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Early American Disabilities Studies: Teaching (and Confronting) Internalized Ableism

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Oliver Caswell. Laura Bridgman / Painted by A. Fisher ; Lith. of Bouvé & Sharp, Boston ; on stone by W. Sharp. [1844]

The print shows Laura guiding Oliver's hand on page of braille book. "The blind leading the blind by the light of intellect" is penciled on print.

Early American Disability Studies: Teaching (and Confronting) Internalized Ableism

How might college instructors introduce students to disabled people in an earlier America who expressed negative views about disability? How can we discuss ableism and internalized ableism in the classroom without chastising or shaming?

Ableism—which positions disability as inferior to able-bodiedness and able-mindedness—harms [bodyminds](#) that do not conform to a nondisabled white heterosexual male norm. Disability scholars must attend to individuals' lived experiences; however, learning to think beyond the individual is often a necessary step for social justice work. Various models of disability studies (including social, feminist, cultural, political, and economic models) allow us to address big-picture systemic issues and confront the institutions that sustain oppression.

While many have written [and spoken](#) about internalized sexism and racism, there's less discussion about [internalized ableism](#). As [Sara Webb explains](#), internalized oppression “is the belief among historically oppressed people that negative stereotypes about themselves and positive stereotypes about a dominant group are, in fact, true” (para. 2). The book [Countours of Ableism](#) cites D. Marks, who states: “Internalized oppression is not the cause of our mistreatment; it is the result of our mistreatment. It would not exist without the real external oppression that forms the social climate in which we exist[VD1]” (25). Many marginalized people devote substantial energy to learning to challenge internalized beliefs. [Audre Lorde](#) models her process of learning to love her multidimensional identities as a Black lesbian woman: “My fullest concentration of energy is available to me only when I integrate all the parts of who I am, openly, allowing power from the particular sources of my living to flow back and forth freely through all my different selves, without the restrictions of externally imposed definition” (112). Lorde has learned to cherish all the parts of herself external forces have tried to diminish, rejecting external and internal oppression.

For disabled people, learning to unpack internalized ableism is [no small feat](#); it's about as simple as learning to identify ableism in all its infinite manifestations. Many of us in disability communities are horrified by the idea of acting on internalized ableism— in participating, however unwillingly, in the abuse of disabled people. And a person whose action and speech come from internalized ableism can do real harm that isn't excusable just because they have experienced ableism too. That said, I'm concerned by excessive criticism and shaming directed towards people who internalize oppression. Often, internalized ableism is just ableism—it might come from somewhere within, but its dominant sources are external, rooted in systems much larger than any one individual. We need to recognize that internalized oppression is often oppression in disguise, animating disabled bodyminds from all sides, inside and out.

Discussions about ableism and internalized oppression with students have inspired me to reconsider some of my pedagogical approaches to social justice issues. When I introduce vocabularies of oppression that are new and unfamiliar, I need to model an approach that is

generous and forgiving, yet be vocal when I need to correct false assumptions – my students’ and my own. For example, I’ve taught Deafblind writer Laura Bridgman’s 1867 poem “Holy Home,” which reads: “God will make me / happy when I die” (290). One student argued Bridgman internalized the idea that she’d be better off dead than disabled. This comment led to an important debate about whether Bridgman was trying to express her hatred of her disabled life or whether the poem captures hope for everyone’s heavenly futures, or whether Bridgman, like many people, simply experiences suicidal ideation at times. I offered more context, including a letter Bridgman wrote that reads “I am so happy to be alive” (192). The student who voiced that comment was embarrassed, thinking they’d said something “ableist”; but, as other students assured them, the full blame lies with the structural forces that preach that disabled people most likely hate themselves.

This experience helped concretize, in my mind, the value of the pair-share as a space for students to feel supported by each other as they encounter new ideas about old histories. I also like scheduling (as often as possible, in a busy semester) one-on-one check-ins to help students feel comfortable acknowledging the ways their beliefs about disability, race, sexuality, and gender might be learned, unlearned, or internalized; welcomed or confronted. I also ask students to freewrite brief self-evaluations several times during the semester so they can reflect on and celebrate this growth. I’ll keep telling my students and myself that because I want to be shown grace when I make mistakes, I want our classroom to be a space for professors and students alike to make mistakes, unlearn, and grow with open eagerness and care.

In self-evaluations and group conversations, my past students have opened up and described their own experiences with internalized ableism. They said that they identify as disabled and have combated feelings of self-hatred. Because I can relate to this (I explain that I often can’t contain feelings of disgust at my “unproductivity” when my bodymind demands rest), I remind the students and myself that learning to recognize and challenge internalization is a constant journey. Moreover, as J. Logan Smilges recently suggested in *Crip Negativity*, negative feelings aren’t the end of the world. Anyone who’s trying to learn and love themselves who had a moment with internalization should not be driven to further self-hatred and guilt. Rather, that energy can be redirected to challenge ableism and other oppressions that harm all of us.

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