

Chapter 7

Ability Matters

Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity by Brenda J. Allen (Waveland Press, 2011)

When I was in elementary school, kids in the projects whom we called “retarded” rode off in a bus that took them to a different school than the rest of us. In junior high, those children went to the same school as the rest of us, but they still rode a bus, while we walked. And, they had classes in a separate part of the school. Sometimes, as their bus passed us, my friends and I would snicker and cackle, “Escape, escape.” I saw a comedy on television where the audience laughed loudly when a kid who had been diagnosed as dyslexic told his dad that he didn’t want to “ride the short bus to school.”

A few years ago, for the first time in over twenty years of teaching, I taught a student with a visible physical disability. “Antoine” was a young black male who used a wheelchair. When I first saw him, I wondered if he had been shot. Recognizing the ever-potent power of media images of young black men, I quickly dismissed that thought. Early in the semester, Antoine told me that he had muscular dystrophy. I tried to treat him as I would any other student, even as I respected his condition. I joked with him like I did with other students, and I gave him constructive feedback. Whenever he talked with me after class, I sat down beside him so that we would be on eye level (I learned this tip during my research for this chapter). We agreed that I would periodically look at him so he could nod when he wanted to speak during class, because he couldn’t raise his hand. The course entailed group projects that required students to meet outside of class. Antoine felt that students in his group didn’t always include him, and they sometimes seemed patronizing. Unfortunately, this experience was not new to him. He once lamented, “People judge me for what I *can’t* do instead of what I *can* do.”

The following semester, another student told me he no longer informed his professors that he had a learning disability. Based on previous experience, he believed they would treat him differently, that they would patronize him. Therefore, he was not taking advantage of the services the university provides for students with learning disabilities, because students have to disclose and document their impairment to qualify for services. One student said that after she trusted a professor enough to reveal her disability, the professor challenged whether or not her condition qualified as a disability. The student was devastated. Yet another student confided that when he told a faculty member that he has Asperger’s Syndrome (often viewed as a high functioning form of

autism¹), the professor replied, "Oh. I just thought you were coming to class high [on drugs or alcohol]." These types of interactions can lead students with learning disabilities (and other "invisible" disabilities) not to tell their professors, even though our university has policies to facilitate learning for students with learning disabilities. For instance, students may request extended time for exams or a quiet environment in which to take a test.

While walking on campus, I saw a young man in a wheelchair struggling to get up an incline. As I considered offering to help, another young guy came behind the chair and said, "Let me help you, man." While he pushed the chair, they chatted easily with one another.

During a course I taught on difference matters, a student divulged his learning disability to his classmates and me after wrestling with whether or not he should tell us. Aware of his presumed privileged status as a white male, he did not want to seem to be whining. Here we can see the impact of intersections of identity as well as related complexities of privileged and disadvantaged social identity categories.

My experiences illustrate a few of the issues I address in this chapter. The fact that I rarely have (knowingly) taught students with disabilities shows that persons with disabilities often are not part of mainstream society. However, since I'm seeing an increase in students with learning disabilities, perhaps that's changing. In addition, some disabilities are visible, while others are not. Consequently, some people like the students with learning disabilities can "pass" as nondisabled, while others who are wheelchair users like Antoine do not have that option. For all I know, other students in my classes may have had disabilities. I regret that I hadn't actively considered this possibility until recently.

Students' reluctance to reveal their learning impairments demonstrates that some persons with disabilities are apprehensive about being stigmatized. Employees with unapparent disabilities also opt sometimes to conceal their condition, even if they are entitled to accommodations for their disability. These concerns illustrate that—similar to the other categories we've studied—although governmental legislation attempts to remove barriers for persons with disabilities, psychological and social barriers persist.

We will explore these and other issues related to ability as a socially constructed aspect of identity arising from a dominant ideology of normality in the United States.² I begin by explaining why ability matters, after which I define key terminology related to disability. Next, I offer a sociohistorical overview of ability and disability in the United States, after which I discuss contemporary communication issues. Then, I discuss disability and work. I conclude by describing positive approaches to supporting and valuing persons with disabilities.