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Disability in Higher Education: From Person-Based to Interaction-Based

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The meaning of disability is analyzed from a conventional and an alternative perspective. Results of this analysis are applied to such higher education issues as institutional role, pedagogical expectations, and program quality. The article advances a view of disability as interaction-specific rather than personspecific, as arising when the nature of the academic task or instructional environment fails to support adequately the learning characteristics of the student. Within this view, learning environments (including teachers) have a primary influence in creating or preventing educational disability. Implications of this position for all students in higher education, not only those conventionally designated as disabled, are explored.

Introduction

Understanding and accommodating student differences has become a central focus for higher education. Looking at the last 20 years and projecting over the next 20, more and more students enrolling in college are poor, academically underprepared, international, older, ethnically and culturally diverse, and characterized as disabled (Hughes, Frances, & Lombardo, 1991). The latter group of students, those experiencing disability, remain toward the margin of higher education's focus (West et al., 1993). Given enrollment trends, this status is ironic. The percentage of first-year college students reporting a disability has tripled since the late 1970s, and as of 1991 stood at roughly 9% (Henderson, 1992). But despite their increasing number, many students experiencing disability in many campus communities are viewed as different in ways that fail to affirm their diversity or to facilitate their inclusion. In what follows, this unvalued differentness is explored, an alternative viewpoint proposed, and implications for higher education discussed.

Alternative Viewpoints of Disability

Such pivotal issues as higher education's responsibility to students experiencing disability, appropriate pedagogical expectations for faculty working with these students, and who has primary responsibility for their education are important to resolve. How the issues are resolved depends on how the meaning of disability is constructed in the first place. At least two viewpoints can frame this construction. The conventional one, with limited educational relevance, sees a disabled student. An alternative one, with greater educational utility, sees a student experiencing disability.

Conventional Viewpoint

Disability in our society typically is defined medically in terms of physical, emotional, or intellectual impairments rooted in the person and hindering normal functioning across a wide variety of settings (Hahn, 1985). From this everyday perspective, the link between impairment and disability is automatic and invariant. A person with a significant hearing impairment, for example, is regarded as disabled in all situations at all times. So, too, people with significant visual or orthopedic impairments, or presumed neurological impairments that interfere with learning. From this conventional viewpoint, an impaired person is a disabled person, regardless of time or place.

Scholars in the field of disability studies (e.g., Abberly, 1987; Oliver, 1990; Sarason & Doris, 1979; Shearer, 1981) have identified key assumptions underlying the conventional viewpoint. These include the follow-ing:

Disability is intrinsic to the person. The source of disability, stemming from some underlying impairment, resides exclusively in the disabled person. Circumstances formiing the moment-to-moment contexts for a disabled person exert no mediating influence on the disability, because they exert no mediating influence on the underlying impairment to begin with. Disability is strictly a person-based phenomenon.

Disability is both deviant and deficient. Disabled people are abnormal; they are not like the rest of us. Further, disabled people deviate from prevailing norms in deficient ways. To be disabled due to an underlying impairment is to possess an essential flaw.

Disability is a master trait. This assumption has two parts. The first views a disabling impairment as the all-consuming, most salient characteristic of a person. All other characteristics, no matter how uniquely defining, are pushed to the edge of the disabled person's identity. The disabling impairment is taken as representing the whole person. The second part, building on the first and incorporating the other assump-

tions, holds disabled people as fundamentally different. In our collective consciousness, people are cleaved into two categories-disabled and abled-each representing not different places along a continuum but different *kinds* of people.

Interactionist Viewpoint

Recent works in the field of disability (e.g., Oliver's 1990 social theory of disability and Hahn's 1985 sociopolitical definition of disability) suggest a viewpoint for understanding disability not as rooted in Persons, but instead arising from interactions between persons and their environments. Applying this reformulation to teaching and learning, disability becomes interaction-specific rather than person-specific and exists when the nature of the educational task or instructional environment (including teaching and assessment strategies) fails to support adequately the learning characteristics of the student. Disability no longer is coupled inevitably to medical impairment. Students who have physical impairments, for example, but are engaged with educational tasks in instructional environments appropriately structured for their individual learning characteristics, do not, in fact, experience educational disability. Students without such impairments, but engaged with tasks in instructional settings inadequately structured in light of their individual learning characteristics, do.

The meaning of disability from this alternative viewpoint is *interaction*al, constituted by the lack of fit among learner, task, and instructional setting, rather than *personal,* rooted exclusively in the learner. It is *functional,* focusing on the learner's success (or failure) in accomplishing the educational task at hand given the demands and supports of the particular instructional setting, rather than *normative,* concerned with violation of social norms and ideals and the consequent application of labels. Finally, it is *dynamic,* contingent on the changing nature of the learner's interactions with tasks and settings across time and place, rather than *static,* as a permanent, irrevocable personal flaw.

The assumptions grounding this interactionist reformulation of disability can be elaborated as follows:

Disability is interactional (rather than intrinsic). Disability stems from unsuccessful interactions between a person and a particular setting. When the relevant learning characteristics of the learner (e.g., the learner's skills, weaknesses, learning styles, or medically based impairments) are complemented by the nature of the academic task and the demands and supports of the instructional setting such that success is realized, no disability exists. When such a match does not exist, disability with regard to that specific task does. Whether or not learners experience disability depends, then, on their profile of learning characteristics in

relation to specific educational tasks within specific instructional settings, not on the simple presence or absence of an underlying impairment.

Disability is dysfunctional (rather than deviant and deficient). Each student represents a complex set of learning characteristics. If each learning characteristic is represented as a continuum, then students can be viewed as falling along a particular learning characteristic continuum at varying places: some students relatively strong, others relatively weak, others in the middle. Clearly, tremendous variation in learning characteristics exists among students, with each student representing a unique mix. These differences among students, however, are ones of relative *degree* rather than absolute kind. Disability does not entail a different kind of student, completely disconnected from the "normal" kind of student. It does not represent deviancy or deficiency based on how distant a student is from some mythical norm or idealized value. Disability instead re esents a dysfunctional interaction among a particular student (given his or her unique mix of learning characteristics), a particular educational task, and a particular instructional setting.

Disability is a dynamic state (rather than a master trait). It is mistaken to think of some students as essentially disabled and others essentially abled. Rather, any student, at least occasionally, experiences a particular learning situation where, because of a mismatch among that student's particular set of learning characteristics, the task at hand, and the demands and supports of the instructional approach, failure occurs and disability arises. As the task is modified, or the demands and supports of instruction are refined, or the learner develops new learning strategies, success is realized and disability ceases. All students, whatever their unique profile of learning characteristics, experience disability with some tasks in some settings at some times.

Implications for Higher Education

Not surprisingly, using the conventional viewpoint to derive appropriate approaches for higher education regarding disabled students generates conventional practices. Disability experts and learning specialists, housed in learning centers or offices of special services outside the organizational realm of academic affairs, often are viewed as ultimately responsible for supporting disabled students as they progress through the required curriculum. "Regular" faculty, lacking special expertise regarding person-based disabilities, naturally focus on "regular" students in implementing curricula. In the end, the implicit institutional stance regarding disabled students (and perhaps all students generally) too easily becomes that of educational filter, first admitting students and then separating "those who can" from "those who can't" relative to meeting

established graduation requirements. The onus for making adjustments in fulfilling such requirements clearly rests with the student more than with the institution.

The limitations of this conventional viewpoint for understanding and resolving disability are considerable. Although physical, sensory, and neurological impairments have objective reality intrinsic to a learner, disability does not. Our everyday construction of who is and is not disabled takes shape in a value-laden sociopolitical context, based on idealized and shifting norms regarding able-bodiedness and ablemindedness. Beyond the assumed reality of disability as an intrinsic personal quality, its ultimate meaning takes shape as a categorical label conventionally applied by powerful bureaucratic means when prevailing norms and values regarding normalcy and ableness are violated. Further, in simplistically and automatically linking disability to underlying medical impairment, the conventional viewpoint lacks educational utility. It directs attention toward such immutable and relatively static factors as degree of motor loss or type of psychometric profile and away from more fluid issues at the educational heart of the matter, such as how the academic task in question relates to the student's existing knowledge domain, or what blending of instructional approach and assessment strategy by the teacher can facilitate student success in developing a targeted skill. Finally, the conventional viewpoint places the burden for dealing with disability too heavily with the learner, failing to account for how factors constituting the particular educational setting (e.g., architectural barriers, restrictive attitudes, and poorly designed curricular, instructional, or assessment practices) can themselves be disabling.

In contrast, the interactionist viewpoint "depersonalizes" disability; it goes beyond the student to the educational interaction in which the student is a primary, but not exclusive, element. In doing so, it brings into sharp focus the following implications for higher education:

1. With regard to teaching-learning dynamics, medical impairments represent individual differences, not indelible boundaries between abled students (whose "normal" learning characteristics often are presumed somehow to lack individual variation) and disabled students (whose learning characteristics often are interpreted as an abnormal, separate category of human functioning).
2. Discrete sets of homogeneous learning characteristics linked definitively to students with various kinds of impairments (and, for that matter, to students without impairments) simply, do not exist. There is not one set of learner characteristics adequately describing deaf and hard-of-hearing college students, a second describing mobility-impaired students, and a third describing students without impairments. In the daily practice of teaching and learning, such tidy conceptual frameworks are swamped by the messy reality of variation among all students.

3. The viewpoint of disability having educational utility is one that extends beyond special "kinds" of students to include any student engaged unsuccessfully in a teaching-learning interaction. Disability, like ability, exists *between* the student and the teacher, not *within* the student.
4. Faculty hold primary responsibility for teaching students in ways that foster academic progress by capitalizing on the individual learning characteristics of students. This responsibility means that faculty need to be not just learned conveyers of academic disciplines, but also skilled practitioners in crafting alternative teaching-learning paths for diverse students. Disability specialists and learning support professionals in developmental learning centers and offices of special services are fertile sources of consultation and collaboration for faculty in realizing this primary responsibility. Such resources, however, should support, not substitute for, the primary teaching-learning relationship between faculty and students.

Summary

The interactionist viewpoint of disability has significance for the academic experience of all students, not just those traditionally designated as disabled. The notion that learning environments (including teachers) have a primary influence in creating or preventing educational disability is consistent with Astin's (1990) view that program quality in higher education should be defined as the "talent development" of every student, rather than the average SAT score of entering classes or the percentage of seniors going on to graduate school. From this talent development perspective, the criterion defining quality is the extent to which each student (regardless of conventional disability/ability status) develops the target knowledge and skills established by the college curriculum. The corresponding challenge for faculty within this perspective is to develop alternative instructional approaches for diverse learners. Responding to this challenge will require as much individual attention, public dialogue, and institutional support throughout higher education around the issue of teaching and learning in all its forms and possibilities as has been devoted traditionally to issues of curriculum development and program review (Cross, 1987). Higher education's historical focus on setting curricular goals and academic standards needs to be complemented by a future focus on forging as many alternative teaching-learning paths as possible toward realizing those goals and standards, and toward promoting the academic success of every student.

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