

## Lessons on Ableism and Inclusion: A Reflection

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### Introduction

In Joel Leslie's moving and insightful reflective essay, he recounts his experiences negotiating the post-secondary system as a person with disabilities. Joel explores how internalized ableism, inclusive and accessible pedagogy, and marginalization have impacted his life as a student, and he connects these insights with academic thinking on these topics. This essay is an outstanding example of a reflection that weaves between personal and academic knowledge and leaves us better off for having taken the time to read it.

*Keywords:* disability, writing studies, ableism, internalized ableism, combating ableism in university classrooms



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## *Introduction*

I am a disabled student. Historically, I have not often allowed myself to show vulnerability regarding disability. My ADHD, genetic connective tissue disorder, and speech disorder have resulted in internalized ableism, exclusion, and marginalization. Ableism is an often systemically upheld belief that the able-bodied have more inherent worth than the disabled. Disablism, contrastingly, is the belief that disability makes someone inferior. My internalized ableism has been challenged through my experiences in this class. In higher education, this form of ableism often results, and has resulted for me, in an understanding of oneself as “deficient” and “burdensome” (Nieminen 614). Inclusive pedagogy has influenced the lectures and group activities of this class and has been a key factor in my attempts to overcome complex feelings of inadequacy.

Ableism often leads to marginalization and dehumanization: “dehumanization ... is a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire 44). Freire includes both those who have been dehumanized and those who dehumanize others as victims of this distortion. The atmosphere within the classroom this semester has enlightened me about how being dehumanized makes me feel and how ableism harms those who perpetuate it. Reflecting on this writing course, and my identity as a disabled student, brought to mind the negative psychosocial and academic impacts on students with disabilities. Opposing systemic ableism in the classroom is a shared responsibility of recognizing internalized ableism and marginalization in disabled students by advocating for accessibility and inclusion.

## *Internalized Ableism*

Prior to this class, I had an assumption that my disability would burden others. Campbell claims that “... internalized ableism refers to how disabled people learn to view themselves as lesser...” (qtd. in Nieminen 618). This is the sentiment that I had regarding my disability, particularly my speech disorder. I often find myself existing in two forms as a student. I am simultaneously a ghost and a force within myself. In class discussions, I only participate if I know that I have something worthwhile to add. Given the speed of spoken conversation, this often leads to me not contributing. My self-imposed silence has led to a profound feeling of isolation throughout my undergraduate studies. Being isolated from my peers has resulted in a deep sense of otherness. This is not abnormal. Isolation can have severe impacts on the mental health of students with disabilities; we have significantly higher rates of depression and anxiety compared to non-disabled students (Solís García et al. 111). My reluctance to participate in class discussions in this writing course was directly related to my anxiety about being seen as defective.

To feel worthy of my spot in class, I overextend myself in group assignments. There have been many assignments where I have made sure to participate beyond what my group members expected. I feared becoming a burden to the group due to my disability if I did not participate to my capacity or beyond. Paradoxically, my intrinsic sense of being burdensome is also a feeling of not being disabled enough to warrant an inferiority complex. While I am not an academic, I can relate to the academics who “not only measured themselves against the societally acceptable, standardized norms but also against internalized criteria of disability” (Brown and Ramlackhan 1232). I have felt the need to not only prove myself as capable as my peers but also to fight against my internal feelings of not being disabled enough to claim that identity. Acknowledging my internalized ableism is a key aspect of opposing systemic ableism. Increasing my awareness of internalized bias has been crucial to accepting the necessity of accessibility as a shared responsibility.

### *Inclusion and Accessibility*

Our professor advocated for inclusion and accessibility from the first class; this has been a method of mitigating systemic ableism in this writing course. The promotion of inclusion by students and faculty can create a sense of belonging for disabled students (Taff and Clifton 127). Prior to starting the course, a meeting I had with the professor set the trajectory for how I would go on to view the class. She was incredibly kind and collaborated with me to ensure I had access to appropriate accommodations for class discussions. In addition to this, she chose to be open about her ADHD and explained how this impacts her in the classroom. Seeing someone in a position of leadership demonstrate confidence regarding disability had a positive effect on my view of myself. The idea that inclusion is the responsibility of everyone was openly communicated to the class, and I was never singled out. Using inclusion as a method of accommodating disability is in direct opposition to ableism. Accommodations can be a “mechanism of ableism... [when they are] ... framed as students’ personal responsibility rather than as a structural issue” (Nieminen 626). Requesting and receiving accommodations is primarily my responsibility as a disabled student, and the collaborative effort that I experienced in this writing course has been a rarity at the University. This is the reality of systemic ableism.

By reinforcing our collective responsibility to help accommodate one another, our professor directly destigmatized accommodations in the classroom. I was struck by the respectful communication that she used to make the class accessible. My accommodations in university have often been an afterthought, but communication in this class was a priority for everyone. Being able to communicate via a shared class document increased my confidence throughout the course. In university, some “...pathological conceptions remain intact and detrimentally shape the higher education experiences of faculty, staff, and students with disabilities” (Brown and Ramlackhan 1226). Our professor demonstrated that

there is a way to move away from pathologizing disability and that doing so can be beneficial to the learning environment. By participating in class, I have been able to make connections with my classmates, and I can only hope that they have found collaborating with me beneficial in turn. Through reflection, I can say that inclusion and accommodations have only had a positive impact on my psychosocial and academic health in this writing course. Advocating for future accommodations and inclusive environments is an aspect of combating my marginalization and that of others.

### *Marginalization*

The importance of recognizing marginalization has been made clear to me in this writing course. I feel that internalized ableism is a tool perpetuated by a larger system of oppression toward disabled people. “In education, disablism often manifests through the segregation of disabled students” (Nieminen 618). I want to make it clear that there have been no overt displays of ableism directed toward me in this class. However, systemic ableism seeps into the subconscious of disabled people like myself. There is no need for overt discrimination when I am willing to segregate myself on behalf of this system. I remember the feeling of not being able to speak during a presentation in this class. I helped to plan the presentation with the group. My hands were shaking as I typed up my ideas because I knew that I would not be able to present the information that we had brainstormed together. I was not a contributing member; I was ashamed. So, not knowing how to participate in the presentation, I chose to sit and watch my group members instead. I segregated myself, not due to internalized ableism, but on behalf of the system which has existed long before my birth. If I could go back to that moment, I would have asked my classmates how I could participate in our presentation instead of assuming I should stay on the margins.

While researching ableism, I read Campbell’s idea that disability can be “cast as a diminished state of being human” (qtd. in Brown and Ramlackhan 1227). This idea of being, frankly, subhuman is embedded in my psyche. This is why learning to recognize and reject, the systemic marginalization of disabled people is necessary. In the introduction of this paper, I openly stated what my disabilities are. I have come to learn, through my experiences in this class, that I must be bold enough to do so. “Declaring a disability can become a political act...” because it requires disabled people to have the audacity to be authentic (Brown and Leigh 175). Having this audacity is not easy for me, but if I want to have positive psychosocial and academic experiences in the future, I must allow this form of politics to guide my actions. I must recognize systemic marginalization and move against it with vigour. This has been, perhaps, the most important lesson of this writing course for me.

### *Implications and Concluding Remarks*

While this reflection has given me some insight into my own capacity to mitigate systemic ableism, it is important to consider a theoretical framework for the future. One which stood out to me while reading about disability and ableism is the social model: “...The social model has guided accessible assessment design that seeks to “design out” barriers and thus reduce the need for accommodations” (Nieminen 614). I believe that this view of disability would allow for further integration between abled and disabled students. It is also important to note that my reflective insight is limited; it is a single data point in a campus that has many disabled students. My commitment to opposing systemic ableism through the promotion of inclusive and egalitarian classroom environments has been forged by reflecting on internalized ableism and marginalization. My experiences during group work, presentations, and interactions with peers and our professor in this writing course have been instrumental in confronting my biases surrounding the psychosocial and academic outcomes of disability. What I thought made me less-than-human is a difference which humanizes us all.

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