Disability Studies, Cultural Analysis, and the Critical Practice of Technical Communication Pedagogy

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This article critically analyzes how technical communication practices both construct and are constructed by normalizing discourses, which can marginalize the experiences, knowledges, and material needs of people with disabilities. In particular, the article explores how disability studies theories can offer critical insights into research in two areas: safety communication and usability. In conclusion, the article offers ways that disability studies can intervene in the pedagogy of usability, communication technology, linguistic bias, narrative, and discourse communities.

In the past few years, cultural studies scholars (Henry, 2000; Herndl, 1993; Lay, 2000; Longo, 1998, 2000; Scott, 2003) have been exploring how technical communication practices both shape and are shaped by powerful social discourses. Drawing on Foucault, as well as other critical social theorists, these scholars have interrogated how technical communication participates in the discursive process of normalization: legitimating and subjugating knowledges, examining and controlling workplace practices, forming subjectivities, and marking bodies as normal or deviant. Arguing that the practices of technical communication often work to reinforce material social inequalities, cultural studies scholars have also demonstrated the need to intervene to contest and provide alternatives to technical communication’s regime of normalization. In these calls for critical intervention, the emerging discipline of disability studies has rarely been cited as a potential source of theory; yet disability studies has much to offer, as it is centrally concerned with interrogating “the divisions our society makes in creating the normal versus the pathological” (Linton, 1998, p. 2).

Rejecting the conventional medical model of disability that focuses on rehabilitating individuals with disabilities so that they can fit into an ableist society,1 disability...
ability studies theorists proffer a social/political model of disability that foregrounds the need to adapt social discourses and material environments to ensure equal participation for citizens of diverse abilities. In interrogating the social construction of disability and normalcy, disability studies theorists ask questions that could usefully extend current critiques of the normalizing practices of technical communication.

1. How does the social construction of citizenship and subjectivity depend upon the othering of people with disabilities? (Garland-Thomson, 1997)
2. How does the historical practice of eugenics, which sought to define bodily norms and eradicate people with disabilities who were deemed deviant, continue to inform contemporary discourses of technology, science, medicine, and public policy? (Davis, 1995; Hubbard, 1997; Russell, 1998)
3. How do visual and verbal rhetorical practices work to reinforce and/or subvert social constructions of normalcy and disability? (Brueggemann, 1999; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Wilson & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2001)

Although disability studies theory has been relatively absent from the conversation about technical communication and normalization, technical communication scholars have contributed greatly to the literature on making texts accessible to individuals with disabilities (Carter & Markel, 2001; Ray & Ray, 1998; O’Hara, 2004).2 This line of research has focused primarily on educating technical communicators about following or enhancing current standards for ensuring access. Although these scholars have demonstrated how technical communicators may effectively address the concerns of users with disabilities, they have not explored ways in which technical communication discourse is enmeshed in the broader social construction of disability and normalcy. Yet as technical communication increasingly constructs itself as a profession that assists users with disabilities, we researchers must begin to critically engage disability studies’ critiques of how professional discourses often work to reinforce normalcy and marginalize the embodied knowledges of people with disabilities (Linton, 1998).

Wilson’s (2000) “Making Disability Visible” has already begun the work of placing technical communication in dialogue with disability studies. In this article, Wilson demonstrated how a disability studies perspective can contribute to the pedagogy and theory of medical and scientific writing, arguing that “disability studies provides a unique site from which to critically examine the assumptions of medicine and science and their interrelated and mutually reinforcing discourses” (p. 151). Showing the relevance of disability studies for medical and scientific

2The Society for Technical Communicators’ (STC) AccessAbility special interest group (http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml) has also published many highly valuable newsletters addressing issues of access for users and for members of the technical communication profession.
writing pedagogy, Wilson outlined a series of activities that encourage students to read critically the ways in which medicine and science socially construct disability and to incorporate the perspectives of people with disabilities into medical/science writing. Ultimately, I seek to extend Wilson’s work by demonstrating how disability studies can also inform technical communication research and pedagogy outside of the medical and scientific realms.

Technical communication’s general focus on workplace discourse practices makes it a vital area for exploring the material consequences of the social construction of disability. Indeed, all three titles of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) address the access that people with disabilities have to employment and/or services in corporate, government, and nonprofit workplaces (O’Brien, 2004). Nevertheless, in an environment in which 93% of plaintiffs’ ADA cases fail (Colker, 1999) and many key provisions of the law are being restricted by the courts, people with disabilities still face many barriers in accessing the workplace. In view of these material conditions, it is vital that technical communicators begin to

1. Interrogate critically the social discourses of disability (and normalcy) that work to constrain workplace access.
2. Consider ways in which technical communication practices both shape and are shaped by these discourses.
3. Imagine ways in which technical communicators, both those with and those without disabilities, can intervene in or transform these discourses.

Yet the need to increase the material access of people with disabilities is certainly not the only reason technical communicators should engage with disability studies perspectives. Technical communication and disability studies share many similar concerns and thus could productively inform one another. Both technical communication and disability studies advance a social constructionist view of science and technology—a view that emphasizes the need to interrogate the ethical, social, and political effects of scientific and technical discourse. In particular, disability studies shares with feminist technical communication a concern for critiquing how scientific and technical discourses participate in the social construction of bodies in ways that reinforce social hierarchies and marginalize certain kinds of knowledges.

To ground my discussion of disability studies in technical communication, I critically explore theory and research in two areas: safety communication and usability. I then conclude by offering several pedagogical interventions that can enable teachers to integrate disability studies throughout their courses. Before delving into this analysis, however, I would first like to position myself in relation to this topic. I identify as a temporarily able-bodied person—a positioning that recognizes that disability will likely be a part of my embodied experiences at some point.
in the future, and that in a few ways it already has in the past. I also would like to note that I have come to disability studies theory rather recently in my academic work. In an early study of collaborative, medically-oriented writing in a law firm, I completely elided concerns of the social construction of disability even though this issue was highly present in the texts I was studying. Furthermore, although I always addressed disability in perfunctory ways in course readings and activities and worked to provide accommodations for individual students, I have only very recently come to see how a disability studies lens could transform my entire pedagogical practice. Thus in critically rereading scholarship on safety communication and usability from a disability studies perspective, I am in some sense critically rereading my own work as well, seeking not so much to critique previous scholarship as to begin to open up the technical communication field to the numerous insights that I believe disability studies theory can provide.

THE EUGENIC UNCONSCIOUS OF SAFETY COMMUNICATION

Seeking to investigate areas of technical communication in which the regime of normalcy is reinforced, I critically explore how disability figures in safety communication discourse. By rereading Madaus’ (1997) groundbreaking historical study of safety communication through a disability studies frame, I demonstrate ways in which the development of safety communication was ultimately enmeshed in normalizing/eugenic discourses that sought to marginalize or eradicate people with disabilities.3

Taking a feminist historiographic perspective, Madaus (1997) told the fascinating story of numerous women who founded the discipline of health and safety com-

3My argument here is indebted to Davis’ (1995) work on the concomitant development of normalcy and eugenics in the 19th and 20th centuries. According to Davis, “the word ‘normal’ as ‘constituting, conforming to, not deviating or differing from, the common type or standard, regular, usual’ only enters the English language around 1840” (p. 24). Interestingly, the notion of normal was accompanied by the 19th century development of the statistical bell curve: “The norm pins down that majority of the population that falls under the arch of the standard-shaped bell curve . . . When we think of bodies, in a society in which the concept of norm is operative, then people with disabilities will be thought of as deviants” (p. 29).

This concept of the norm (that could be tracked and measured) gave rise to the eugenics movement. Ultimately, the division of the bell curve “into quartiles, ranked order, and so on creates a new kind of ‘ideal.’ . . . The new ideal of ranked order is powered by the imperative of the norm, and then supplemented by the notion of progress, human perfectibility, and the elimination of deviance, to create a dominating hegemonic vision of what the human body should be. Although people tend to associate eugenics with Nazi-like racial supremacy, it is important to recognize that eugenics was not the trade of a fringe group of right-wing fascist maniacs. Rather, it became the common practice of many, if not most, European and American citizens.” (Davis, 1995, p. 35)
munication in the early part of the 20th century. In telling this story, Madaus sought to recover and value the voices of previously overlooked female technical communicators who critiqued the ideological implications of science and reimagined technical communication as a public, activist practice. Madaus aptly noted that these women were master rhetors who greatly modified their messages for scientific, governmental, and public audiences. In addition, the women combined appeals to scientific logos (statistics) with emotionally powerful narratives of workers who were harmed by industrial conditions. Drawing on the work of Waddell (1990) and Sauer (1993), Madaus singled out the use of emotion as a particularly important device for feminist rhetorical action: “The ability of emotional appeals to motivate policy change is often overlooked or devalued (Waddell, 1990). Eastman’s work stands in mark contrast to contemporary accident reports which ‘privilege the rational (male) objective voice and silence human suffering’ (Sauer, ‘Sense’ 63)” (p. 265). Elucidating the powerful appeals in Eastman’s (1910) *Work Accidents and the Law*, Madaus noted that Eastman persuasively demonstrated that over 509 men a year were seriously injured in Pittsburgh in industrial accidents and then “she increased the [emotional] impact of these figures by extrapolating a ten-year figure, 5,000, which prompted her to imagine a little city of cripples” (p. 264). Using the work of Garland-Thomson (2002) as a frame, one can move from seeing the “city of cripples” quote as an example of pathos to conceptualizing it as an example of the sentimental gaze that “produces the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor and invoking pity, inspiration, and frequent contributions …. In such appeals, impairment becomes the stigma of suffering, transforming disability into a project that morally enables a nondisabled rescuer” (p. 63).

This gaze is especially apparent in the photos taken by Lewis Hine that accompany Eastman’s (1910) text, photos whose pathetic appeals Madaus (1997) praised. In one photo, a worker stands with one hand outside his overalls and one hand tucked within them; the caption reads, “THE WOUNDS OF WORK: When a man’s hand is mutilated he keeps it out of sight” (Eastman, 1910, p. 144). In this way, the photo caption exalts able-bodiedness and invites readers to pity the subject for his unsuccessful attempt to achieve the appearance of normalcy. In another photo, a man with only one arm stands on a front porch with his family, all of whom appear very sorrowful. The caption reads, “One arm and four children” (p. 153). In this photo, the male worker is metonymically referred to by his disability—his one arm—and the audience is asked to pity him because he can no longer

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Although the American eugenic movement did certainly have strong racist, sexist, and classist dimensions, it was also very centrally concerned with the identification and eradication of disability, through such methods as institutionalization and forced sterilization of women with disabilities. And although the eugenics movement is now officially discredited, its assumptions continue to inform many discursive and material practices that seek to eradicate disability (often through genetic means) rather than transform society to adapt to it (Hubbard, 1997; Russell, 1998).
provide for his family. In this way, Eastman’s text advances the cause of industrial safety by evoking the disabled person as a sentimental object, putting all emphasis on preventing disability and overlooking the need to adapt social institutions to make the lives of those with disabilities more livable. In addition to evoking the sentimental gaze, Eastman also drew upon the eugenic gaze, which classifies people with disabilities as problems to be eradicated. Through extensive qualitative and quantitative analyses, Eastman outlined the great social costs of disability: “Every helpless cripple left an unwilling burden on those who can ill afford to support him is a burden upon society” (p. 166). By constructing a pathetic appeal that evoked horror at the great burden of a “city of cripples,” Eastman ultimately gained power for her (admittedly important) cause of workplace safety by appealing to unconscious social desires to eliminate people with disabilities from the polis. Thus, although it is important to value Eastman’s significant contributions to safety communication—as Madaus powerfully called for—scholars must also be careful to interrogate critically the eugenic unconscious of safety communication—the ways that safety and normalcy are inextricably bound.

This critical reevaluation of Eastman’s (1910) historic use of disability images in safety communication is all the more pressing because disability continues to appear problematically in contemporary workplace safety reports. For example, Schlosser’s (2002) highly persuasive exposé about the appalling labor conditions in meat-packing plants relates the case of Kenny, a worker who was severely injured numerous times. Schlosser wrote, “Once strong and powerfully built, he [Kenny] now walks with difficulty, tires easily, and feels useless, as though his life were over. He is forty-six years old” (p. 190). Effectively using the sentimental image of Kenny to dramatize the consequences of unregulated industry, Schlosser took for granted that Kenny would feel useless; he did not critically consider the social conditions that make it difficult for Kenny to imagine/live life with his disability.

As technical communicators increasingly take on the vital and important work of advocating for worker and consumer safety, we must be mindful that we do not unwittingly reinforce destructive images of the social implications of disability. To begin integrating disability studies critique into safety communication scholarship, we might ask the following questions:

1. How has safety communication historically relied on eugenic arguments about the need to mitigate the so-called economic burden of disability on society? To what extent does this eugenic unconscious persist in safety rhetoric today?

2. How do safety communication narratives draw upon problematic sentimental narratives of disability as an individual tragedy to be pitied? How could safety communication narratives integrate a social/political view of disability while still dramatizing the real harm that workplace accidents cause?
3. Where do people with disabilities appear (and not appear) in safety communication texts? Are people with disabilities relegated to the role of victims of poor safety procedures? How might safety communication texts address and be cowritten by people with disabilities as vital participants in the process of creating and maintaining safe environments and products?

4. What particular safety challenges do people with disabilities face as workers and consumers? How might attempts to make workplaces and products safer for people with disabilities result in insights that could improve safety more generally?

USABILITY DISCOURSE AND THE TROUBLE WITH NORMALCY

Although issues of disability access have remained largely separate from the scholarly conversation in safety communication, usability scholars have been at the forefront of considering ways to increase access for users with disabilities. By conducting a close, disability studies-inflected reading of two foundational articles on usability and disability (Ray & Ray, 1998; Salvo, 2001), I hope to open up a conversation about how technical communication’s rhetoric of disability accessibility may inadvertently reinforce problematic constructions of normalcy, even as it simultaneously increases access for people with disabilities in positive ways.

Technical Communication as Rehab Science

Ray and Ray (1998) began their discussion of designing for users with visual impairments by noting that “as technical communicators, we often assume that our audience will interact with information in the same way that we do: we see pictures, fonts, colors, links, and page layouts, and we read, interpret, or click them as appropriate. The fact is, though, that a significant portion of our audience—people with visual impairments—cannot readily interact with information in this way. Many visually impaired people require the help of adaptive technologies” (Ray & Ray, 1998, p. 573). Although Ray and Ray gave a very useful summary of the challenges often faced by visually impaired users in interacting with online texts (and also offer cogent suggestions for accessible design), their language implicitly constructs the we of technical communicators as people with normal vision, thereby subtly marginalizing blind and visually impaired people from the profession. In other words, this article implicitly conceives of technical communication as a kind of rehabilitative profession of experts who assist those with disabilities in accessing information. In this way, disability is constructed as something to be accommodated (a much better move than something to be ignored), but it is not yet seen as “enabling insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, and sensory” (Brueggemann, 2002, p. 121). Although
Ray and Ray provided very valuable information on accessible design, they did not imagine the possibility that technical communicators with disabilities may have embodied knowledges that could transform and improve Web design practice for all users.

Furthermore Ray and Ray’s (1998) equation of accessibility with adaptive technologies—a common move in most articles of this type—also inadvertently reinforces the ideology of normalcy. We technical communicators must question the implications of how the adaptive technologies used by people with disabilities are implicitly defined in opposition to the technologies (i.e., market-leading Web browsers) used by everyone else. After all, dominant technologies are adaptive as well; the problem is that they are adapted to “normal” users and thus exclude many other people. Rather than just ensuring that our texts can be read by adaptive technologies, we should begin to argue for deep structural changes that could make all technologies more accessible and that could provide all people with more choices for accessing content. For example, although screen (text-to-speech) readers are an invaluable tool for many users with visual impairments or blindness, we must question why so many websites present content only in text format in the first place. Rather than putting the onus on the user to employ adaptive technology to turn text to speech, we might provide audio, textual, and visual versions of Web content and let all users—even those who do not identify as having a disability—choose the format that is best for them.

Indeed many so-called adaptive technologies can ultimately open up communication possibilities for wide varieties of people. For example, one of the first typewriters was developed as an assistive technology for the blind (Adler, 1973), and one of the earliest forms of synchronous electronic conferencing (ENFI) was developed for deaf and hard-of-hearing students at Gallaudet University (Barclay, 1995). Subverting the opposition between normal and “adaptive” technologies, we can begin to open up a space in which the embodied experiences and knowledges of users with disabilities provide insights for improving communication practices for all people.

Enabling/Normalizing Participatory Design

Salvo’s (2001) “Ethics of Engagement: User-Centered Design and Rhetorical Methodology” came much closer to advocating a model of usability based on the notion of disability as enabling insight. In this article, Salvo drew upon Bakhtinian discourse theory and participatory (or Scandinavian) design practices to argue that designers should adopt a dialogic ethic of collaboratively developing products with users in local contextual environments. As one of three examples of this kind of practice, Salvo discussed Whitehouse’s (1999) work of collaboratively designing tactile signage with users of the Lighthouse, “an office designed to serve the needs of the blind and sight impaired. …The first insight the users provided was
that many of the users of the Lighthouse office space do not read Braille. …Users had loss of sight in common, but very little else, being of all ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, levels of experience with hearing and touch to compensate for sight loss. In this case, scientific research methods did not apply. What allowed the designers to create useful information-rich products for this situation was their interaction and communication with their clients” (p. 283).

Salvo (2001) discussed a compelling example of ways in which the involvement of people with disabilities in design processes can be transformative. Yet, there is something potentially troubling in how the Lighthouse story of accessible design is positioned in the article as a whole. The other two case studies that Salvo cited do not address disability in any specific way. Furthermore, Salvo did not include disability studies scholarship in outlining theoretical support for participatory design practices. As Salvo was ultimately arguing for a model of design that is highly local and contextual, he ended up implicitly suggesting that disability as insight most applies in institutional spaces in which people with disabilities are prominent. As many local contexts in the world today exclude people with disabilities, the progressive potential of collaborating with users may have limits. If all the potential local users of a technology harbor unconscious ableist biases, they might create a usable yet exclusionary technology. In other words, although participatory design can be a great model for reconceiving of usability in ways that value the perspectives of people with disabilities, a disability studies cultural critique demands that we (at times) challenge the assumptions of users in normalized contexts.

Ultimately, technical communicators must move from seeing disability accessibility as a concern particular to a subset of users and begin to reimagine it as a source of transformative insight into design practice for all. In the following section on pedagogical interventions, I offer numerous tentative suggestions for how to begin this process.

DISRUPTING NORMALCY: PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

Within technical communication, cultural studies scholars have developed pedagogies that blend critique and intervention. Arguing that scholars must teach students to critically analyze the social implications of how technical communication texts are produced, distributed, interpreted, and consumed, Scott (2004) offered a pedagogy that encourages students to “become more aware and critical of the ways texts are transformed, more aware of the broader conditions shaping them, and more attentive to their multiple effects, especially on users. But this critical awareness can only be the beginning of a cultural studies approach; it must be accompanied by the impulse to respond ethically to the problematic functions and effects of texts” (Scott, 2004, p. 215).
Extending this cultural studies pedagogy, disability studies calls for teaching students to interrogate and to intervene in the ways in which technical communication practices work to reinforce ableist hierarchies. To this end, I offer some suggestions for how disability studies could inform instruction on communication technology, usability, linguistic bias, narrative, and discourse communities.

Rethinking Discourses of Assistive Technology and Usability

When teaching students about Web design, technical communication pedagogues must continue to provide instruction in adhering to Web accessibility standards. Often, in discussing standards, we technical communicators focus on ensuring compatibility with assistive (or adaptive) technologies such as screen readers. Although teaching about assistive technology and Web standards is an essential step in increasing access, we must begin to trouble the binary between normal and assistive technologies. Challenging the naturalization of conventional ableist technologies, we should teach students to view all technologies as assistive. For example, both Internet Explorer and the JAWS Screen Reader can be seen as technologies that assist users in reading Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) code.

Too often in our computer classrooms, so-called assistive technologies are segregated. We may have only one station with screen-reading or text-zooming software, a station that is reserved for users who are blind or visually impaired, or for testing of websites for accessibility. Video and multimedia texts often are captioned only at the request of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Speech-to-text composing software is also often similarly segregated. Challenging this marginalization of technologies used by people with disabilities, we should create pedagogical environments in which all students use and critically analyze screen-reading, captioning, and speech-to-text technologies. The point of these activities would not be to give students the experience of being a disabled user (a largely impossible and questionable goal), but to get students to see how the experience of using various assistive communication technologies can help open up possibilities for reimagining communication design. (Students who were already regular users of these technologies would also gain the opportunity to reflect on them critically.)

For example, students could conduct a contrastive analysis of their experiences reading a website with a conventional Web browser and with a screen reader. Some questions students could consider include

1. How does your understanding of the website differ in the two assistive media? What elements of the website were emphasized and de-emphasized in each of the media?
2. What are the potential advantages of hearing a website? What kind of possibilities does this open up?
3. How would website design principles change if listening to a website was the dominant mode of communication?
4. How might a website be redesigned to provide options for users to choose to audio, visual, or textual versions of content?

In this way, students would come to see assistive technologies as sources of insight into design processes rather than just as marginal tools to be accommodated. This activity could also benefit teachers in rethinking their own pedagogical websites (ideally with student input). In addition to looking at Web technologies, students could also consider examples of common household products. By having students read a case study of the development of assistive household utensils (Center for Universal Design, 2000), teachers could demonstrate how many of the revolutions in utensil design (e.g., the development of more comfortable, larger grips and more visible and tactile markings) initially began as assistive technologies for individuals with mobility and visual impairments. For a kinesthetic learning experience, teachers could have students actually use the old and new versions of the utensils, coming to recognize how these assistive technologies ultimately made such activities as measuring and vegetable peeling easier for everyone.

In addition to critically interrogating assistive technology discourses in which people with disabilities are highly present (albeit in problematic ways), we technical communication scholars must also critically intervene in broader usability discourses in which people with disabilities are often absent or marginalized. Most discussions of usability methodologies center on how much input the user has in the design of the document or of the technological product; traditional models of usability testing often involve users after a product or document has been developed, whereas other more recent approaches such as participatory design and contextual inquiry involve users much more intimately in development processes. Yet in teaching students to evaluate usability methodologies, we must do more than teach them to interrogate users’ levels of participation and power; rather, we must teach students to question how definitions or selections of average users ultimately may work to reinforce the ideology of normalcy.

Some questions that could guide critical discussion and critical reflective writing about usability include:

1. When technical communicators conduct a task analysis to prepare to write a manual, what kinds of assumptions do they make about the abilities of the users who will have to perform the task?
2. When usability tests are conducted to find the most common problems users would have with a document or product, to what extent are the concerns of users with disabilities addressed and given prominence?
3. If technical communicators work on a participatory design project with users in an office that is inaccessible for people with disabilities, will they merely reinforce the ableist biases of the users they are serving?
4. How could the perspectives of users with disabilities ultimately lead to design improvements that can benefit all users?

In addition to having students reflect critically on these issues, both cultural studies and disability studies approaches demand that students and teachers consider ways to intervene in social constructions of assistive technology and usability. For a start, students and teachers could work together to begin to transform normalizing technological environments on campus. Working collaboratively, students could research and draft persuasive proposals about how campus courseware programs could be made more accessible to users with disabilities and about how assistive technologies should be more widely available to all students. Extending this work, students and teachers could collaboratively create course materials that enable all users to benefit from choices in how information is presented (visually, textually, aurally, and kinesthetically).

Critiquing Linguistic Ableism

As a result of feminist interventions (Sauer, 1993, 1994; Vaugh, 1989), we technical communication teachers now commonly teach students to consider the gendered power dynamics of language use and to avoid explicitly sexist language practices (generic masculine pronouns, sexist metaphors). Extending feminist pedagogical perspectives on the relationship between language and power, disability studies asks us to uncover and challenge the pervasiveness of linguistic ableism (Linton, 1998), that is, to consider how the conventions of the English language ultimately work to reinforce the ideology of normalcy. To give students a good introduction to the political implications of naming disability, I recommend assigning and discussing Linton’s (1998) highly readable chapter “Reassigning Meaning” (pp. 9–33). In this chapter, Linton reconceptualized disability as a social/political identity rather than a medical designation. She then critiqued numerous naming practices that work to restrict social/political agency of people with disabilities: pejorative attacking words (cripple, deformed, maimed, freak); condescending words (challenged, special); passive, victim words (confined to a wheelchair, stricken with). In addition, Linton critiqued the common tendency for people who do not have disabilities to speak of disability in terms of overcoming. “The popular phrase overcoming a disability is used most often to describe someone with a disability who seems competent and successful in some way. This idea is reinforced by the equally confounding statement ‘I never think of you as disabled.’” An implication of these statements is that the other members
of the group from which the individual has supposedly moved beyond are not as brave, strong, or extraordinary as the person who has ‘overcome’ that designation” (Linton, pp. 17–18).

Many well-meaning students might not see the problem with complimenting people for rising above their disabilities and therefore might later draw on this trope in professional documents such as performance appraisals and recommendation letters. Through reading and discussing Linton’s (1998) text, students can begin to interrogate the subtly ableist implications of overcoming rhetoric, noting ways in which this rhetoric impedes the kinds of collective social change necessarily to address ableist oppression.

Yet this discussion of naming disability is only the beginning of an interrogation of linguistic ableism. Drawing implicitly on Mitchell’s (2002) work on the material implications of disability metaphor, I ask students to begin listing metaphors and expressions that reference disability. Some examples include blind, blindspot, fall on deaf ears, dumbing down, crazy, and idiot. After generating a substantial list of metaphors with the class, teachers can then ask students to analyze them. Why is it that all (or most) of the metaphors that use disability carry negative connotations? What do these metaphors reveal about how our culture views disability? How might these metaphors help construct the reality of experiencing disability in our culture? By doing this activity early in the course, teachers can encourage students to interrogate disability metaphors in all the texts that they read and write.

Incorporating Disability Autobiography

In the past few years, scholars have argued against the traditional devaluing and exclusion of narrative texts from professional communication study. As Perkins and Blyler (1999) demonstrated, the failure to grant narrative serious scholarly attention has been accompanied by the exclusion of a range of topics from consideration. For example, feminist scholars have asserted that, “as narrative ways of knowing have been marginalized, women’s experiences and some types of discourse often produced by women have suffered neglect as well” (p. 21).

Extending this discussion of the politics of narrative, I suggest that a disability studies pedagogy also necessitates an inclusion of heretofore excluded narrative texts into the technical communication classroom. If we limit ourselves to analyzing technical and professional (legal, medical, rehabilitative) texts about disability, we will end up reinforcing the normalization construction of disability as an individ-

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4This discussion of linguistic ableism is particularly pressing because metaphoric uses of disability are actually quite common in the technical communication scholarly literature. Some examples include dumbing down (Mazur, 2000; Kostelnick, 1998), idiot (Johnson, 1998), blind yourself (Hart, 2000), blinding influence (Dragga & Voss, 2003), and blind spots (Uljin & St. Amant, 2000).
ual problem or case to be fixed, thereby deadening the agency of those with disa-

Although one could include a number of texts to accomplish this, I suggest a re-
cent edited collection as particularly salient to the workplace focus of most technical communication classes. O’Brien (2004) juxtaposed numerous fictional and auto-
biographic stories of disability-based discrimination faced by employees and patrons of public and private workplaces along with legal commentary about how these narratives might be viewed in terms of recent ADA case law. This tactic of int-
erspersing commentary with narrative effectively highlights the limiting ways in which ADA case law has defined disability and the lack of agency it affords people with disabilities who seek to articulate their own identities and needs. In addition to introducing students to important aspects of disability law and policy that they will need to know on the job, this collection would also encourage students to inter-
terrogate the limitations of current disability policies, imagining alternatives to ex-
isting practices.

Although I think that autobiographical disability narratives offer an important corrective to ableist professional discourses, technical communication scholars should be careful not to celebrate disability autobiography uncritically as repre-
sentations of reality. As Mitchell (2000) demonstrated, some disability autobiogra-
phies work against a social/political understanding of disability, at times reinforcing problematic tropes of disability experience as an individual problem to be overcome (self-reliance) or an individual tragedy to be pitied (sentimentality). In other words, although autobiographical narratives of disability can offer important insights, they too must be critically interrogated for the material implications of how they construct disability identities.

Challenging Discourse Community Norms

In contrast to conventional technical communication pedagogies, which teach stu-
dents how to assimilate the norms of professional and organizational discourse communities, cultural studies pedagogies seek to teach students, as Herndl (1993) wrote, to “participate in professional discourse, but also to recognize it as contin-
gent and ideologically interested,” thereby enabling students to “escape the ‘cul-
ture of silence’ fostered by an uncritical attitude to hegemonic discourse” (p. 225). Yoking critique and intervention, Henry (2000) had his professional writing stu-
dents conduct autoethnographic projects in which they both analyzed and chal-
enged the discursive practices that form their subjectivities and that constrain their actions as professional writers. Extending this pedagogical work, disability studies theory can open additional critical questions that students can ask in textual and ethnographic analyses of discourse communities:
1. Are people with diverse abilities visible in the textual and visual representations of the community? If not, why not? If so, what do the representations tell you about how disability is viewed within this community?
2. What forms or modes of communication (visual, print, oral) are privileged and devalued in the community? Who would most likely be included and excluded from participation in the privileged forms of communication?
3. What material and virtual spaces does the community inhabit? For what kinds of bodies were these spaces designed? What bodies are excluded from full participation in these spaces?

Following this kind of analysis, students could then produce a persuasive professional document (memo, proposal, presentation) in which they make specific recommendations about how a particular organization or profession could change its practices to be more inclusive of people with diverse abilities.

Enabling Insights/Transforming Realities

Almost all technical communication practices are embedded in the construction of normalcy in one way or another. Thus integrating disability studies cultural critique is not a matter of adding one assignment or one activity. Rather, just as we integrate audience analysis into almost everything we teach, we should also consider how disability may offer insight into the myriad communication situations we face as teachers, as professionals, and as students. As Davis (1995) noted, “the consideration of disability … rather than being a marginal and eccentric focus of study, goes to the heart of issues about representation, communication, language, ideology, and so on” (p. 124). Through a sustained engagement with disability studies, technical communicators can continue to reimagine the field in ways that productively contribute to the material social changes necessary to create a more equitable, accessible society.

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REFERENCES


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