Critical Disability Studies Reflection

How has your understanding of disability been expanded or challenged? Where did learning happen for you, and how did you contribute to others’ learning? Are there areas where you wish you’d pushed your learning further? How did you develop as a reader, a writer, a speaker, a listener, and how do you hope to develop further? What will you take from this course into your future academic or professional life and into your future as a human?

 After taking Portraits of Disability and Difference as my freshman year writing seminar, I knew that I wanted to continue learning more about the field of disability studies and thinking about disability in a nuanced and academic sort of way. Leaving Portraits, I remember feeling disappointed by the lack of representation of people with intellectual disabilities in disability studies, but also excited that there was a whole community of people thinking and talking about disability and disability culture. Though, at that point in my college experience, I was not entirely sure what I wanted to major in, I remember feeling a divide between medicine (at that point I was still toying with the idea of going into medicine) and disability studies and I was not really sure that I could bridge that gap and do both. The most important thing that I have learned through Critical Disability Studies: Theory and Practice is probably that it is possible to be interested in both science and disability studies, and that the two disciplines are intrinsically related and can constructively inform one another.

 This semester, in addition to taking Critical Disability Studies, I also took a neuroscience course entitled Neurobiology of Disease. I’ve been lucky enough to have the professor teaching this class before and also have her as my advisor for the Neuroscience minor, and in the past I have talked to her about my interest in neuroscience, neuroethics, and disability studies. As one might imagine, in our class we discussed many neurological conditions including epilepsy, Alzheimer’s disease, stroke, traumatic brain injuries, and Huntington’s disease. During the stroke module, we were watching public awareness of stroke videos, most of which were using disability as a scare tactic to teach people about the risk factors of stroke. When our professor asked for comments about the videos, I stated that while public awareness of strokes and risk factors for strokes is really important, I did not think that the videos went about doing that in the correct manner. This initial comment kick started many more conversations about disability studies and science, both during the course as well as during office hours. I ended up writing a paper about how a disability studies perspective can broaden the field of scientific research and opens up the possibility of novel discoveries, a topic that took a lot of research but also helped me to realize that it is possible to “do both”. Additionally, my neurobiology of disease professor is now incredibly interested in continuing to think about the intersections of disability and science. I can only hope that in the future I will continue to have mentors who are willing and open to new perspectives, and hope that more scientists will be introduced to thinking about disability outside of the medical model.

 At the beginning of the Critical Disability Studies course, I was really excited by the diversity of disciplines that different students in the class were in, but I also felt somewhat threatened. So many people were in the humanities and social sciences, fields that are often more reflective and writing-intensive than the sciences, and as someone who struggles with reflections and writing I was concerned that I wouldn’t be able to express my ideas clearly and eloquently. The first turning point that I had in my thinking about what it means to be a disability studies scholar, and more broadly what it means to be an academic, was when we read the excerpt from Margaret Price’s *Mad at School* and Melanie Yergeau’s article *Clinically Significant Disturbance*. Discussing gatekeeping procedures in the academy and the value that academics place on clear and coherent thinking made me think about how these “rules” have influenced my own academic experience. I struggle with clarity as a writer and speaker- usually my writing process involves writing everything that comes into my head and then trying to edit it into a more clear and concise final product. While coming to learn this about myself has helped immensely, it also frustrates me because it often means that writing takes a very long time and speaking usually involves a lot of planning and thought. Something else that has been very helpful is the idea of storytelling. As a scientist, I have been told many times to present my research as a story to make it more accessible and more entertaining for the audience. Thinking about telling a story, whether it is in a Serendip post, or when I make a comment in class, or when Sarah and I gave the BioArt talk, or even when I was presenting my thesis research, has helped me to communicate complex ideas and theories in more accessible manners.

 Looking forward, I am excited to continue thinking about disability studies both in the context of scientific research and in the context of bioethics. This class furthered my interest and knowledge in disability studies frameworks and application of these frameworks to different disciplines. Learning to tell stories, whether those stories are about disability, or science, or both, has helped me to become a better communicator. Finally, this class has given me confidence that it is possible to “do both” and incorporate disability theory into scientific research and vice-versa.