



This Is Broken:

Disability at Smith College & Recommendations for Administration

Cait Dougherty · ANT 200 · Spring 2019

Introduction

An enduring memory of my own first experience with college education, granted to me in high school by a professor in the graphic design department of the college where I was dual-enrolled, is the phrase, “this is broken.” Used to comic effect on the now-defunct blog of the same name, formerly maintained by the author and Stanford Business school graduate Seth Godin, this phrase captures succinctly the often-humorous and always disastrous consequences of thoughtless, hasty, and just-plain-bad design.

It is my go-to verbal observation for my unfortunately frequent encounters with any design, infrastructure, architecture, methodology, etcetera that are so awful, counterintuitive, or wrong, they could only be captured by this phrase which at once names the issue at hand and inscribes a subtle call-to-action. Indeed, for every laughable observation, like when all of the toilet paper dispensers have been installed in one of your college’s bathrooms such that the directions which implore one to “INSTALL WITH THIS SIDE DOWN” stare decidedly *up*

at you from their odd placement in the stall, for every “this is broken!” moment like this, there is an underlying, but pressing, “this must be fixed!” moment as well.

Summary

In this brief, I first make note of the literature which guided our structuring of this project, including articles on disability studies, “crip theory,” and accessibility in higher education. This is followed by the context for the formulation of our research process and the goal of our project. Finally, I consider the challenges we encountered in the course of this project and the recommendations for administration we can make based on the results of our semester’s efforts.

Background

When we began this project in our Anthropology colloquium, we as Smith College students were by and large in collective acknowledgment of a “this is broken” moment. For us, the assertion, as made by Marshak et al., that students with

disabilities may be unaware of the resources available to them by law or else not inclined to make use of them was old hat; perhaps because of our own experiences with disability, or because of our position on the ground with the topics these academic sources attempted to elucidate, our initial research served to enforce empirically what was happening in our own lives.¹ The existence of barriers to accommodations was not revelatory, and neither was the concept put forth by Ginsburg and Rapp of disability as a relational category in which one is “dis-abled” by “material conditions” rather than an innate *something* “lodged in the body” of the individual.²

Still, the exploration of this realm did lead to some major shifts in perspective. The parallel between compulsory heterosexuality and the expectation of compulsory able-bodiedness, and therefore the relationship between queer theory and disability studies, for example, was unknown territory for many of us who were inexperienced in both of these areas of study.³ The concept of the solutions offered by these compulsories being inadequate for progress was not entirely alien to us, however. This idea of intersectionality was elaborated upon further in Williams’ discussion of “Crip Theory,” which brought up many questions as to allyship and the

dis-abling effect of marginalization.⁴ Further, the establishment of best practices for language related to disability was essential, and reading about the personal experiences of disability activists like Margaret Price helped to establish our vocabulary, or at least the variability of it, for our research.⁵ Some resources constituted for us a practical guide, such as pieces that focused on universal design and how it stands to benefit everyone in addition to being liberatory for people with disabilities, or who are “dis-abled” by the nature of their environment.⁶ Goode’s article put this into the context of “managing” disability at the university, wherein the shift between the more accommodation-oriented world of public school systems to the private university presents a problem for students with specific needs.⁷ Finally, the means of speaking about these issues were made clearer to us through Collier’s exploration of disability-related language, which compelled us to alternate the ways in which we refer to disability in order to give voice to many approaches.⁸

¹ Laura Marshak et al., “Exploring Barriers to College Student Use of Disability Services and Accommodations,” *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 22, no. 3 (2010): 151–65.

² Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, “Disability Worlds,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (October 2013): 54.

³ Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *Disability Studies Reader*, by Lennard J. Davis, 4th ed. (New York, New York: Routledge, 2013), 369–78.

⁴ Julie Williams, “Crip Theory,” *Breaking Silences, Demanding Crip Justice Conference*, 2017.

⁵ Margaret Price, “Defining Mental Disability,” in *Disability Studies Reader*, by Lennard J. Davis, 4th ed. (New York, New York: Routledge, 2013), 298–307, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/smith/read.er.action?docID=1125176&ppg=384>.

⁶ Rob Imrie and Rachael Luck, “Designing Inclusive Environments: Rehabilitating the Body and the Relevance of Universal Design,” *Disability and Rehabilitation: An International, Multidisciplinary Journal* 36, no. 16 (August 2014): 1315–19.

⁷ Jackie Goode, “‘Managing’ Disability: Early Experiences of University Students with Disabilities,” *Disability & Society* 22, no. 1 (January 2007): 35–48.

⁸ Roger Collier, “Person-First Language: Noble Intent but to What Effect?,” *CMAJ* 184, no. 18 (December 11, 2012): 1977–78.

We came to this project as students at a particularly social-justice-oriented private liberal arts college in Western Massachusetts. Smith College has a storied history of intense student involvement in movements to improve campus life, from exposé journalism to protests. In fact, this past April saw Smith students disrupting the class schedule to demonstrate in front of the main auditorium on campus and to call for the resignation of a recently hired campus police chief who publicly expressed his anti-immigrant views. Thus the general open-mindedness of our class with regard to learning more about disability studies and the degree of familiarity we already had with the topics at hand were unsurprising. Furthermore, as a class of anthropology majors, the ability to reserve our personal opinions and the relativity required were almost second-nature. With the long-established A.D.A. in mind, the overall awareness of disability and the frequent commentary on the effectiveness of the Office of Disability Services, and the looming threat of revoking legal protections for students with disabilities on the part of a conservative presidential administration, there was no better time to explore the issue of disability at Smith College.

This project began with research into the field of disability studies. Then, we began participant observation sessions which were intended to aid in the development of our research question. Indeed, these sessions, which had each of us in academic settings for the duration of several classes, helped us to begin to see the barriers which students might encounter in their day-to-day experiences at Smith College. This allowed us to transition into one-on-one interviews, wherein each of the three teams in our class were tasked with interviewing professors, administrators, and students respectively. Finally, our class culminated in focus groups, in which three groups of students were

interviewed, two of which identified as students with disabilities, and the last of which served as a kind of control in that they did not identify as having disabilities. It was not until the completion of these focus groups that we were able, as a class, to really define the goal of our project, which was ultimately identified as an advocacy brief.

Documented Challenges

There were numerous challenges we encountered in even so short a project as this one. Foremost, we found it difficult to imagine the ways in which a person who has disabilities that we do not have might interact with a space. Additionally, we had a tendency to focus on the physical limitations a student may encounter on campus; the iciness of the sidewalks and the barriers created by ongoing construction, for example, were commonly mentioned. However, we were well aware that disability is not only being in a wheelchair or using crutches, and in fact this perception acts as an obstacle for students seeking accommodations for what are commonly referred to as “invisible” disabilities. Our direct interactions with students in interviews and focus groups reinforced this idea, as many students, despite either being registered with the Office of Disability Services at Smith College, or experiencing mental or physical health problems not obvious to others, did *not* identify as disabled.

Recommendations

It is through these personal interactions with students at Smith College, these focus groups and interviews, that I am comfortable concluding that the most important takeaway is that students want more contexts in which they might discuss the issues of disability on the Smith College

campus. Students want the occasion to talk to one another about disability, and they want to talk to faculty and administration about what they need from them. For the students, it is obvious what is “broken.” Even for those who had no physical conditions which would impair their navigation of the campus, the issue of having an easily accessible campus was at the forefront. The lack of understanding on the part of professors with regard to mental health issues and in-classroom accommodations was also a common refrain. Most of all, students asked for the language and context with which to explore these issues that are moving to the forefront of discussions on campus. If there was any action to be taken, it should be that this project and others like it would be given more time and resources with which to address disability at Smith College.

References

- Collier, Roger. 2012. “Person-First Language: Noble Intent but to What Effect?” *CMAJ* 184 (18): 1977–78.
- Davis, Lennard J. 2013. *Disability Studies Reader*. 4th ed. New York, New York: Routledge.
- Ginsburg, Faye, and Rayna Rapp. 2013. “Disability Worlds.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (October): 53–68.
- Goode, Jackie. 2007. “‘Managing’ Disability: Early Experiences of University Students with Disabilities.” *Disability & Society* 22 (1): 35–48.
- Imrie, Rob, and Rachael Luck. 2014. “Designing Inclusive Environments: Rehabilitating the Body and the Relevance of Universal Design.” *Disability and Rehabilitation: An International, Multidisciplinary Journal* 36 (16): 1315–19.
- Marshak, Laura, Todd Van Wieren, Dianne Raeke Ferrell, Lindsay Swiss, and Catherine Dugan. 2010. “Exploring Barriers to College Student Use of Disability Services and Accommodations.” *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 22 (3): 151–65.
- McRuer, Robert. 2013. “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence.” In *Disability Studies Reader*, by Lennard J. Davis, 4th ed., 369–78. New York, New York: Routledge.
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/smith/reader.action?docID=1125176>.
- Mullins, Laura, and Michele Preyde. 2013. “The Lived Experience of Students with an Invisible Disability at a Canadian University.” *Disability & Society* 28 (2): 147–60.
- Price, Margaret. 2013. “Defining Mental Disability.” In *Disability Studies Reader*, by Lennard J. Davis, 4th ed., 298–307. New York, New York: Routledge.
<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/smith/reader.action?docID=1125176>.
- TallBear, Kim. 2014. “Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry.” *Journal of Research Practice* 10 (2).
<http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/405/371>.
- Williams, Julie. 2017. “Crip Theory.” Breaking Silences, Demanding Crip Justice Conference. 2017.
<https://www.wright.edu/event/sex-disability-conference/crip-theory>.