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## Commentary

### Teaching Disability Studies Together: The Importance of Having Instructors with Labels of Intellectual Disabilities

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This short commentary has two goals: 1) to share the unique co-teaching experience of two disabled instructors, one of whom has a label of intellectual disability, and 2) to discuss how we, as two white disabled men, try to incorporate the principles of disability justice in our efforts to disrupt bodymind hierarchies within and outside the university classroom and to share some of the resources we use.

For the past 3 years, we have co-taught an introduction to disability studies class at Syracuse University. We do this work as two white disabled educators in a school of education with a long, sometimes complicated history of disability activism, that at times is too focused on disability as a single-identity (overwhelmingly white) experience. While co-teaching is not new, there are regrettably fewer opportunities to co-teach in educational settings where new gyms and student centers are prioritized over instructional innovation. As two instructors with different levels of privilege and educational opportunities, we teach our course committed to the principles of [disability justice](#); an articulation of how ableism, white supremacy, settler colonialism, systems of incarceration, classism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are intertwined. In

2005, the Disability Justice Collective, a group of Black, brown, queer, and trans people, including Patty Berne, Eli Clare, Sebastian Margaret, Stacey Park Milbern, Mia Mingus, Leroy Moore, Jr. offered this invaluable framework that challenges [single-issue, white dominate](#) disability rights discussions. In our course, we work with students to examine how ableism, along with anti-Black racism, white supremacy, and other interlocking systems of oppression, manifest and maintain the school to prison pipeline, the exclusion of disabled students in higher education, the institutionalization of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in group homes and nursing homes, and how the state continues to murder disabled people of color despite failed efforts at de-escalation trainings and disability awareness campaigns.

We have vastly different educational and life experiences. [Micah](#) was involved in a two-year lawsuit to fight for his right to live on campus in the dorms at Oakland University. He is also one of the main subjects in the recent film [Intelligent Lives](#) that challenges assumptions that IQ testing can accurately reflect a person's potential and abilities. Mike has lifelong deathly food allergies as well as diagnoses of IBS and sleep apnea. Mike worked at a sheltered workshop as a staff member in the late 1990s before entering graduate school and earning a PhD in disability studies. Prior to his job at Syracuse, he taught women's, gender, and sexuality studies at campuses throughout the US. Both of us have disabilities, but if we are honest, only Micah's have led to experiences of discrimination. Assumptions of able-bodiedness and type of impairment means Mike's professional experience is assumed to be a better qualification to teach than Micah's. One of the things we grapple with is how to effectively teach our students, while actively challenging cognitive ableism that denies Micah's contributions and abilities to teach. In an effort to create an accessible format for both of us - and to share our successes and failures - we have decided to interview each other. We hope that our experiences can help others to

imagine infusing their curriculum with disability justice informed materials and to seek out models of co-instruction that challenge assumptions about who belongs at the front of the classroom.

***What do you like about teaching together?***

Micah: I think teaching together we know what we can do. We know how to teach together. We know how we work together. If we are saying something different, we ask each other. If we don't understand something, we ask each other. We work well together. We are very good at knowing how we plan for class.

Mike: I love teaching together. You and I have some different life experiences and your disability experience is so different from mine and our students. When I was first learning disability studies in graduate school - and later when I started teaching disability studies - most of the materials were not from the perspective of people with labels of intellectual disability. As we teach, we complicate our understanding and experiences of disability to consider how our identities and experiences with gender and racial privilege have created opportunities, including the ability to teach these courses together.

***Why is it important that we are teaching students disability studies?***

Micah: I think it is important because it is not taught much at other schools, and in K-12. Students don't know about disability culture and history and I think it is a great way to learn about that stuff. I think it is great to have someone with a disability teach with a co-teacher.

There are not many people with disabilities that teach in a college class and it is great I have a chance to teach that way.

Mike: Yes, I think from day 1 the way we co-teach and talk about us as both instructors for the course with many years of experience teaching, the students are challenged to see me as the

“professor” and you as the “helper.” Much of what we teach to the students challenges their assumptions that disabled people passively wait for help or are there to inspire the able-bodied. We teach and discuss disability cultures and histories trying to center the experiences of disabled people of color.

***As white men, how do we try to challenge whiteness and white supremacy in teaching disability studies? How do we teach about disability using an intersectional framework that addresses how racism, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and other systems of oppression impact disabled people. What are the ways we can continue to teach not only about white disabled people?***

Micah: Try to bring in other guest speakers. Most of our students are white. Syracuse is a predominately white university. We have to teach in a different way; we can show videos, websites. It is kind of like that video we show from [Chicago of the Fe Fe's](#). That film has people with disabilities asking other people questions about disabilities. And the video shows people's responses. We hope that our class continues to become more diverse. And that more disabled students including disabled students of color continue to take our class.

Mike: When I was taught disability studies first, over two decades ago, a majority of what was taught to me was of the experiences and writings of white male wheelchair users from North America. Many of these texts were not intersectional either. The authors didn't consider how their gender and race created opportunities that other disabled people did not have. One of our commitments is to teach things that are not in the “canon” of disability studies. We don't use any of the readers, or textbooks because often these fail to reflect the experiences of our students and their communities. I have a PhD in disability studies, but you won't find any of the readings that were on the syllabi from the classes I took, or even the class I taught as part of my thesis. You and I teach blogs, interviews, poems, short essays alongside novels and creative collaborative pieces. This past semester we added *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our*

*People*, a Disability Justice Primer based on the work of Patty Berne and Sins Invalid. This primer challenges many white liberal assumptions that rights will create change and the government is the best agent for that change, what some call disability nationalism and disability exceptionalism. The authors in the primer argue that all forms of incarceration and domination, from prisons, to mental health institutions, to settler-colonial restrictions need to be abolished. We learn from this text how ableism, white supremacy, settler colonialism, and other systems of oppression are interconnected. One of the other pieces that students respond to is the special issue of *Asian American Literary Review*, [Open in Emergency: a Special Issue on Asian American Health](#), edited by Mimi Khúc. This is a collection full of things the students relate to their own intersectional mental health experiences including a tarot deck, a hacked DSM, and annotated mental health pamphlets. This past year white supremacist violence was rampant on campus. As a response, the Black student-led movement, [#NotAgainSU](#) held the administration, faculty, staff, campus police forces, and fellow students responsible for inaction and for nurturing an environment where white supremacy and hate crimes/incidents proliferate targeting Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), International, disabled, and Jewish students, faculty, and staff. Our students have used the materials we teach including pieces by Leroy Moore, Jr, Lydia X.Z. Brown, Mia Mingus, Eli Clare, Stacey Park Milbern to demand more equitable and less oppressive futures on campus and in their communities.

***In the 3 years we have taught together, what works really well? What can we improve on?***

Micah: I think we tell each other if we can't make it to class. We meet to go through the assignments. We talk about how class went. I think most everything has worked out. I can't think of something that didn't work out.

Mike: I appreciate how positive you are, Micah! I think for the most part we do a good job getting the students to think about their experiences on campus and how they have certain opportunities because of privileges, but at the same time, some of our students still end the class wanting to “help” disabled people instead of wanting to challenge structures that create inequality. And we need to constantly update our syllabus and course materials. I think we should try to change 20 to 25% of the course materials from semester to semester. We can continue to share the work of amazing disabled artists, musicians, and culture makers with the class.

***What have you learned about having someone with a disability teach the class?***

Mike: I have learned that you make the class better. What I mean is that in classroom settings all over there are assumptions that only certain people (mostly those *without* intellectual/learning/developmental disabilities) belong. Inclusive higher educational programs are controversial because at the core they challenge assumptions that only those with high grades, or SAT scores, or are legacy kids belong on campus. Our class - and your experience on campus as a graduate of an inclusive program, and now as a co-instructor makes the class wrestle with their ableist beliefs that someone with a disability should not be a teacher. You and I work together to construct the syllabus, plan and lead class, grade and give feedback, and seek evaluation. Sure, it is hard to be intentional and the structures of education/the academy mean that I am often the one that can make the final decision or has the final say. We try daily to challenge those assumptions that having certain credentials, or not having certain disabilities makes you a better/more qualified/capable teacher. What about you, Micah?

Micah: I think that it's a way that people with disabilities can teach. And how someone with a disability is able to teach and do anything any other teaching assistant can do like grading,

meeting with students. There aren't many other colleges that have teachers with disabilities.

People with disabilities have a voice and say in how they can relate to the college classes.

Knowing that it is good to have someone with a disability teach, the students can learn that when they become teachers they can work with people with disabilities.

***As a co-teacher is there anything you would want to change?***

Mike: Yes, I've mentioned this briefly, but I don't want the school, administration, our students, and others to only consider you as a symbolic teacher, or assistant. If what we teach is about transforming all spaces including educational spaces to be less oppressive and equitable then I need to be actively challenging the difference in privilege between us in the classroom. You have knowledge, expertise, and skills that I do not. And your skills and in teaching and your perspectives make our class a much richer and hopefully more transformative space. You and many of our students have deep levels of knowledge that we can share and use to imagine and build more equitable todays and tomorrows.

Micah: I want the students that I teach to see me as a co-teacher and not just a person that is there to help.

As a way to conclude our article, we wanted to share some resources we use that can easily be adapted for a K-12 setting. Below we briefly discuss the resource and how we teach it. As two white disabled cisgender men, we use these resources in an effort to amplify the knowledges and experiences of disabled people of color in our classroom. We are also aware that our own presence as white men can unintentionally center whiteness. We don't want to teach the whitewashed disability studies courses that have traditionally been offered (see e.g. [#DisabilityTooWhite](#), an important intervention by Vilissa Thompson). These courses might only share experiences and perspectives of white disabled people and fail to accurately articulate



how white supremacy and anti-Black racism are embedded in histories of disability activism. We refuse to focus only on disability rights as the only measure of inclusion. 30 years post-Americans with Disabilities Act, there are still many disabled people locked away in nursing homes, large bed facilities, and prisons. We fail at times to fully and deeply consider how disabled people of color are excluded in our course readings and class discussions. Our process is imperfect and not without critique. We are actively examining how white privilege, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy have shaped our own experiences and opportunities. It is our hope that readers will be encouraged to incorporate these and other resources into your curriculum. Also, if you would like a copy of our syllabus please email Mike ([mcgill\[at\]syr.edu](mailto:mcgill[at]syr.edu)).

**The work of Leroy Moore, Jr.** <http://kriphopnation.com/leroy-f-moore-jr-s-statementbio/>

Leroy Moore, Jr. is a Black Poet, Activist, Author and founder of Krip-Hop Nation. He also is one of the individuals that articulated the tenets of Disability Justice. He also helped co-found, with Patty Berne, Sins Invalid, a “disability justice based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ / gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized.”

(<https://www.sinsinvalid.org/mission>). We have students engage with Moore, Jr’s poems, interviews, and work on police violence against Black and Brown disabled people. We also have students watch performances from Sins Invalid, including their documentary *An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility*. Moore Jr. has written a book *Black Disabled Art History 101*. In another class, students have read this text and created presentations about the artists and culture makers that Moore Jr. writes about.

**All the Weight of Our Dreams: On Living Racialized Autism** (edited by Lydia X.Y. Brown, E. Ashkenazy, and Morénike Giwa Onaiwu). <https://autismandrace.com/>

This text only features writing by autistic people of color, which is a rarity when narratives of white (mostly cisgender males) are assumed to be the main representative of autistic experience. The students read selections in this text to understand how systems of oppression interact in the lives of the authors. We talk about how we cannot adopt single-issue political stances (e.g. not just focus on disability) because systems of oppression often target individuals with multiple marginalized identities and experiences. Many of the pieces in the text discuss school segregation, police violence, and inability to access medical services. The students are better able to articulate the principles of disability justice after reading through this text. During the Spring 2021 semester, the editors of this collection announced that publication of the text would immediately be discontinued (<https://autismandrace.com/all-the-weight-of-our-dreams-anthology/>). We have stopped teaching this text but plan to teach the revised edition when it is available.

**Open in Emergency: a Special Issue of Asian American Literary Review** (edited by Mimi Khúc). <https://www.aalrmag.org/shop/open-in-emergency>

This special issue is unlike anything our students have experienced before yet each semester students respond how they were desperately seeking something like it for years. A dynamic mix of poetry, visual art, hacking, a tarot deck, and other engaging pieces seek to decolonize mental health and to “collectively ask what Asian American unwellness looks like and how to tend to that unwellness.” In using these materials we have our students consider their own experiences of mental health/wellness/unwellness incorporating *all* their identities. Students at all levels of education are experiencing various levels of stress and unwellness. These materials help our

students articulate what they need to prepare in an emergency. In the class, the students create their own mental health/wellness/unwellness boxes and share them with the class.

**Intelligent Lives** (film, 70 minutes, Dir. Dan Habib). <https://intelligentlives.org/>

Intelligent Lives is a film that questions assumptions about the “fixed” nature of intelligence. Micah is featured in the film along with Naomi Monplaisir and Naieer Shaheed. The website features many discussion questions and resources. After screening the film, we engage our students in a robust discussion of how racial status and systems of gender impact the opportunities of the three protagonists. We also discuss Naomi's experience of forced labor and segregation at Harold A. Birch Vocational School and how it is connected to historical experience of segregation due to eugenics and segregated education. The film also highlights the importance of challenging traditional methods of guardianship to enable individuals with intellectual disabilities to self-determine their lives.

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