Doing Disability Ally Work

Disabled people are everywhere, and yet are mostly invisible to the nondisabled world. Everyone grew up learning stereotypes about disabled people. Some of these stereotypes are negative (“helpless,” “dependent,” “useless,” “dangerous”). Others seem positive but are just as limiting (“cheerful,” “inspiring,” “brave”). In order to end ableism (the system of oppression targeting disabled people), nondisabled people need to learn how to do disability ally work.

respect

- **Recognize** that disabled, chronically ill, D/deaf, Mad, and neurodivergent people have inherent worth and value.
- **Listen** to disabled people’s stories, experiences, and perspectives.
- **Understand** that having a disability does not make our lives any more inspirational, pitiful or tragic than yours. Our disabilities are ordinary and familiar parts of who we are.
- **Ask before you offer help** to a disabled person. What you assume is helpful may not be. Start with a friendly but non-intrusive question: “Can I provide assistance?” or “Can I get that for you?” Be aware that your offer may not be accepted. Disabled people are the experts about our own lives and what we need.
- **Don’t ask** intrusive questions, however well-intentioned. Because of how disabled people are separated from society, many of us deal with daily curiosity about our body, minds and lives. This can be irritating, exhausting, and demeaning.
- **Challenge** your own assumptions. Many people have disabilities that might not be apparent to you. Everyone has a right to request and use the access they need without being criticized or questioned.
- **Ignore** service dogs while they’re working. Don’t pet, feed, or interact with them.

language

- **Don’t use** the words “cripple,” “defect,” “spastic,” “lame,” “retard,” and “crazy.” These words have long been used to bully and oppress disabled people. You may hear disabled people calling each other “crip” or “gimp,” This is “insider” language, akin to LGBT people calling each other “queer,” but isn’t appropriate language for non-disabled people to use. Not all disabled people like or use this “insider” language.
- **Use** the phrase “disabled people” or “people with disabilities.”
- When you hear other people use ableist language, **take the opportunity** to challenge and educate.
- **Don’t ask**, “What’s wrong with you?” Disabled people have many different relationships with our body, minds. Don’t assume you know what’s right or wrong.

a community resource—please distribute widely
created by disability activists
for more info: eli@eliclare.com or www.eliclare.com
access

• **Work to create** accessibility in your communities, workplaces, and places of worship. Ramps and elevators are vital, but access doesn’t stop there.

• **Access means** creating an inclusive and welcoming space for all members of your community:
  --**Ensure** that people with mobility aids and/or personal attendants can use the bathrooms.
  --**Minimize** the presence of scented products and other triggers for people with chemical sensitivities with the goal of creating scent-free space.
  --**Offer** printed materials in alternative formats, such as Braille, large print, and audio.
  --**Provide** sign language interpreters and real time captioning.
  --**Choose** locations for community events near public transportation.
  --**Offer** sliding scales at events that cost money.
  --**This is not an exhaustive list, only a starting place.**

• **Understand** that no single accommodation will work for all disabled people. One solution doesn’t fit all, but increased access does benefit everyone.

• **Take your lead** from disabled people. We know what works best for us.

• **Be creative.** Don’t use lack of money as an excuse not to create access.

activism

• **Educate yourself.** Read about the disability rights movement and disability justice. Attend disability culture events.

• **Follow the leadership** of disabled people, particularly disabled people of color.

• **Confront** disability stereotypes and oppression—ableism—wherever you encounter them.

• **Integrate** ableism into your understanding of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, fatphobia, and xenophobia. These systems of oppression are all interlocked.
Disability, Race, Gender & Class
Bibliography/Resources

books


articles


web sites


• Harriet Tubman Collective (harriettubmancollective.tumblr.com).

• Krip Hop (kriphopnation.com).

• National Black Disability Coalition (www.blackdisability.org).

blogs

• Disability Visibility Project (https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com).

• Ramp Your Voice! (rampyourvoice.com).
Selected Queer/Trans Deaf & Disability Bibliography and Resources

books

- Terry Galloway, Mean Little deaf Queer: A Memoir (Boston: Beacon, 2009).
- Alison Kafer, Feminist, Queer, Crip (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)
- Corbett O'Toole, My Fading Scars (Fort Worth: Autonomous Press, 2015).

web sites

- Bent Voices (www.bentvoices.org).
- Deaf Queer Resource Center (www.deafqueer.org).
- NeuroQueer (http://neuroqueer.blogspot.com).
- Queerness and Disability Conference of 2002 (www.disabilityhistory.org/dwa/queer/proceedings.html)
- Leaving Evidence by Mia Mingus (leavingevidence.wordpress.com).
- Queer & Trans Disability/Deaf Resources (www.eliclare.com/queer-disability-resources).
- Sins Invalid (www.sinsinvalid.org).
Selected General Deaf & Disability Resources

books


• Harriet McBryde Johnson, *Too Late to Die Young* (New York: Picador, 2005).


• Barrett Shaw, ed., *The Ragged Edge: The Disability Experience from the Pages of the First Fifteen Years of The Disability Rag* (Louisville, Kentucky: Avocado Press, 1994).


organizations

• ADAPT—American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (www.freeourpeople.org)

• Not Dead Yet (www.notdeadyet.org)

web sites

• Disability Visibility Project (disabilityvisibilityproject.com/author/alwong199/)

• Icarus Project—for psych survivors (theicarusproject.net)

• Multiple Chemical Sensitivities and links to how to be fragrance free (eastbaymeditation.org/resources/fragrance-free-at-ebmc/)

• *Ragged Edge Magazine Online* (www.raggededgemagazine.com)
Agenda

• What is disability identity?
• What do disability identities among disabled students have to do with access and accommodations?
• What kinds of work foster disability identities? What are the barriers to this work?
Self-Reflection: Identity

- Think about your identities (who you are)
- Answer the following:
  - Which identity (or identities) did you choose?
  - Which were you born with or into?
  - Which did you acquire but didn’t choose?
  - Which were difficult for you to accept?
  - Which bring you joy?
- You won’t be asked to share.

Reminder About Identity

- Use this short self-reflection as a reminder:
- We all have:
  - a range of identities and
  - a range of relationships to those identities

Disability Identity Brainstorm

- What do you think of when you encounter the phrase “disability identity”?
- Let’s use the Zoom chat to brainstorm.
- There are no right or wrong answers.
Characteristics of Disability Identity

- beyond diagnosis
- sense of how disability has shaped who we are
- awareness of ableism
- internal acceptance
- sometimes pride
- disability community
- connection to disability culture
- embracing interdependence
- finding joy
- resisting stereotypes (including overcoming and being seen as inspirational)

Descriptively vs. Politically Disabled

“When I say ‘descriptively disabled,’ I mean someone who has the lived experience of being disabled. They may not talk about ableism, discrimination or even call themselves ‘disabled,’ but they know what it feels like to use a wheelchair, experience chronic pain, have people stare at you, be institutionalized, walk with a brace, be isolated, etc. There are many people who are descriptively disabled who never become or identify as ‘politically disabled.’ When I say ‘politically disabled,’ I mean someone who is descriptively disabled and has a political understanding about that lived experience. I mean someone who has an analysis about ableism, power, privilege, who feels connected to and is in solidarity with other disabled people (regardless of whatever language you use). I mean someone who thinks of disability as a political identity/experience, grounded in their descriptive lived experience.”

--Mia Mingus from her blog “Leaving Evidence”

Disability Identity Never a Singular Identity

- No one is only one identity.
- Race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigration, age, and religion/spirituality always connected.
- Some identities may be more important than others for some people.
Multiple Identities

“Queer women of color never say we are disabled if we have any choice about it. We come from families who believe in being tough, in sucking it up. We do not want any more identities than we already have to wrestle with. Our bodies are already seen as tough, monster, angry, seductive, incompetent. How can we admit weakness, vulnerability, interdependence and still keep our jobs, our perch on the ‘thin edge of barbwire’ we live on?”

Why would we join crip who are all white in the mainstream [disability] rights movement?” --Leah Lakshmi Pieperza-Samarasinghe

Disability Identity Development

• Resource:
  The work of Anjali J. Forber-Pratt
Finding ourselves: What we know about disability identity development”

Disability Identities, Access & Accommodations

• You all are working hard to create broad-based access and individual accommodations for disabled students on campus.
• Disability identity may feel irrelevant to this work.
• But....
Connections Between Disability Identities & Access

- Disabled students who have claimed a disability identity or are working toward that are:
  - less likely to live with isolation, secrecy, and shame
  - more likely to know what access they need and be able to advocate for it when necessary
  - more likely to name and confront ableism when it occurs, rather than internalizing the lack of access as personal failings
  - more prepared to navigate getting their access needs met and ableism in the world once they graduate

Connections Between Disability Identities & Access - cont.

- In other words fostering disability identities among disabled students is an integral part of supporting them and of ending ableism on campuses.

The Work of Fostering Disability Identities I

- This work includes:
  - supporting disabled students in disability-affirming ways
  - for disabled staff, modeling strong, visible disability identities
  - encouraging students in becoming experts about their own access needs
  - minimizing the importance of diagnosis
  - framing access and accommodation failures as ableism
  - educating the students you work with about ableism
The Work of Fostering Disability Identities II

• This work includes (continued):
  – connecting the students you work with together
  – hiring disabled students to work in your office
  – displaying disability art and culture in your office
  – providing staff the time to mentor disabled students
  – finding disabled staff and faculty to mentor disabled students
  – sponsoring disability culture and community events on campus

The Work of Fostering Disability Identities III

• This work includes (continued):
  – encouraging students to found and join disability-focused student clubs
  – collaborating with others on campus doing diversity work
  – insisting that disability is part of diversity both on a policy and a practice level
  – pushing your campus to actively recruit, retain, and value disabled students
  – encouraging the integration of disability studies into the curriculum

Barriers to this Work

• Not enough time
• Don’t know enough about disability identity
• Students not engaged or seemingly uninterested
• On an institutional level disabled students perceived as a burden or legal liability
• Ableism
Self-Reflection: The Work You’re Doing

- Questions to take back to your office:
  - What are you and your office doing to foster disability identities?
  - What would you like to be doing?
  - Is there support and motivation to do this work in your office?

Closing

- In the Zoom chat, write three words about what you’re leaving this training with.

Thank you all!

Eli Clare:
writer + speaker + activist + teacher + poet

- www.eliclare.com
- eliclare@buffalo.edu