faculty should talk to these professionals about the best way to work together. However, when talking to the student, the instructor should always address the student, never the interpreter.

Other accommodations will lie solely with the instructor. In today’s technologically sophisticated world these include such things as enlarged handouts and copies of overheads used in class. E-mail attachments can provide electronically formatted materials that a student can access through their own assistive technology. Accommodations can be as simple as allowing a student to tape record lectures. In any case, taped lectures is an accommodation guaranteed by law. If you have a problem with students retaining tapes of lectures, you can negotiate providing the tapes for the students on the condition that they return the tapes to you at the end of the term. Some accommodations may not be listed but will enhance the classroom experience. These include facing the students rather than the chalkboard when talking. When using audiovisual equipment in a darkened room, it is good to remember that students who need lip will require that a speaker’s face be lit, while students with visual impairments may require copies of materials in alternate formats. Remember that even when a accommodation is the responsibility of the faculty member, the DSS staff is available to advise you on how best to meet it.

Faculty who are committed to teaching, however, will want to move beyond this basic cookbook method. They will want to engage all three partners in designing accommodations that will enhance the learning experience for their specific course. The accommodation list provided by DSS should be considered as minimal. After all, if you can serve your specific classroom situation may be substituted on consultation with the student. Situations unique to a course can be identified and addressed. The DSS staff is available to assist in brainstorming how to address unique learning opportunities, and they have access to an extended professional community as well. DSS professionals are usually affiliated with the National Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), which publishes numerous resource materials and manages the Disability Student Services in Higher Education (DSSHE-L), a list server that provides an ongoing dialogue via e-mail for DSS staff. DSSHE-L also provides an archive of all communications on the list. Topics that have been discussed in the past include how to accommodate biblical languages such as Greek and Hebrew for students with visual and learning disabilities.

While faculty should feel confident in being creative and innovative in providing accommodations, I would offer one word of caution: Remember that you are in the position of power. Students tend to be agreeable with those who hold power over them. They may agree to less-than-appropriate accommodations simply because you are the instructor. This does not mean that they will refrain from charging you with inadequate accommodation if they are not satisfied with the final results. The student must feel that an accommodation is appropriate. It would be advisable for you to discuss your innovations with the DSS staff. Again, DSS assist the faculty as well as the student.

The latest school of thought emerging in DSS is “Universal Instructional Design” (UID), UID advocates building diverse ways of addressing various learning styles and disabilities into the structure of the curriculum. It is hoped that as the best teaching methods for addressing diverse learners are incorporated into the classroom, accommodation will be part of the natural structure of the education process. As faculty become more comfortable with addressing diverse learners, they will become more confident in accommodating students with disabilities.
A Student’s Perspective on the Accessible Classroom

Kirk VanGilder, Boston University

The MOST ACCESSIBLE classroom I have encountered as a deaf student in both my MDIV and TTD programs have been those which employ a pedagogy that honors the presence of everyone. As simple as this sounds in principle, the practice of good, inclusive pedagogy is often one of the more complex aspects of teaching. Many professors approach accessibility in the classroom by expressing a desire for clear-cut lists of “dos and don’ts.” When a deaf student is in your classroom, do lecture normally; the interpreters will translate what you are saying. Don’t talk to the interpreters when you mean to address the student. Do repeat things when the interpreter asks, because classroom chances are half the class could benefit from this as well. Don’t stand between the deaf student and the interpreters; they need to see each other. As helpful as these hints are, you will vary from student to student depending on their particular abilities and learning styles. The effort to make accessible classroom cannot be reduced to “helpful hints for professors” any more than theological education can be reduced to “helpful hints for pastors.” Instead, the very act of making your classroom accessible must entail a transformation of what it means to teach and create an atmosphere of learning. This atmosphere for learning will involve the formation of practices which honor the presence of everyone. These practices and can help you to shape the atmosphere of learning. You must help your students to understand that communication and learning takes place. It should also challenge each participant to expand their understanding of the nature of communication and learning. This atmosphere becomes a radically inclusive and liberating atmosphere that allows for students of a variety of abilities and experiences to actively learn and contribute to the scholarly discourse.

Presence and Perception in the Classroom

In my own case, my presence often disrupts the status quo of a regular classroom. Although this may stem from my tendency to be an outspoken participant in classroom discussion, it also results from the presence of two other individuals who translate everything being said into American Sign Language (ASL). The presence of interpreters makes it possible for me to be myself and participate fully in the learning experience. In addition, my self-conception of myself is often shaped by views internal to the general assumptions a hearing professor has of what it means to be “deaf.” I see myself as a member of a culturally diverse community and culture of deaf people, as well as a user of a minority language — American Sign Language (ASL). This articulation of being in the world is often eliding, disabled, etc., studies by capitalizing the word “Deaf” when speaking of a cultural understanding, and, using “deaf” to speak of the experience of hearing loss in general. I present myself as a cultural-linguistic minority student rather than a student with a disability. Not everyone with hearing loss adopts the cultural viewpoint. Quite often, college-aged students are at a point in their lives where they are discovering who they are and how they exist in the world, and their identity formation may be vague and in flux. Therefore, a deaf/Deaf student may not be able to fully articulate who they are and, even if they do, they will likely present a hybrid identity which moves between the Deaf world and the hearing world, as they are in a hearing classroom. A professor who assumes that a “deaf” student has a student with hearing loss and that all deaf students will have similar experiences will find herself faced with a plethora of identities in various stages of formation. To this complex picture add the fact that many students who are visually impaired, mobility impaired, learning disabled, etc., have begun to adopt a view of themselves which is somewhat similar to the cultural-linguistic view of Deaf people. Disability is increasingly being understood as a socially constructed condition rather than something rooted solely in the bodies of people. What makes a person disabled is not that she or he cannot see and, therefore, adaptations must be made, but rather that the classroom experience has been designed around the needs of sighted people in such a way that excludes those with limited vision. While this doesn’t carry the full effect of the Deaf community as presenting themselves as a cultural-linguistic minority, it does have the effect of reframing our presence as students in the classroom from placing the locus of the “problem” on the student to instead focusing that locus in the pedagogical approaches employed by professors.

Dancing with Diversity

While Deaf studies, disability studies, and multiculturalism do not present the same particularities, they intersect in the classroom in presenting professors with the challenges of creating a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all. Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.” Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.” Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.” Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.” Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.” Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.” Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.” Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.” Honoring the diversity of every student in the classroom must mean recognizing that each student brings a particular set of factors into the room that will shape how communication, dialogue, and therefore, teaching and learning take place. Although I generally tell professors, “The way you teach doesn’t make a difference for a pedagogy that can accommodate the diversity of identities in such a manner that facilitates learning for all.”

In this way, intuitively feeling and dancing your way through the process of teaching can be much more beneficial than simply adopting set pedagogical models in relation to enhancing teaching methods for students with disabilities and applying them in practice.

African-American feminist theorist bell hooks writes of her efforts to create an inclusive classroom in Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom. In her reflections on the importance of honoring the presence of every student, she states that the legitimacy of the classroom depends on their engagement with the class material and share paragraphs before the whole class. She sees this as an “exercise in recognition” (1994, 41) that allows the presence of each student to contribute to the shape of the classroom discussion, “even if there is a student present whose voice cannot be heard in spoken words, by ‘signing’ (even if we cannot read the sign) they make their presence felt.” Overlooking hooks’ use of quotation marks to qualify the use of American Sign Language in her classroom as if it were something less than spoken words, she has still honored the “voice” of a deaf student; she has recognized the power of how even the “voicless” can contribute and shape the meaning of a class when empowered to contribute. In her collection of essays Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope, hooks examines how students differ in the lives of minority students as compared to majority students. Many white male professors entered college as students fully aware that they might be subjected to rituals of shaming to prove their worth, their right to be one of the chosen. As a consequence they may endure these rituals without feeling threatened or destroyed. Not so for the vulnerable students from marginalized groups who may enter college with no awareness that ritualized shaming may take place. Rituals of shaming may create in them a true crisis of spirit where they doubt both their self-

Therefore, the specter of failure in the classroom is often a moment of crisis which reaches deep into our identities, as we come to question the legitimacy of our presence there and whether we have the right to enter this “foreign world” or not."

In conclusion, when working to create an accessible classroom, professors need to consider how Deaf students and students with disabilities bring particularities to the work of the classroom in ways that students of majority populations in society do not. Therefore, the specter of failure in the classroom is often a moment of crisis which reaches deep into our identities, as we come to question the legitimacy of our presence there and whether we have the right to enter this “foreign world” or not.

References


Spotlight on Teaching Solicits Guest Editors and Articles

AAR members interested in guest editing an issue of Spotlight on Teaching are invited to submit the title of a theme focusing on teaching and learning in the study of religion, along with a succinct description (500 words) of the theme’s merit and significance, to Spotlight general editor, Tazim R. Kassam. In addition to issues devoted to specific themes, problems, and settings, Spotlight on teaching will also occasionally feature a variety of independent essays and articles critically focusing on teaching and learning in the field of religious studies. Please send both types of submissions to:

Tazim R. Kassam, Editor Spotlight on Teaching
501 Hall of Languages
Department of Religion
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13244

E-mail: tkassam@syr.edu

May 2005 AAR JRN v
religious studies news — aar edition

new bodies of knowledge: disability studies and teaching biblical studies

Hector Avalos, Iowa State University

If reference works measure the status of a field, then one need only read the article “Lame” in The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible (1962) to gauge how many biblical scholars conceptualized disability in the 1960s. The main preoccupation for the author, Roland K. Harrison, was in diagnosing the disability in modern medical terms. Thus, the lame man in Acts 3:2 suffered from “weakness of the astragalus and metatarsus bones of the foot.” The person healed at Lystra (Acts 14:8) probably suffered from some form of “cytolysis.”

Another stream of scholarship had a more anthropocentric and “orientalist” approach. Merrill F. Unger’s article “Diseases” in Unger’s Bible Dictionary (1966) tells readers: “Insanity is much more rare in the East than in the West. This is doubtless due to the frequency from the tropical climate which so severely tests the endurance of the more active limbs of the Japhetic stock.” If we fast-forward to more recent reference works (e.g., The Anchor Bible Dictionary), we find mixed results at best. In fact, most biblical scholars, critical or not, still see disability in essentialist medical terms, and view their job as translating biblical descriptions into modern medical terminology.

Justifying Disability Studies

A survey published by David Pfeiffer and Karen Yoshida (1995) showed that not a single Disability Studies (DS) course was taught under the sponsorship of a religious studies program or department in 1993. A 2003 survey compiled by Steven J. Taylor, Rachael Zubal-Ruggieri, and Matthew A. Mitchell notes that Unger and other scholars “use” disabilities to promote theological and literary agendas in their narratives and discourse. Accordingly, much may be missed in the literary analysis of the Bible if attention is not paid to disability discourse.

How to Integrate Disability Studies

While there is a plurality of disability studies models for conceptualizing disability, most are a response to an essentialist medical model of the “normal body.” Many disability studies scholars emphasize that “disabilities” are created when societies objectify the ability of persons to perform certain actions, rather than when certain physical features render persons unable to perform certain actions. Other scholars may emphasize that “disability” should be accepted for the body they have rather than be rehabilitated to conform to the “normal” body.

Given the plurality of models and perspectives that one could emphasize, integration of disability studies may range from including DS materials in opportune moments of a course, to a course devoted fully to a disability studies perspective. Regardless of the level of integration, there are at least five approaches to integrating disability studies into undergraduate courses on the Bible:

1. An “attitudinal approach” may be introduced as the class encounters relevant texts. For example, students may be asked to meditate on how “blindness” is viewed in Deuteronomy 28:28, which suggests that it can be the result of sin. Discussion about the assumptions of this biblical author can generate further discussions of whether any modern societies see disabilities as the result of sin. Many of my students note how some in our society see AIDS as a punishment for sin, which then engenders discussion about other conditions. The Book of Job, which denies that sin is a necessary cause of disability, can be used for comparison with the views expressed in Deuteronomy.

2. The literary role of disability can also help students understand how authors “use” disabilities to tell their stories. This is an insight systematically explored by David Mitchell, who argues that disabilities play a central role in narratives and film. One example may suffice: Deuteronomy 6:4 (NRSV) says, “Hear, O Israel, our God, is one YHWH.” Although the selection of “hearing” may seem insignificant to some, the use of this “sense” may be part of a systematic privileging of hearing over seeing that one finds in other parts of the Deuteronomistic History. We are specifically told, for example, that the Israelites did not see Yahweh, but rather heard him (Deut. 4:12). The verse I Samuel 9:9 contains the seemingly odd note that prophets were formerly called “seers” in ancient Israel. The prophet Ahijah (1 Kings 14:1–7) is portrayed as perceptive despite the fact that the story specifically emphasizes that he is unshod. Ahijah’s correct information comes from hearing God’s message rather than from seeing. The last example specifically shows how the author uses one disability, “blindness,” to tell a story about the privileged nature of “hearing” of God. At the same time, such differential attitudes toward the senses may also help the student understand how the privileging of specific “abilities” (perceiving without “seeing”) are constructed by theological and social agendas. In a full-scale course emphasizing disability studies, one can study systematically how different biblical corpora view disability and privilege some senses above others.

3. The fact that biblical scholarship itself reflects ideological investments in the body can be illustrated by comparing writings from various periods and perspectives within biblical scholarship. Moreover, a different choice of “view of insanity” can be contrasted with other views of madness/insanity. We may note that Unger and other scholars were not concerned with how biblical authors empowered or disempowered the disabled through their rhetoric and theology.

4. Books and/or articles may be assigned that include discussion of disability from the perspective of disabled scholars. John Hull, for example, writes about blindness in the light of the perspective of an unsighted scholar.

5. Sociological studies may be introduced that focus on how modern persons of faith use the Bible to address their own disabilities. Lisa Copen of Best Ministries, for instance, develops devotional literature to aid the disabled in living productive lives. Even one who does not agree with her theology, such resources are useful in studying how some disabled persons use the Bible on more practical levels. As noted by a number of disability scholars, experimental, inclusive, and action-oriented pedagogical approaches can also be useful. One experience as a disabled faculty member can be a model for empowering disabled students. The plasticity of the disabled identity can also be important to note. Due to chronic respiratory problems caused by Wegener’s Granulomatosis, I experienced highly restricted mobility for a significant portion of my life, but now surgery has increased my breathing capacity to near “normal.” Thus, I sometimes address how one can move from “abled” to disabled identities and vice versa.

Conclusion

Disability studies is at least as deserving of attention as any other approach to biblical studies. It can be seen as part of a larger body of experience that may be called “corporeal studies” or “corporeal criticism,” which focuses on how different cultures value and conceptualize the body. If education means knowing more about the world in which we live, then students of the Bible should know more about how the most influential book in history addresses our embodiment. Yet, there are still many challenges and obstacles in the way of a thriving (systematic) disability studies approach to biblical studies.

One desideratum is a corpus of scholarly literature that addresses disabilities in the Bible and the ancient Near East in a more systematic manner.

References


For how some persons of faith integrate the Bible in addressing their disability, see http://www.nrmsmin.org/pro-devotion.htm.
Disability and the Tasks of Social Justice

Roger S. Gottlieb, Worcester Polytechnic Institute

A 1. What is a "disability"? Who is "disabled"? Who decides?
Is "being disabled" a simple, natural fact about a person, comparable to their height or eye color? Or is it more socially constructed, like "being a resident of Michigan"? Some have argued for the distinction between an "impairment" and a "disability." An impairment is some restriction or disadvantage based on a physical, mental, or sensory deficit, provided by the environment. An impairment can generalize to the social or economic environment. Severe and lifelong impairments effectively end one's ability to live in the community. Some disabilities are invisible, and can be socially constructed, like those associated with obesity or chronic pain.

2. What is autonomy? What is intelligence?
Clears people with certain disabilities are more likely to experience autonomy. Autonomy is a state of mind, not a physical state. People with disabilities may have diminished autonomy due to the practices of dependency workers. Dependency workers' attitudes toward those who are disabled are sometimes negative. Dependency workers may lack the education and training needed to provide adequate care.

3. How does "disability" relate to issues of justice and politics of identity?
Together with other social issues, disability can be thought of in terms of justice and recognition, both the protection of rights and the granting of respect and care. Along with other groups from peasants, workers, and women to homosexuals and the colonized, those with disabilities have been marginalized, stigmatized, denied equality, and literally not seen. Because of this shared experience, both the condition of the resistance by the disability community can be explored by applying the familiar vocabulary of democracy, rights, freedom, and respect. In this investigation it must be remembered that human identities are multiple: no one is simply a woman, a Hispanic, or blind. Each person's identity is formed by several social identities: class and race, gender and nationality, sexuality and forms of ability/disability. Further, as white and black women have racialized experiences of patriarchy, so within the disability community there is a hierarchy in which those with only physical impairments have more status and recognition than those with mental or emotional ones.

4. How do we teach this stuff?
Along with historical and theoretical writings on disability and justice, it is essential for students to get a sense of the actual life experience of those who must face these challenges. Memoirs, biographies, and films can provide some insights into the particular lives of people with disability. Strategies for developing awareness are as important as reading books and writing papers. Here are some possibilities:

• Keep a journal in which the student pays attention to the way these issues surface in daily life, around campus, in the news — in everything from the use of "retard" as a put-down to the presence or absence of wheelchair ramps.
• Have students reflect on their own experiences of difference — how they felt "different," "unable," "less than," when they were bad at sports, late to learn how to read, or lacked friends.
• Have students reflect on their own experiences of difference — how they felt "different," "unable," "less than," when they were bad at sports, late to learn how to read, or lacked friends. Students might write paragraphs on this topic and then the teacher may read them aloud anonymously in class.
• Have students share experiences of disability from their own lives or their families: who has a brother with Down's syndrome, a mother with chronic fatigue, or their own unusual condition?
• Have students "become disabled" for a day or a week: use a wheelchair, wear a scarf over their ears, tie all the fingers of their right hand together.
• Have students share experiences of disability from their own lives or their families: who has a brother with Down's syndrome, a mother with chronic fatigue, or their own unusual condition?
• Have students share experiences of disability from their own lives or their families: who has a brother with Down's syndrome, a mother with chronic fatigue, or their own unusual condition?
• Have students "become disabled" for a day or a week: use a wheelchair, wear a scarf over their ears, tie all the fingers of their right hand together.
• Have students share experiences of disability from their own lives or their families: who has a brother with Down's syndrome, a mother with chronic fatigue, or their own unusual condition?

References


SPOTLIGHT ON TEACHING
Jane Hurst, Gallaudet University

O N MY CAMPUS, a beautiful, bucolic oasis in Washington, D.C., all my students are deaf. This is how they describe themselves in our campus culture, though sometimes with a capital “D.” Deaf. A high percentage of our faculty and staff are also deaf. This is how we view the world, through the eyes of deaf culture.

At Gallaudet, deaf people do not consider themselves disabled. Ours is a cultural minority group within the larger hearing society. Gallaudet University sees itself as a deaf parallel to our neighbor Howard University, whose students and faculty are predominantly African-American and whose mission focuses on African-American culture and concerns. Deaf people use visible communication, and where this is readily available there is no disability. Our president, M. Kent Porter, was chosen after the powerful and peaceful walkout. “Deaf President Now” protest in 1988, has said, “Deaf people can do anything except hear,” and the vast majority of deaf people agree with him. With advances in technology, such as TV captioning, Internet messaging, and text messaging, access to clear communication has opened up the wider society to what deaf people can do.

We do have disabled students on campus, and the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSWD) serves those needs. Those who have learning disabilities or have visual impairments are the most commonly served by this office. Students can take tests at the OSWD with extended time or with the size of the font magnified. OSWD also provides close vision interpreting so that students whose visual range is only a few feet have someone to sign the classroom conversation at that distance.

Based on my years of teaching in this environment, I have a few practical suggestions for those of you who are new to deaf, hard-of-hearing, or hearing impaired students. First of all, let the university know which designation from the above list he or she prefers. Like the terms African-American, black, and Negro, terms that describe hearing loss are culturally loaded and very political. As a hearing person you can stay out of the fray, as well as show respect, by letting each student self-identify.

Second, when I asked my students for their suggestions for hearing teachers of deaf students, they told me that it is most important to stay aware of visual communication in the classroom. A lifetime of habits of communicating only orally may have to be broken. Good visual communication means making eye contact when speaking to someone, and not talking while writing on the board or looking at an exhibit. It means being open to deaf people to the deaf person of view and to the suggestions for better communication that your deaf students might give you.

In deaf culture, avoiding eye contact with the signer is a way of saying “I don’t care” and is considered and can be taken as an insult! I have gotten so used to eye contact in the classroom that when I gave a guest lecture at a hearing university nearby, I was shocked when the entire class broke eye contact and looked down at their notes. I knew I had offended them! Had I lost the whole class at once? I had to laugh at myself, because they were simply taking notes. In a deaf classroom, the lecturer should stop talking while students write notes. For this reason, I usually distribute copies of my own notes to the class to save time waiting for them to write everything down. This is also why deaf students may need hearing students to take notes for them so you do not have to pause the entire class while your deaf student writes things down.

My third suggestion is to learn to use interpreters wisely. A sign-language interpreter serves as your eyes and hands. He or she will put into sign language your oral communication and voice the signed questions of your deaf students. You speak directly to the deaf person, not the interpreter, even though the deaf person will not be looking at you but at your “hands,” the interpreter. In subjects such as religious studies, which are based not simply on a presentation of facts but are highly nuanced and abstract, it is important to have an interpreter who can work at this level. You cannot deal with the interpreter does not understand the subject.

For some students with hearing loss, interpreters may be useless if the student does not know sign language, but instead depends on lip-reading or other visual communication systems. Furthermore, not all signed communication is the same. Some people use American Sign Language (ASL), the native language of deaf people, which has its own grammar and syntax, quite different from English, while others prefer Pidgin Signed Language, which uses features of ASL but is based on English grammar and syntax. Still others might prefer directly signed English, which includes every article, pronoun, and verb ending. Because of this complexity, it is important to be sure that your student has the appropriate communication in the classroom.

Fourth, be aware that students can have multiple disabilities, and that you must do your best to accommodate them. I will not go into depth here, but will just point out that this is important to keep in mind.

Fifth, I suggest that you see the presence of disabled students in your classroom as an opportunity to develop mental flexibility on your part. You will have to change some habits, drop some assumptions, and adapt your teaching style to reach these students. What you did in the past in a classroom with homogeneous communication will certainly have to be adapted for those with different communication modes. This is a wonderful chance to rethink your approach to teaching. I have found, for example, that the most natural habits of speech that carry all the levels of meaning that I want my class to understand!

My final suggestion comes from the existential issues raised for me as a college professor who has devoted 25 years of my career to teaching deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing impaired students. This is not what I expected to be doing! I was prepared for a traditional academic career, but the exigencies of the job market, and I must admit the challenge of the situation, led me to Gallaudet. I have not regretted this commitment, though I have experienced plenty of conflicting emotions about my career and my students. I have had to keep learning, which sometimes my aging self resists. For example, one visually impaired student would sign to me and point his finger with a foot of my face when I was signing the word “you.” This seemed so rude to me until I realized that he had no depth perception, and had no idea how close his sign was to my bifocals. Still, I had to overcome my annoyance each time we talked.

As I teach what are perceived by the mainstream world as “disabled students,” I have learned to go beyond conventional ways of thinking about the study of religion, especially the use of language. For example, I focus more on key concepts than a barrage of information, which can be visually exhausting in sign language, and is often better understood in written form. In the classroom, I use speech and sign simultaneously, which keeps my brain synapses humming and is mentally very challenging. Every abstract concept I introduce must be accompanied by many examples and interactions with my students to be sure they have understood. Here the basic interactive classroom approach, with much focus on discussion and small group work, will be helpful.

For example, in introducing the concept of karma, my students easily grasp the cause and effect nature of karma since the sign itself adapts the sign for “influence” or “cause” moving away from and then toward the signer. At this point someone usually asks, “But isn’t karma punishment for the things you have done wrong in the past?” But the sign for punishment is quite different, and does not show a clear cause and effect relationship. Deaf students from Buddhist countries have an input here, since some of them have been taught this concept as children. Now we have an opportunity to come up with sign phrases that can apply the sign concept. But we must take the time to find out where the students are coming from, rather than simply lecturing on the subject.

Most importantly, the flexibility required as I teach students who are so different from me in their experience has raised the question of who we truly are beyond our physical presence in this world. Is there a commonality that we share beyond our physical presence in this world, beyond the boundaries of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation? I’m going to ask my students these questions on Monday. I talk. I expect a lively discussion.

Past Spotlight on Teaching Topics

October 2004 Teaching with Site Visits

May 2004 Teaching about Religion and Violence

October 2003 Teaching about Material Culture in Religious Studies

October 2002 Teaching Religious Studies and Theology in Community Colleges

March 2002 Multiculturalism and the Academic Study of Religion in the Schools

Fall 2001 Issues in Teaching Religion and Theology in Great Britain

Spring 2001 Teaching about Buddhism

September 2000 Teaching about the Holocaust

May 2000 Theory Practice Learning: Models in Violence Studies and Conflict Resolution

November 1999 Teaching for the Next Millennium: Top Choices of Significant Works on Teaching and Pedagogy

May 1999 Syllabi Development

November 1998 Teaching the Bible: Initiations and Transformations

October 1998 Teaching with Film

November 1997 Insider, Outsider, and Gender Identities in the Religion Classroom

May 1997 Cases and Course Design

November 1996 Alternative Sexualities: Bringing Lesbian and Gay Studies to the Religion Classroom

February 1996 General Issues of Teaching Religious Studies

February 1995 The Introductory Course

May 1993 Teaching African Religions

November 1992 General Issues of Teaching Religious Studies
Office of Disability Services works with the student and the instructor to find ways in which the learning requirements for the class and degree program can be met by disabled students. The Office can provide accommodation to students with learning disabilities, which are normally defined as a disorder that affects speaking, listening, reading, writing, spelling, or mathematical calculations. Some examples of these kinds of disabilities include dyslexia (problems in expressive or receptive language, oral or written language), dyscalculia (barriers in arithmetic and grasping mathematical concepts), dysgraphia (problems with writing or forming letters or writing within a defined space), and dyspraxia (troubles in a person’s ability to make a controlled or coordinated physical movement) (2004, 100), as well as auditory memory, and processing disabilities, which result in an impediment to understanding or remembering words or sounds because of the brain’s failure to comprehend language correctly.

Learning disabilities are quite common. In the general population the estimate of those affected by learning disabilities ranges from 3 to 20 percent. These types of disabilities persist throughout life and present unique academic challenges. As noted by Eastwick Covington, “Educators must realize that a learning disability is not a disease, but a category that is useful to identify those who struggle to learn with traditional classroom techniques” (2004, 100). Understanding that a learning disability is not something to overcome through greater effort, the wise adult educator learns to follow students, and to discuss with them a learning plan that will give them the strategies and skills needed to be successful in our class and beyond. After you are prepared to identify the accommodations necessary to perform the tasks required for an effective instructional process, you are a person yourself. The end result is not unlike the intent of the Individualized Education Program which lists specific accommodations, communication needs, and the use of assistive technology devices, if any (IEP—Public Law 94–142, 1975).

The increasing number of disabled students accessing postsecondary education underscores the need for instructors to develop competencies in working with this population. While in 1978 only 2.6 percent of disabled students entered postsecondary programs, by 1996 that percentage had climbed to 19. Given trends in research, education, and public policy, one can safely conclude that the number of disabled postsecondary students will continue to rise and begin to approximate the 56 percent of students without disabilities who attend postsecondary institutions within the first two year of graduating from high school (“Research Finding Brief” 2000). The continuing trend of inclusion of disabled students in the classroom as well as the level playing field than in the past. Factors contributing to the improved situation include: 1) civil rights protection from discrimination in training, testing, condition and provides documentation to verify that situation. Otherwise, he may choose not to request accommodations. Identification involves the risk of self- disclosure, being aware of, and being able to identify particular disabilities and the wide range of uncertainties given the lack of understanding by the general public, which the learning-disabled student has faced all his life. “For many individuals, instructors need to accept their share of the responsibility for the success of the disabled student” (Eastwick Covington 2004). The debate focuses on whether it is worthwhile to identity oneself as a person with a learning disability or to try to do the best one can without accommodations” (Young 1996). Any postsecondary class may include the adult learner who has successfully compensated for her disability in the workplace and has now returned to pursue a first or second degree. Perhaps this student is not sure whether or not to identify her disability, or even whether services are available to increase the likelihood of her success. As noted by Carpenter and Morgan (2003), the classroom can be a place of risk and an environment that “can generate confusion and personal trauma if the teaching and learning strategies are not set up in such a way that the instructor’s first response to the student’s request for accommodation focuses on the personal needs of the instructor and not those of the nondisabled members of the class, the end result is increased confusion and personal pain for the disabled student.

Two suggestions can accomplish much toward reducing the “be due to personal trauma.” The first involves being willing to vary methodology to enhance the experience of the student. Although this might be as simple as allowing for alternative methods of feedback on assignments, the discussion of varied methodology exceeds the scope of this article. However, one important recommendation is that instructors learn how to communicate goodwill and flexibility. In contrast to my opening story, the instructor needs to ask himself not what is being done all that is possible to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment. Does the student know that I am interested in his special needs and that I am willing to do everything possible to encourage the success of the learning experience? Do I communicate these expectations and am not just one more obstacle to overcome in the pursuit of the degree? All students, and especially those with a learning disability, “respond to those who care about them and who take a genuine interest in them.” Education—Any student who because of a disability may require some special arrangements to meet course requirements should contact the instructor or the Access Coordinator for the Office of Disability Services by the second class period to discuss reasonable accommodations.” When accompanied by an attitude of sincerity, such a statement opens the door for substantive dialogue regarding strategies for success.

References


National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education. “Research Finding Brief.” National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education Support, study area of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, April 2000.


May 2005 AAR RNW • ix
Rebecca Raphael has been teaching at Texas State University–San Marcos since 1999. She received her PhD from the University of Chicago Divinity School. Her scholarly interests include prophecy, the history of biblical interpretation, poetry and drama. She is currently working on a book on the representation of disability in the Hebrew Bible.

I had to ask myself, ‘Should I leave academia just because I’m deaf?’ The ability to communicate in a classroom is essential to teaching. But is communication equivalent to a physical sense?

When I say that I couldn’t hear my students, it doesn’t mean that I heard nothing. I could hear voices, especially stress and laughter. I couldn’t talk to each other, I rarely understood anything was getting across. For me, the ‘deaf’ label didn’t have a physical meaning. When I crossed a different line and heard again, I knew that students found me intimidating, and deafness amplified the effect. ‘You seem to know everything, and they say, ‘How can she be so smart if she’s deaf?’ Apparently one isn’t allowed to be both. Anna also said that students felt that my historical-literary approach attacked their faith, that they had to defend it to me, and that my deafness made this harder. This reaction shows a direct application of my disability, rather than to my ability to communicate. It doesn’t even consider that there may be weaknesses in their approaches to the text. Finally, this view has historical precedent in early modern belief about deaf people. Without hearing, education was thought to be impossible, and without hearing or reading, one could not receive the Word. We were exempt from evangelization and its purported benefits.

For my part, I felt vulnerable to judgment and abuse, and incompetent as a teacher. After all, I didn’t know what students were saying or laughing at, and was never sure that my mitigating responses to questions were even on the point. I couldn’t tell if anything was getting across. For me, the biblical images of deafness applied ironically to my students. Nothing I said about historical and cultural context sank into these heads. They just knew what it meant, as effortlessly as hearing people hear. No labor of language-learning or lip-reading for them. O i bu my ear, o de ike e ese led?

How the CI has changed and not changed my life is a story for a book. For now, I would like to raise the tougher question for my colleagues. I had to ask myself, ‘Should I leave academia just because I’m deaf?’ The ability to communicate in a classroom is essential to teaching. But is communication equivalent to a physical sense? Ask yourself whether your academic merit would change if you suddenly lost your hearing tomorrow. I don’t think it would. So, let’s generalize my question to ‘Should academia exclude deaf people?’ I ask this in a provocative form because I hope that your instinctive answer is a resounding No. However, a simple feeling on the part of individuals will not, by itself, include the deaf in and include the policies are necessary. For example, I’m sure no one would say that deaf people should be turned away at the door of the Annual Meeting because of their deafness. However, in 2004, the first year in which the AAR provided any accommodations to deaf people, it consciously chose to provide only ASL and not CART. For me five years ago, this was like having the door closed in my face. Should the door to the classroom also be closed? If not, it must be opened by the understanding that communication and academic merit don’t require physical hearing. The hearing academy will have to do something it has not done well before: listen to us. •

The author kindly provides the equivalent of captioning by translating the following key in the vowel sentences: in order, Mark 6:9, I.e 6:9, I.e 19:14, P. 38:14, I. 42:19.

HAD TWO Teaching careers, one deaf and one hearing. Yes, in that order. I grew up with normal hearing. At 14, I developed a mild hearing loss that progressed slowly. From 15 until cochlear implant surgery at 34, I used hearing aids, lip-reading, and assisted adaptive strategies. When I completed my PhD, I was profoundly deaf. Unlike those who identify with the Deaf World and use American Sign Language (ASL) as their primary language, I experienced hearing loss as just that—a loss. English is my mother tongue. There was no day in my life when I crossed a line from hearing to Deaf and magically learned ASL. There was, however, a summer when I crossed a different line and heard again. Since my results with the cochlear implant are exceptional—one researcher called me “a happy accident”—I want to focus on teaching before I had the implant. It raises more searching questions for academia. E o a e a e a e.

When I say that I couldn’t hear my students, it doesn’t mean that I heard nothing. I could hear voices, especially stress and patterns. But speech is more than sound: it’s phonemes. Vowels are lower-pitched, louder, and take longer to pronounce. Consonants are higher-pitched, softer, and shorter in pronunciation. The meaning of language lies primarily in the consonants. Some people are exceptional—one researcher called me “a happy accident.” I want to focus on teaching before I had the implant. It raises more searching questions for academia. E o a e a e a e.

From my first week of teaching I knew that the ‘hard-of-hearing’ or ‘deaf’ academics. I found a few people who had quit teaching, but no one who was currently working in academia. I found one or two science PhDs who wanted academic careers, but went into research because schools wouldn’t hire them. Even for hearing and left-deafened organizations, I didn’t find any professors. There aren’t many of us. The list-serve ‘Deaf Academics’ has 300 members worldwide, and many of them are graduate students. (Yet deafness does not count under most institutions’ diversity initiatives.) It was founded in 2002 and did not exist when I was looking for it.

A long experiment with accommodations followed. First, we tried what worked for me as a student: FM devices. These are personal radio transmitters-receivers. Designed for hearing a single speaker, they maximize residual hearing by delivering sound without background noise and by amplifying the speaker’s voice. They do not assume that the hard-of-hearing person will be the one who has to hear 30 people. MI gave me a small boost, but not much. One day after class, I picked up the table microphone from the other side of the room and noticed that someone had scribbled in pencil. HELLO! I didn’t know who the graffiti was. O a o t e d e a.

After two semesters with FMs, I realized that I no longer had enough residual hearing to use them. This epiphany had three effects: I began to explore career changes, to consider a cochlear implant, and to use visual media for classroom communication. My second round of accommodations involved using students in the class to write down what other students said, and, later, hiring an instructional assistant to do this. Note-takers were essential. They were usually slow and conscientious, part of the communication. There was still a lot going on that I didn’t know about. Anna, my Instructor’s Assistant (IA), once told me after a class that some of the students were talking and laughing about my failure to hear something. I confronted the class in the next session and told them that talking about a deaf person in his or her presence was similar to a racial slur. Several students were in tears by the end of my speech. T a i e a e a.

I considered learning ASL and using the university’s interpreters. But ASL solves the wrong problem. I can’t hear students, and they don’t sign. Further, my audiologist expressed skepticism about mastering a new language in order to use it in such a demanding context. Finally, the staff interpreters are for students. Which would not want to take anything away from students who need it, the assumption that people with profound deafness will not be able to maintain or position of authority is institutionalized, self-reinforcing, and illegal.

It took me over two years to find someone who knew about the accommodation I needed. CART. The same service and technology by which television is captioned

REFERENCES

Kathryn Woodward and Miguel Aguayo. Deafened People: Adjustment and Support. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2000. In my case, the situation is the single best description on the experience of becoming deaf in adulthood, as opposed to being born into the Deaf community.

Department of Justice Americans with Disabilities Act ADA home page. http://www.access.att.gov/ada. Contains a wealth of information about the ADA, guidelines for compliance with it, and remedies available to disabled persons when the act is violated.


CART. http://www.cartprovides.net. A listing of CART providers by state.

In the next: Spotlight on Teaching

Reflections on a Teaching Career in Religion

Edward Mooney, Syracuse University

Guest Editor
An Academic’s Encounter with Chronic Illness: Teaching, Collegiality, and Scholarship, and Students with Chronic Conditions

Mary Jo Iozzo, Barry University

CHRONIC ILLNESSES, like arthritis, asthma and emphysema, cancer, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, diabetes, COPD, Gulf War Syndrome, heart disease, HIV/AIDS and immune deficiency, mental illnesses, neurological and neuromuscular diseases, and Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, to name a few examples, vary considerably from person to person in symptom expression and in severity — as is true of most illnesses, as well as most disabilities. This variability causes misconceptions on the part of observers about the incidence and progress of illness and disability, as well as significant periods of delay on the part of the subject-person with the condition about the extent to which the condition is self-defining. Further complicating these misconceptions and delays, some people who have symptomatic episodes, the person with the condition often disappears, even though others continue to hold on to the image that classes will be taught, committee work fulfilled, articles written and published, and assignments handed in on time.

How can a person experiencing episodic symptoms meet these expectations and when is it appropriate for oneself or others to adjust those expectations? Many but not all of these conditions result from social, sociological, psychological, economic, historical, theological, philosophical, or natural causes. Further complicating these misconceptions are the problems of accommodation, to the questions of expectations, yes, and also to the questions of accommodation, solidarity, support, human families and friendship, a shared sense of human frailty, interdependence, common purpose, and human flourishing. These latter questions permit explorations into the religious, philosophical, historical, sociological, psychological, economic, and scientific implications of illnesses and of disabilities. People with chronic illnesses and people with disabilities — and their advocates in disability studies — have only begun to expose some of the answers to these broader questions and the issues connected to these questions. 

Cuing the supervision of the faculties that teach or exclude them. People with chronic illness have fared only a little better in contemporary society and the modern workplace than their near cousins with mobility, sight, and sound disabilities. The teacher hospitalized for intensive chemotherapy will rightly be permitted a substitute teaching plan; the colleague undergoing coronary bypass surgery will rightly be given recuperative time in the office; the student undergoing physical therapy following a sport injury will rightly be excused from class attendance. Except for the temporary accommodation, the faculty member may set near cousins with mobility, sight, and sound disabilities. The teacher hospitalized for intensive chemotherapy will rightly be permitted a substitute teaching plan; the colleague undergoing coronary bypass surgery will rightly be given recuperative time in the office; the student undergoing physical therapy following a sport injury will rightly be excused from class attendance. Except for the temporary accommodation, the faculty member may set near cousins with mobility, sight, and sound disabilities. The teacher hospitalized for intensive chemotherapy will rightly be permitted a substitute teaching plan; the colleague undergoing coronary bypass surgery will rightly be given recuperative time in the office; the student undergoing physical therapy following a sport injury will rightly be excused from class attendance. Except for the temporary accommodation, the faculty member may set near cousins with mobility, sight, and sound disabilities. The teacher hospitalized for intensive chemotherapy will rightly be permitted a substitute teaching plan; the colleague undergoing coronary bypass surgery will rightly be given recuperative time in the office; the student undergoing physical therapy following a sport injury will rightly be excused from class attendance. Except for the temporary accommodation, the faculty member may set near cousins with mobility, sight, and sound disabilities. The teacher hospitalized for intensive chemotherapy will rightly be permitted a substitute teaching plan; the colleague undergoing coronary bypass surgery will rightly be given recuperative time in the office; the student undergoing physical therapy following a sport injury will rightly be excused from class attendance. Except for the temporary accommodation, the faculty member may set near cousins with mobility, sight, and sound disabilities. The teacher hospitalized for intensive chemotherapy will rightly be permitted a substitute teaching plan; the colleague undergoing coronary bypass surgery will rightly be given recuperative time in the office; the student undergoing physical therapy following a sport injury will rightly be excused from class attendance. Except for the temporary accommodation, the faculty member may set near cousins with mobility, sight, and sound disabilities.
If you accept this claim, what comes next? First, as is evident from these articles, we must continue our struggles for access and inclusion for all people regardless of disability status. Those of us who have grown up with Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as the evolutionary legacy of the disability rights and civil rights movements, see access to the classroom as a right, not a privilege. It is clear that the work there is not yet done. Additionally, because disability represents a bona fide minority group (or groups), it should be consciously engaged when doing diversity work. We also see that students who are pursuing religious leadership or teaching professions need to be better prepared to work with people with disabilities in their congregations, classrooms, and communities. Seminaries (and other institutions) ought to regularly offer courses on disability, and ableism (discrimination in favor of the able-bodied) should be addressed side by side with other issues.

These reflections also show that it is time for us to recognize disability throughout all of our courses, rather than just as an atterisk or as a special topics forum. Disability is relevant throughout the curriculum, even in places where it has been previously invisible or unnoticed. If we are attentive, we find its imprint in religious texts, church history, and theological (particularly issues such as healing and suffering), congregational membership, and the population. When we tell only the able-bodied part of the story and fail to draw on the resources offered by the lens of disability, we are remiss in our role as teachers.

More than just correcting a gap in our research or teaching, reflection on disability has a positive contribution to make to the work of our field. This is, for me, the exciting piece that lies ahead for my generation of teachers and scholars. The discipline of disability studies is a rich and exciting one, but until recently it has neither addressed religious topics nor been engaged by scholars of religion. There is much unexplored ground, and much to gain for all of us.

Let me conclude this paper by noting that disability status is not a burden or an opportunity, or perhaps as the simple presence of a variety of instantiations of human embodiment. Second, the study of disability is not simply about the inclusion of people with disabilities, just as the study of religion is not simply about the religious practices of people of faith, or as feminist theology is not simply about women gaining access to the pulpit. The discipline of disability studies explores assumptions, systems, and practices that go far beyond the specific day-to-day inclusion of people with disabilities. Third, for this very reason, this topic is not solely relevant to people with disabilities. Especially useful is disability’s established in contrast to the concept of normalcy: these issues raise questions of interest to us all. Thus, the appropriate argument is that disability is both an issue of inclusion and an exploratory lens relevant to people with disabilities as well as the temporarily able-bodied.

Deborah Creamer is adjunct faculty at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. She teaches courses on Religion and Disability and Feminist Theology (she co-chairs the AAR Religion and Disability Studies Group). Her dissertation was entitled “The Withered Hand of God: Disability and Theological Reflection” (University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology 2004).

References


Deborah Creamer is adjunct faculty at the Iliff School of Theology. She teaches courses on Religion and Disability and Feminist Theology (she co-chairs the AAR Religion and Disability Studies Group). Her dissertation was entitled “The Withered Hand of God: Disability and Theological Reflection” (University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology 2004).