

## Including Women with Disabilities in Women & Disability Studies

*Maria Barile*

In defining feminist pedagogy, theorist Linda Brinskin (1990) suggests three basic premises: she states first that, “Feminist pedagogy starts from the acknowledgement of women’s oppression and speaks to the gendered characters...” She then states, “...to develop a feminist pedagogy one must unravel the contradictions of women’s experience (p. 1).” Lastly, she discusses power roles in student-teacher relationships.

I propose that these three premises are equally applicable to women studies with respect to the inclusion of issues concerning women with disabilities. The proposal for identifying exclusion and indexing inclusion can be equally applied to the emerging disability studies. Herein, I will suggest other ideas that need to be explored and built into feminist pedagogy to provide diversity and inclusion. The process that feminist pedagogy must adopt has to be inclusive of both theory (teaching and research) and of practices in which we engage in our daily lives.

### **Pedagogical Exclusion**

There are four major influences on pedagogical exclusion: 1) non-flexible requirements set up by programs, 2) the restrictive traditional methods of teaching, 3) exclusionary theoretical perspectives and 4) exclusionary instructional materials.

Much like the disability movements and women's movements of the 1970s and 1980s, disability studies and women studies are most often lacking in scholarship that informs us of theoretical and practical realities of and about women with disabilities. Specifically, the curricula lacks knowledge constructed from various disabled women's positions. Such constructions must be subjective and varied since disablement (both body and social) is experienced differently by various groups. Areas of difference that breed imbalances in the construction of disablement, for example, include those between men and women (Morris, 1993); between those who become disabled at different stages of life; among those who have different political and philosophical positions; among those whose views or understandings of body politics differ; and between those who perceive their disabilities as illnesses or physical limitations, and those who hold more socially constructed /political understandings of their realities.

The few courses directly about women with disabilities, emerging primarily from women studies, provide only an overview of the complexity of disabled women's realities. Either the research and instructional material used is not always a direct product of the lives of women with disabilities, or these materials focus on a "uni-view"—an often accepted dominant view about disability within women studies. Feminist scholar Jenny Morris (1993) maintains that feminist research cannot add women with disabilities without proper analysis, just as women's issues could not simply be added as subject matter in male-dominated scholarship. Feminist scholarship that simply adds disabled women to its existing curriculum or to its research as another element of diversity without proper context is, in effect, furthering (unintentional as it may be) the notion that women with disabilities are only an afterthought. This results in the omission of specific issues that concern women with disabilities in areas such as reproductive rights and violence against women.



## Identifying Core Contradictions

In the 1940s and 1950s, students in medicine and health-related fields were taught about women's issues as "medical issues (Ehreneich & English, 1979)." Similarly, the issues of "impaired bodies" have been taught for years in disciplines such as medicine, rehabilitation and medical ethics (Hahn, 1991, Amundson, 1992). Teaching exclusively about "impaired bodies" from rehabilitation and individualistic approaches is not what disability studies is about (Linton, p. 124). Linton points out that disability studies adds a critical dimension to "pre-existing thinking about issues in civic and pedagogical culture (p. 118)." A curriculum of disability studies would look at issues of disablement from social justice perspectives and encourage students to critique existing policies and practices and alternative scholarly perspectives and disciplines. In philosophy, for example, the historical significance given to "normal" vs. "diversity" of bodies and minds is at the core of the oppression of women with disabilities and non-disabled women (Sampson, 2003; Tremain, 2001; Silver, 1998). New scholarship in these areas can be the nexus in which women with disabilities and non-disabled women can find common ground.

Women studies scholarship informs us that the traditional style of teaching did not include, and often excluded, women's learning patterns. By leaving out the daily experiences of women as housewives, mothers, etc., pedagogy often excluded women as learners and teachers. For example, in restrictive academic environments requiring intensive study for specific examinations given on set dates with no regard for the circumstances in the lives of learners, women who were unable to study because they were caring for sick children at home were being penalised. This is equally true of students with disabilities who come into school systems that have no adaptation. Often these students are penalised for not keeping up with students who need no adaptations. In the language of the social model of disability, these situations are problems of the individualistic approach, in which

the individual must adapt to a 'disabling environment' (Oliver, 1996).

Other factors that impede inclusion are courses in which the techniques are entirely directed from a male-constructed knowledge of the world, a construction in which women and women's contributions are rarely mentioned (Oakley, 1981; Vickers, 1982). Even within most women studies and disability studies programs, the previous example of the student/mother can easily become real for women with disabilities. The program is designed with a social construct of non-disabled women in mind, or from a disabled-male perspective; very little is presented to students about the lives of disabled women. For example, women studies and political science courses often make mention of women's suffrage in America, yet rarely include the fact that Helen Keller marched next to non-disabled women in many liberation marches (Herrmann, 1999). These factors can emerge only if gender analysis and teaching methods are implemented from alternative viewpoints. We must look at the locus of the problem from different perspectives, analyzing variables such as the lives of women as mothers, victims/survivors in a non-egalitarian society and the imbalance of power from a socio-political perspective (Malhotra, 2003; Tremain, 2001; Silver, 1998; Barnes, 2002). The challenge for any instructor is to find facts that will both inform and intrigue students, so that they can further expand theoretical knowledge.

### **Issues of Power**

A more contentious point explored by Briskin (1988) regarding women in women studies is the issue of power. Briskin cites bell hooks with regards to the relationships between students and teachers and issues of power:

To have a revolutionary feminist pedagogy we must first focus on the teacher-student relationship and the issue of power. How do we as feminist teachers use power in a way



that is not coercive, dominating? Many women have difficulty asserting power in the feminist classroom for the fear that to do so would be to exercise domination. Yet we must acknowledge that our role as teacher is a position of power over others. We can use that power in ways that diminish or in ways that enrich and it is this choice that should distinguish feminist pedagogy from ways of teaching that reinforces domination. (p. 29)

Teachers with disabilities are, at this point in time, among the first generation; for them and their students, the challenge is to understand the disparity or “flip-side” of power. Disabled instructors may be, on the one hand, in a position of greater power within the classroom, and still perhaps in other areas of their lives be in positions of lesser “perceived power.” Still, such individuals have both the challenge and the privilege of grounding a new generation.

In considering the flip-side of the power issue, teachers must acknowledge the historical positions assigned to disabled persons as ‘inferior,’ ‘having lives not worthy of living’ (Morris, 1991). These historical positions may influence how both students and faculty perceive the professor with a disability. There may also be differences worth considering between a newly hired professor with a disability and a professor who already has a teaching position and becomes disabled. What will be the interaction and expectation of the two different professors? Will her or his knowledge be recognised for its own merits?

The newly hired professors with disabilities have several challenges. First, like all academics, they must prove the ability to teach. Like in any other job, disabled individuals have the responsibility of acknowledging the usual discomfort that may be present both with colleagues and students. Women and members of visible minorities are somewhat more prevalent in the current generation of academia; therefore, both students and faculty are more comfortable with their presence. Due to this inclusion of women and visible minorities, the subject matter of courses they

teach becomes practical and not just theoretical. The presence of professors with disabilities likewise enriches students' learning experiences.

### **Toward Pedagogy of Distinctive Feminist Standpoint on Disability**

Feminist pedagogy can play an important role in the inclusion of disability epistemology. To do so, it must insert "theoretical curb-cuts" (elements of theory that identify and connect the social/political and personal ways in which lives of women with disabilities are similar and simultaneously different from each other and from those of non-disabled women) and physical and technological access (Barile & Michèle, 2000). At the planning stage of their courses, professors must incorporate methods and theories that are in-sync with feminist principles of equality, and must be inclusive of diverse styles of learning concerning that content. As Mary Mahowald (1998) puts it:

A feminist standpoint imputes privileged status to non-dominant perspectives not because those perspectives are more valid or more accurate (although sometimes they are) than the dominant perspective but because nondominant perspectives are typically missing from the perspective that dominates society at large. (p. 210)

Women's life experiences differ depending on their positions within given social structures. In the case of women with disabilities, there is the experience of cumulative oppression constructed from two incongruent viewpoints. Subject matter for courses must include these social and practical ramifications of the reality of women with disabilities. For instance, it must address mothers with disability-specific issues that cannot be met by services as they are presently structured. An example of the benefits of such inclusion involves the study of economics and poverty among women. An economic analysis of poverty for



women with disability not only implies lower income, but also brings to light several other issues. Elwan's (1999) report on poverty informs us that:

Disability rates for women seem to be higher than those for men in developed countries, and lower in developing countries. Lower female rates may indicate that severe impairments may be male-dominated, and/or females with disabilities may be under-reported or may receive less care and die sooner. For the childbearing age groups, female rates tend to be slightly higher, possibly because of ill health resulting from too many pregnancies, inadequate health and medical care, and poor nutrition." (p.5)

Moreover, this report also links gender to poverty and health issues:

In some communities, disabled girls receive less care and food, and have less access to health care and rehabilitation services and fewer education and employment opportunities. They also tend to have lower marriage prospects than disabled men, and can be at risk of being abused physically and mentally. (p.18)

Any economic analysis must factor in expenditures due to disabling social structures that require additional materials to fulfill basic needs such as adapted housing and technologies to adapt disabling workplaces (Barile, 2002). Elwan's report found that once the extra disability-related costs were factored in, "The proportion [of disabled people living under the poverty line] increased to almost a half (p. 23)." In researching or teaching about human reactions to any disabling situation and/or disabling environment, we must take gender into account as an individual variable that interacts and produces specific results. Human geography tells us that space can either free or restrict individuals'

movements. Some empirical questions may be: how does the inaccessible space hinder safety for women with disabilities? How does that affect choice for disabled women in various parts of the world? (Chouinard, 1997; Imrie, 1996).

Feminist pedagogy must include specific voices of women with disabilities in all bodies that determine curricula for women studies and disability studies, both in teaching and in conducting research. One of the objectives of disability studies/women studies should be to dispel the notion that disabled people/women are objects and that actions are performed upon them. In the case of education, we must stop using people with disabilities exclusively as passive objects for learning. Educators, disabled or not, must include the perspectives of women and/or men who live the reality of disability using a variety of modes in the curriculum, not just in the form of videos in which students and teachers speak in abstract terms. The participation of women with disabilities compels discussion in real terms; therefore, bringing in women with disabilities from various viewpoints on disabled living would be ideal. Bringing in non-disabled representatives is not the same as bringing in people with disabilities. These two distinctive standpoints—living with a disability and living/working with people with disabilities—produce two different perceptions of reality, each with merits of its own. It is necessary that questions of power between these two groups be addressed.

Like instructors in women studies, in black/African-American studies and in other studies involving oppressed groups, people with disabilities who choose to teach are driven by the search for epistemological, ontological journey of ideological discovery. Thus, their presence in departments needs to be encouraged whenever possible. Such outreach can extend beyond the classroom. Universities can advance scholarship of and about women with disabilities by conducting co-operative research that includes women with disabilities as primary researchers, collaborators and partners in studies about women's lives.

The academic world must struggle to promote diversity of view points when research and teaching is based on the dominant





view of any given moment, or when research hypotheses and analyses are based on funding that promotes a dominant position. To do otherwise will not service the students or society.

Disability studies and women studies have both the obligation and privilege of learning from the lives and experience of women with disabilities, and of including them as educators. Their participation would assist students, disabled or not, in critically questioning conventional knowledge about elements that have historically promoted oppression of persons with disabilities including disabling environments and policies along with the roles of the impaired bodies and language.

*Maria Barile is a disability activist and a co-founder of Dis-Abled Women's Network Canada and its local affiliate Action des femmes handicapées (Montréal).*

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