

I. Bridging the Disciplines and the (Dis)Abilities

A View from the Bridge: An Interdisciplinary's Overview of the Social Relations of Disability Studies

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Introduction

Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge even when there is no river. - Nikita Khrushchev, impromptu remark made on a visit to the USA at Glen Cove, New York, October 1960.

The last two decades have clearly seen a huge growth in disability studies. This growth has been stimulated in a number of ways, which include the political mobilisation of disabled people, the establishment of authentic conceptual foundations or "central identities," and the transgression of disciplinary boundaries in the search of alternative knowledges, ideas, meanings and interpretations relating to the experience of disability. This exploration has also generated different "fields" of, and "identities" for, disability studies that struggle to co-exist in a tension-ridden relationship with each other. The diverse paradigms fostered in the approaches of US and UK theorists make up one particularly problematic example (Barnes et al. 1999) which lends credence to George Bernard Shaw's frequently cited though unpublished comment that "we are two countries divided by a common language." Further, because both of these countries embrace Western ways of thinking, there is a danger that non-Western perspectives offering alternative understandings and paradigms may be crushed by the Scylla of Western systems of representation, and relegated to the Charybdis of chaos and uncertainty. In this scenario, the disabled subject is quite literally caught between two rocks and a hard place.

Beyond these conflicts of national identity, which permeate most disciplinary frameworks, the main debates within disability studies seem to emerge from the highly contextualised ways in which we constitute different representations of the disabled subject through the study of disability. These debates reflect the struggle between representations that, for example, emphasise subjectivity *or* objectivity, materialism *or* idealism, and those that seek to interpret our worlds *versus* those that aim to change them. Disabled people (or "people with disabilities") can be viewed as "impaired individuals" and "counted as cripples" *or* as a "social category" *or* as a "minority group" *or* as a "social movement"; and they can be considered a group of "socially constructed" *or* "socially created" subjects (Shakespeare 1999). In addition, disability does not exist in isolation from other social oppressions, such as those related to race, gender, age, and sexuality, for example, which are themselves viewed from multiple standpoints and positions.

These representations produce a story of difference on a number of levels. By corollary, however, *engagement* with the Charybdis of difference appears to be countered by disciplinary language of ownership and reification, each of which fields attempts to mark some universal and abstracted notion of disability that becomes carved in the rocks of Scylla. Moreover, such universals walk a very fine dividing line between those which seek to be accurate representations of disabled people's experience and those which are, as Judith Butler (1993, 1997) might say, performatively produced, often ritualised in a way that cites the norms and authority that materialise the community of disabled people as such. Though abstraction may appear to make it easier to conceptualise and study disability, a view from the bridge - from within interdisciplinary space - suggests that truth claims cannot be made about any single identity in terms of emancipation, autonomy, social inclusion, independent living, or any manner of other political and social goals. Thus, the questions "*What is disability (studies)?*" and "*Who is disabled and who is not?*"

that are at the heart of all of these approaches are actually questions about *which differences matter*. Which differences create the most tension in universal notions of disability and their incumbent disabled subject/object?

I have explored the question of differences that matter, elsewhere (Corker 1998, 1999b). In this essay, I will argue that it is the drive towards ownership and reification in different fields of disability studies that makes it difficult to engage with difference - to "have a public conversation with difference through sameness" (Bell 1998). This difficulty is epitomised in recent debates in the UK journal *Disability & Society*, the *disability-research mailbox*, and the US *Chronicle of Higher Education*, about the roles and knowledge of non-disabled people and parents within disability studies. I suggest that the interdisciplinary culture of disability studies has its own subcultures of study that are trapped in a web of dysfunctional social relations, which assume discrete and autonomous interlocutors, and which are characterised by communicative repertoires of conflict and struggle. Using my experience of attempting to understand communication through deafness and, by extension, what I have learned from the interdisciplinary project of discourse studies, I will highlight how these particular social relations both constitute and are constituted through a number of clearly identifiable *communicative* structures and processes that *actively re-produce* conflict and struggle. Finally, because I believe that this re-production effectively mitigates against disability studies being the inclusive, multi-voiced discipline it might be, I outline alternative processes that build on a dialogic model of social relations.

Structuring disability studies

Precisely because language-using is paradigmatically a social, public act, communication must be carried out with reference to (socio)linguistic norms which may themselves become the subject of overt comment and debate. In our everyday interactions we take this for granted, and this becomes apparent when deaf and hearing people enter into an act of communication. As a metaphor, we might use Fromkin and Rodman's (1983: 47) cartoon of two disgruntled cavemen attempting to converse. One says to the other:

"f w wnt t tlk rily gd, w'll hv t nvnt vwlz."

Most of us can, assuming knowledge of the context and with a little time, fill in the gaps to understand what is being said. But let us suppose that the other caveman is deaf. He responds:

"e o ae o ie e oe eaue e oe ae aea ee."

Try as he might, the hearing caveman cannot understand what is being said because, first, his approach is to make his friend's comment fit into his language, using the same taken-for-granted context and tools, or the accounting rules of his language and culture. And second, because he does not realise the deeper significance of what is going on here - namely, that in applying his own context and tools to his friend's utterance, he is effectively separating his friend's language from its user. What emerges from this interaction is therefore a strong sense that the deaf caveman is not "there," not "real," is Other, displaced. Though he is attempting to engage with what he sees to be the norms of spoken language in responding, he lacks access to the accounting rules (in this case, the consonants) that underpin these norms.

In actuality, however, the hearing caveman only appears more real than his deaf counterpart because his way of talking assumes the received wisdom that the vowels are there (Cameron 1995: 11). Furthermore, as audience to this interaction, we observers *know* and do not generally question that the vowels are there. We can make sense of what is being said. But the security of this knowledge, together with the fact that spoken utterances are *unanticipated*, places social distance between deaf and hearing people, and contributes to the definition of their respective roles as receiver and transmitter. Communication can only occur in monologic fashion and by transmission - the so-called *conduit metaphor* of communication (Prior 1998). In its norm-referencing, the encounter does not incorporate a recognition that in states of social inequality, vowels may be *all* that there is. And in this state, vowels do not make sense *at all* except perhaps in the eyes of a

subject who, in social constructionist terms, can only understand events by the network of premises and presuppositions that constitute *their* map of the world. Though both deaf and hearing may well be *potentially* what Habermas (1984a, b) would call "concrete interlocutors," this potential can only be realised if there is a shared system of coding (or at least complementary systems for coding and encoding) *and* a shared contextual framework for communication. The absence of such a framework leads to the formation of *discrete* subject positions, which then form the basis of binary models of distinction through the linked processes of detemporalization, spatialization, and hierarchical ordering of deaf and hearing - which become the basis for inequality and exclusion.

Progressing from this primal position of dysfunctional communication clearly requires some form of mediation, a bridge, which in the Dark Ages might well have been a club! Even today, as we approach the Millennium, we retain our clubs of persuasion, albeit of a less physical variety. To illustrate this in relation the field(s) of disability studies, each approach to doing disability studies - or what I will henceforth refer to as the *disciplinarity* of disability studies - generates knowledges that can themselves work as instruments of normalisation. The discourses and activities that make up different disciplinaritys, or fields of disability studies, thus tend to define and represent the boundaries of particular and discrete spaces of social, economic, political, cognitive, or ontological positions for each field's respective constituents.

All of these spaces are contained within the "logical borders and valid dimensions" (Linton 1998: 525) of the real disability studies, but are grounded in, for example, "the liberal arts" or "sociology and social policy." All of these fields simultaneously define spaces that are "not" disability studies. In other words, and echoing Foucault's belief that any disciplinary structure participates in its own disciplinarity, what is to count as the truth about disability is always the result of the kinds of institutional and discursive practices which constitute the field on the exclusion of its Others. Thus, through the process of *disciplinary enculturation*, each field of disability studies demands that students and scholars be enculturated into the cultures of the field, to the extent that they do disability studies in the particular, carefully controlled way defined by the field's disciplinarity.

Because the borders and dimensions of each field *are* delineated in a way that does not represent simply a nominal distinction - as evidenced by Linton's allusion to a "pure" disability studies in her reference to the "applied fields of disability studies" - the disciplinarity of each field of disability studies is always partly decontextualised and de-historicised. But I would therefore dispute Linton's view that (her version of) disability studies "provides an epistemology of inclusion and integration" (526). Not only are boundaries maintained by virtue of the conduit metaphor of communication, but there is a tendency to *reinforce* "the restrictive thresholds of the traditional canon," as Branfield suggests:

There are of course dangers implicit in a discourse which highlights difference and separateness. Not only can the discourse of oppression be perpetuated, but by promoting the idea of positive group specificity, of claiming that disabled people constitute an undifferentiated, homogeneous coterie, the idea of the Disabled becomes solidified and unproblematic. (1999: 399)

The disabled subject/object constituted by the different fields of disability studies becomes part of the "clubs" and "canons" of an "argument culture" (Tannen 1999) of "rock logic" or "I am right and you are wrong!" thinking (de Bono 1991) that is characteristic of structuralism. When experience is dichotomised by dualisms produced by the processes of boundary-marking and privileging, the disabled person is likened to a ball in a tennis match, where the fields are marked out and demarcated by the net. Disability-studies scholars may serve, pass, lob, smash, and volley the disabled subject/object, perhaps accumulating points along the way, but only if the ball falls within the lines as adjudged by the line judges and the umpire - those who delineate and police the

boundaries. For silent spectators, it seems that the disabled subject can only be in or out, disabled or not, as long as the fields of a disability studies based on structuralist processes engages in ongoing contests with different emphases, situated histories, or new knowledges. And as long as such contests are in progress, disability studies will be compounded by the "politics of identity, a politics of 'position' - that has gone into them" (Hall 1990: 226).

The conduit metaphor extends to the texts of disability studies. Structuralist approaches have defined literacy not in terms of the practices of readers and writers, but of the features of material texts. Such texts are commonly "deaf" to their audiences (Smith 1998), because they aim to mediate the understanding of their readers through the socially developed tools and practices of language, through technologies of writing, and through practices of classification. Assuming that readers are conduits into which textual information is poured, the abstract objectivism of texts turns dynamic streams of polysemous language into a static system. Readers are encouraged to read literally; and there is no bridge between author and reader, because textualism excludes the speaking subject her/himself.

For some readers, this is akin to a form of cultural imperialism for such texts exploit these readers' "cultural impoverishment" (Habermas 1984a, b). Cultural impoverishment refers specifically to the role-differentiation and professional specialization which have led to the reification of expert systems that exclude particular citizens from the knowledge-base involved in many social processes. One of the primary methods of exclusion is promotion of the assumption that information is the same thing as knowledge. And as van Dijk writes:

We need to explore the implications of the complex question *Who may speak or write to whom, about what, when, and in what context, or Who may participate in such communicative events in various recipient roles*, for instance as addressees, audience, bystanders and overhearers. Access may even be analysed in terms of the topics or referents of discourse, that is who is written or spoken *about*. We may assume, as for other social resources, that *more* access according to these several participant roles, corresponds with *more* social power. (1996: 86) (author's italics).

The scholarly elites of disability studies may have considerable control over the way that disability is defined *within* the discipline, but scholarly efforts in some fields of disability studies are concentrated on extending this elite knowledge to other disciplines, often at the cost of addressing patterns of access to the discipline itself.

Further, as van Dijk (1996) continues, "the hype, especially in the USA, about what is defined as 'political correctness' in academia reflects an overreaction of dominant elites against minor and local cultural shifts and minority resistance, rather than a fundamental change in prevailing academic discourse and access patterns." One example of this is the way in which most approaches to disability research, even those that place considerable emphasis on the participation of disabled people, maintain the role of disabled people as users, the researched, experiential experts, or consultants - in other words, as specialists who perform their roles *outside of the academy* and who are thus unable to influence *directly* the hegemonic basis of power that constructs disciplinary knowledge and beliefs and that manufactures disciplinary consensus. The disciplinarity of disability studies, to use a well-heeled metaphor, is for disabled people, not of disabled people.

Disciplinarity as dialogue

Thus far, I have suggested that a structuralist approach to defining the social relations between different fields of disability studies, between disability studies and other disciplines, and between disability studies and disabled people perpetuates structures and roles that create impass-

able rivers, over which it is difficult to build bridges. I have argued that structuralism's close links with both a "politic of identity" and a "conduit model" of communication serve to maintain the distance between those involved in these social relations. The space in between is nevertheless heavily populated by those who have been displaced - interdisciplinarians and disabled people among them. It seems, therefore, that to view this space as a place of production might reduce the torrents of the impassable river, allowing us to build a bridge that can act as a strategic viewpoint. Such production might arise from the replacement of conduit as a metaphor for communication, with a metaphor that emphasises the dialogic, multi-voiced, and *critical* nature of discursive exchange.

Many disciplines, more or less at the same time, have come to see the need for an awareness of language, and of the way in which language constitutes their disciplinarity, although it is recognised that linguistics - "the scientific study of language" - has not always provided the most appropriate means of studying knowledge-making processes and their social implications. Some disciplines have uncritically adopted the idea that language is simply structure; but as Paul Ricoeur notes, structuralism's epistemological decision "to remain inside the closure of the universe of signs. . . does violence to linguistic experience" (1974: 84-5). Language does not exist in a vacuum; it gets used, and it gets used in highly creative ways.

The rise in awareness of the importance of discourse has coincided with a reduction in intellectual security about what we know and what it means to know - that is, there has been a shift in epistemology and in the theorising of knowledge (Foucault 1972). Thus, the question of *how* we build knowledge has come more to the fore, and this brings issues of language and linguistic representation into sharp focus. Academic study, in fact all aspects of experience, are based on acts of classification. The building of knowledge and interpretations is very largely a process of demarcating boundaries between conceptual classes and of labelling those classes and the relationships between them. Indeed, it is through language that classification becomes possible (Lee 1992), and so language ceases to be a neutral medium for the transmission and reception of pre-existing knowledge.

The complex representations described in the introduction indicate that disability is not a singular concept, or an essence in any more than a nominal sense, to draw upon John Locke's distinction between "nominal" and "real" essence. This distinction originates in the debates between Aristotle and Plato about universals. "Real" essence connotes the Aristotelian understanding of essence as that which is most irreducible and unchanging about a thing and which can therefore be discovered by close empirical observation - and I would argue that this is characteristic of the approaches to disciplinarity described in the previous section. "Nominal" essence is merely a linguistic convenience, a classificatory fiction that we need, to categorise and to label, and which is assigned or produced, specifically by language (see Fuss, 1989, for further discussion).

In terms of nominal essence, disability becomes a network of multiple positions, constructed in and through many chains of past and present signification - "a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall 1990: 22). That is, the disabled subject is mutable. Claiming *a* subject position does not have to be the same as claiming *the* subject position, as if there can only be one, in which we all participate equally and identically, because

"Discourse". . . refers to language "in use," as a process which is socially situated. . . [D]iscourse is a means of talking and writing about and acting upon worlds, a means which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices within these worlds, and in so doing both reproduces and constructs afresh particular social-discursive practice, constrained and encouraged by more macro movements in the overarching social formation. (Candlin 1997: ix)

Therefore, I seem to have arrived at a place where the disciplinarity of disability studies must be seen as a function of dialogue and where social relations of the field(s) of disability studies must be addressed through a dialogic framework. If we were to abandon the structuralist framework that inhibits creative thinking in favour of a paradigm that privileges embodied dialogue and agency dispersed across places, time and persons - a paradigm that recognises what the Greeks call *kronos* and *kairos* - we might better challenge a number of deeply entrenched, dichotomised categories on which social conceptualisations of disability are founded, because these categories would become *interpenetrated* rather than internalised.

On one level, such a position reflects the ongoing and now familiar work within disability studies on simultaneous and multiple oppression. These accounts express a wariness of theories which seek to compartmentalise social categories, or of theories that seek to synthesise categories absolutely or set up analogies between them, as if they are isomorphic in relation to one another. They attempt to challenge the view of oppressions as additive, suggesting that layering occurs only when theorists try to keep the processes of disablement, sexualisation, gendering, and racing radically distinct. They present the alternative view that the discourses of sexuality, gender, disability, and race actually transgress (and intersect with) the discourses of position and social categorisation. I would suggest that this kind of work has wider implications for a dialogic disability studies and should be applied to a rigorous re-construction of disability across the disciplines. The very notion of dialogue suggests that disability studies must develop theoretical perspectives that, first, approach disciplinarity in terms of nonsubstantialist notions of affinity, hybridity, and multiplicity; and second, move beyond a politic of identity to a critique of the social forces that compel selves and social relations to be organised in terms of ability, as regulated by notions of normality and health.

Such perspectives would allow us to break free of structuralism, dualism, and textualism, by resituating disability studies in a framework such as that promoted by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986). Bakhtin, a social philosopher and cultural theorist who was himself disabled, saw the world as a contested space filled with multiple and conflicting senses, polyphonic and intertextual connections, and multifocal accents. The world is a field where people, socially and biographically positioned, struggle to produce meaning and identity, both individually and collectively. Ours is a world in which situated historical activity has no outside, and in which decontextualised knowledge and literal meaning are seen as the products of specific sociocultural practices. Bakhtin criticises the notion of the prototype arguing that it has been developed largely in terms of category formation and is grounded in cognitive representationalism. Categorical representations are more oriented to the objectifying perspectives and notions of internalization whereby the audience is assumed to be a passive recipient of authority.

Within Bakhtin's theory, all discursive phenomena, from national languages to a single, situated utterance, are not simply dialogic, but also dynamic, evolving local interactions of centripetal (centralizing) and centrifugal (decentralizing) forces. What emerges is not a set of rules and terms of abstract systems, but certain growth of the collective and an active appropriation of concrete sociohistorical knowledge of our complex and diverse landscape. Bakhtin's radical tolerance is not a form of tolerance that simply allows us to put up with the existence of pluralistic life-worlds. Rather, in the context of disability studies, it aims at mutual recognition and co-construction of a discipline that realizes each life world as part of a field of reciprocal influences and perspectives. This type of tolerance must become central to the interrelationship of difference in the postmodern era of uncertainty because it emphasises that truth, itself, is constituted through dialogue. Scholars of disability studies, Bakhtin might recommend,

must not reject the possibility of changing or even abandoning [their] already prepared viewpoints and positions. In the act of understanding, a struggle occurs that results in mutual change and enrichment. (Bakhtin 1986: 142)

That is to say, if we focus for a moment on the textual level of scholarship, disability scholars must become readers *par excellence*, who, in their reading within, across, and between disciplines, learn to question the ease with which, for example, visual texts such as pictures and photographs are understood as read in the same way that written texts are, particularly when these texts are presented alongside written texts.

Authors of disability textbooks must recognise that the reader's eye is not a neutral corridor (Jenks 1995); and that vision and knowledge are not simply causally related, in either direction, but are entangled with each other through the processes of situation and contextualisation. When a disciplinary text - itself a product of a living, embodied writer - passes through the lived experience of its readership, many bridges are built simultaneously, precisely because of this complexity, and the girders of each bridge will resonate differently with that text. This must become the basis for critical thought and the analysis of critical thought.

What Bakhtin's dialogics enable us to achieve is the possibility that the dichotomies created by structuralism can be re-written in a way that centres us in the productive in-between space. Within this space, sociohistoric theories are able to assert a notion of the person with particularity and agency, without resorting to an *a priori*, asocial self. This offers us a way to reconceptualise disciplinarity and disciplinary enculturation as open and heterogeneous processes, rather than as closed and monolithic structures. Disciplinarity - *doing* disability studies - can then be seen as part of the process by which people jointly constitute social worlds and identities through shared knowledge. Bakhtin understood typified representations to be grounded in actual concrete histories, which he called *chronotopes*. He highlighted the embodied chronotopes of the reader and the author in the situated activities of producing and renewing a text, suggesting that the notion of chronotopes is holistic, historical, and capable of evoking full narratives which facilitate social relations built on *understanding* and which are basic to our ontological grounding in the world.

Concluding remarks

I am more than ever convinced that letting-go of assumptions about group cohesion, and the release of the various fields of disability studies to internal dialogue, as well as to dialogue with other disciplines, would open out a much richer range of explanatory possibilities along with a greater range and depth of possibilities for social and political action. However, in this context, it is important to emphasise that I am not advocating the abandonment of a politics of identity, nor am I diminishing the importance of affirming disabled identities, whose colonisation has been integral to disabled people's social oppression.

Rather, I follow Oliver and Barnes' (1998: xv) suggestion that "constructing varying and often competing disability discourses around genetics, experience and policy may be academically expedient for some," but that "such practices are unlikely to change the materiality" of the impact of disability on disabled people's daily lives. I would argue that what really prohibits "change in the material impact of disability" is rather the fact that many disabled people are *not part* of the construction of knowledge in the different fields of disability studies. This itself happens, because limited views of access and participation are adopted. Discourse is *part of* the materiality of disabled people's lives, because it is by and through discourse that power and resistance are constituted, on many levels of social experience.

Further, a disability studies that is narrowly preoccupied with looking inwards at itself within a particular disciplinary focus fails to look at the kind of bridges that can be built with the disciplines of medicine, science, education, law, economics, philosophy, politics, and other examples of "not" disability-studies. The failure to appreciate such disciplines - for their critical involvement in disability knowledge-construction and their inextricable links to the domains of social reproduction and social power that drive national policies and media accounts - seriously impedes our progress in effecting material change.

Foucault's understanding of the relations between what he called "the discursive" and the "non-discursive" was a crucial contribution to what could subsequently be said about text-context relations. He totally changed the ways in which those relationships could be conceptualised, by rewriting hierarchies as networks, and by making it possible to think much larger sets of textual relations working across different semiotic systems, than had ever been the case with linguistic accounts of those relations (which construed the verbal and the non-verbal as distinct and separate realms).

Foucault's work suggests that exploring disability across the disciplines is not just a matter of adding inflections such as sociology, anthropology, feminism, or literature to the existing disciplinary collectivity that is disability studies, but also demands that we entirely dismantle disciplinary boundaries and look at the diverse, discrete, and interconnected moments of the construction of disability *and disciplinarity*, through discourses and associated social practices. This is the stuff of bridge-building and it is within Bakhtin's work, in my view, that we capture the significance and potential of dialogics for the interdisciplinary project of disability studies. For, as Bakhtin notes,

When cultures are closed and deaf . . . to one another, each considers itself absolute; when one language sees itself in the light of another, novelness has arrived. With novelness, two myths perish simultaneously: the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified. (1981: 430)

When perceived in dialogic terms, the disciplinarity of disability studies *becomes* a conversation about difference through sameness - a localisation of the parts, joined through strategic interpenetration and interdependence, and supporting the unity of the abstraction we call disability. Disabled people in all of their complex ways of being have the right not just to voice, but the right to be *understood*. These rights should be central to the knowledge created through disability studies, and should form the cornerstone of bridge-building to other terrains of knowledge.

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