

## Disability and Academe: Views from Both Sides of the Teacher's Desk

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**Abstract:** Personal history of going through higher education as a blind person and a thirty year career of teaching, counseling, supervising and administrating is used to illustrate changes and constants in the ways academe deals with a disability.

**Key Words:** teaching, disability accommodations, blindness

I was born blind, and I have experienced 20 years of education as a student, and 30 years of teaching, counseling, and administrating. My blindness has shaped my views on education from both sides of the teacher's desk. The only two teachers with visible disabilities I ever had were my resource room teachers who taught me Braille. This might have something to do with the fact I received almost all of my education from elementary school to graduate school before Public Law 94-142 and long before the Americans with Disabilities Act. But even since the ADA, I can count very few fellow denizens of the groves of academe with disabilities. Therefore, I have made up the rules as I have gone along, and I learned a lot about human nature for which I never got credits or grades.

Early on it became clear to both my parents and me that my success in life was much more likely to be in the classroom than on the playground. I was chosen captain of the spelling bee team but never captain of the dodge ball team. When I was ten, my parents, possibly hoping to inspire me to be a scientist like my father, took me to meet Dr. Nemeth, the blind math professor who invented the Braille math and scientific notation system.

In high school I participated in a two-week summer school at a local university for gifted science students. I learned a lot about just plain coping away from home and can vouch for the benefit to disabled students of this kind of transition experience. One of the skills I learned was what to do when your reader does not show up. I enlisted my brother to read the material I needed for my course project on the making of the first hydrogen bomb. What would Freud say about this subject choice by a socially inept, young blind girl trying to go through the separation and individuation conflicts of the teen years?

When it came time to venture forth from the home nest, something in me knew I would need to make a complete separation from an overprotective family. My parents pointed out there were four good colleges in my hometown and I could go to any of them. I chose to go to Michigan State, eighty-six miles from home and to stay there almost twelve months a year, graduating in three years.

I loved the freedom of being one of about twenty blind students on campus. At first I stayed far away from other blind students, having adopted society's attitudes that blindness was something to be ashamed of and overcome. But during my second year, I began to hang out in the room set aside in the library for reading aloud to blind students. There I learned such useful skills as using a nail file to jimmy the door to get to the women's restroom nearby instead of going halfway across the library to ask someone to let me in. I also had enlightening discussions with other blind students about such topics of the sixties as, "Do you see colors when you're on an LSD trip?" and, "How do you run from the cops when using a cane and participating in a

street demonstration?” Student development, including pride in my identity as a blind person, came with reading assignments not available from Recordings for the Blind.

Readers deserve a large amount of credit for helping me get through school. I never had the funds to pay them; so all the hundreds of hours to get through from freshman year to dissertation preparation were volunteered. In college, the only Braille book I had was calculus; many were not available on tape either.

At Purdue where I did my graduate work in clinical psychology, there was no reading room set aside for reading aloud to the blind, so we used back corners and a couch in the women’s bathroom outside the psychology reading room. Statistics and Freud, among others, were read to the tune of flush, flush. Some of my volunteers did not know statistics, so would say, “There’s this long S-shaped curvy symbol here.” But they showed up and they read. Working and volunteering were important parts of my education. I worked washing dishes in the dorm cafeteria, gaining opportunities to play in the muck and earn money at the same time. My favorite volunteer activity was working at local crisis phones. One day during some volunteer training, I suddenly realized why I shone at this work. I was used to relying on voices to get information; not having visual cues was no problem!

Most faculty members I had were accessible and helpful long before they “had” to be because of ADA and other laws. They met my requests for accommodations by reading tests aloud and reading aloud what they wrote on the board. A few did not try and made it clear they wished I was not in their classes. In these situations, I stayed, probably more out of stubbornness than out of a genuine thirst for knowledge.

One gentleman tried much too hard to level the playing field. My hindsight views him as a caring liberal of the sixties variety. He was reading me his multiple-choice exam and when I told him my answer for a question was “a”, he told me that was wrong and I should try again. I said “No. My answer is ‘a’.” He stated he was just trying to help and why not guess again. I said something about not caring if it was wrong, “just mark ‘a’.” He did, muttering he could not understand why I would take no help. I felt royally insulted and ready to fight his condescending attitude.

A tough area for me in both undergraduate and graduate school was statistics. In undergraduate school I had an Indian teacher who spoke with a British/Indian accent. By the time I translated in my mind what she was saying and wrote it down using my slate and stylus dot by dot I was light years behind. Again in graduate school, the book was not in Braille or on tape, so volunteer readers and weekly tutorials from the professor got me through. Bless the professor, he even provided coffee for the tutorials; compassion can be found in statistics faculty members!

Fast-forward to over 30 years of a rewarding career in the academic world, teaching, counseling, supervising and administrating college counseling centers at four different universities. One major change in the way I do my work is because of the advent of talking computers. I can grade student work submitted electronically, read professional journals online, and scan text material into my computer. My university provides the job accommodations of buying software that enables the computer to read everything on the screen out loud and hires a work/study student to read to me five hours a week. We skim through pounds of books, journals, and paperwork that fall into my mailbox each week. What has not changed is my driving desire to know as much as I can in my chosen field. Occasionally, I grudgingly accept that blind or sighted, one cannot read it all, but I keep trying. Librarians have been great friends and enablers of my bookaholic tendencies. At each university where I have worked, I had a cataloguer friend

who pointed out good new books to me in my areas of interest. The books get carted to my office, the student reader reads the table of contents, and I pick out chapters to mark and take home and scan to read in my copious “free” time. The most frequent words I say to the readers are still “next paragraph” and “look for the results.” So many books and so little time! (Especially when you consider it takes at least twice as long to read something out loud) Do not ask me what the Thursday television line-up is; my ears are in a book.

Academe, whether before or after the Americans with Disabilities Act, has been grudging in my experience in its acceptance of those of us with visible disabilities, even at the bottom rungs of adjunct lecturer and assistant professor. After receiving my doctorate in clinical psychology, I sent out over 150 resumes before getting any interviews. I had written about my blindness in my cover letter stating it limited me only in my ability to drive between branch campuses. I received back many laudatory letters pronouncing me “amazing” but not for them. Finally I garnered an interview at a campus that turned out to be my future employer. Their way of dealing with the many questions that could quite reasonably occur to sighted folks about how a blind professor would handle the day to day demands of teaching was to ask: “What would you do if someone shot up heroin in class?”

When I asked, stalling for time, “Is this common?” they assured me it was not but still wanted to know what would I do. I suggested it would probably cause a stir from other students and I could notice the stir and ask what was going on. The closest I came was a shouting match between a Black Muslim and a white racist.

I have never had the kind of discussion I would like to with blind faculty members from across the country about classroom management, but here are my solutions to a couple of common problems: cheating, and recognizing students.

In the area of academic honesty, I take the hard line quickly and firmly. I inform students in my syllabus and on the first day of class that academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and anyone found cheating will be given an “F” on that assignment. I inform them again at the beginning of the test and have a sighted proctor patrol the aisles. In the one incident of cheating I know about, the proctor grabbed a napkin from a member of one of the university’s athletic teams with multiple-choice answers written on it. I gave the student the grade he deserved, but think it was later changed by a more forgiving or sports-minded department chair. Somehow the word spread at that university that my Seeing Eye dog knew who cheated and had tipped off the proctor. At least the dog got some respect.

Recognizing students and forming personal relationships with them is an important part of teaching but is hard for me. By mid-semester I usually know about half my students in a class of forty. Some are easy: the three males in a 30 student psychology of women class; the bright talkative “stars”; and a few at the bottom of the class about whom I worry perhaps more than they do. The middle is a blur. Being able to read their e-journals myself and write back comments has helped in promoting more personal faculty-student relationships.

In teaching the psychology of the exceptional child class, I have had the opportunity to make my exceptionality part of the curriculum. These students learning how to be professionals working with disabled clients first must figure out how to work with a professor who is blind. Most of the students come into the course kindly disposed towards “those unfortunates.” It is my agenda to have the students leave the course with empathy and skills to become impassioned allies for exceptional clients, friends and coworkers. Teaching in the nice, polite, hard working Midwest, I try to not sound too angry when discussing discrimination or too sarcastic when a “disabled superhero overcomes disability” story hits the news. One of the sensitization exercises

I use early in the term is to have students report in class on images of exceptional individuals they find in magazines I hand out. Needless to say, “There aren’t any” is the most common report. This provokes wonderful discussions of hidden disabilities, the “beautiful people” pictured in magazines, and what is beauty anyway?

To get a picture of how my disability comes across to students, I asked them anonymously to write about this in a psychology of the exceptional child course. The students said having a professor with a disability added to their knowledge of the practicalities of living with a disability in ways a textbook could not teach. As one student said, “They (people with disabilities) can do the same things I do, just in a different manner and with a little bit more effort.” Students also reported an attitudinal change toward “looking past the exterior to the person inside.” At first the facts that I did not make eye contact, that students had to just speak up instead of raising their hands to be called on and that a dog was in the classroom caused some consternation. As the semester went on, these differences just became parts of the classroom ambiance. One student felt advantaged in that she did not have to groom herself before coming to an eight a.m. class because I would not see her. One wonders why peer pressure did not keep her combing her hair anyway?

From my fifty years of teaching and learning, the major conclusion I can draw is: academe is just like the rest of society, still grappling with how to deal with the one out of seven of us with disabilities. I get irritated at not being provided with electronic copies of documents before meetings even though I have repeatedly asked for them. I need to draw a deep breath and remember that no matter on which side of the desk we are, we are all still learning.

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