Each and every time I stand in front of a new class, I feel the undue and often paradoxical burden of representation. Somewhere in the briefing over course policies, the obligatory run through the syllabus, the remarks on key texts and assignments, and the stumbling over a roster of names that I might struggle to pronounce and will struggle even more to hear correctly—somewhere in there I need to tell them that I am deaf. But I won’t use that word. I’ll opt for “hard-of-hearing.” And then I’ll wince over how I’m sure they’re thinking: “Gee, I guess she’s a lot older than she looks.” So I’ll quickly add that it’s a genetic condition that I’ve had from birth, and I’ll begin rambling fast and nervously about how I have no hearing whatsoever in the higher frequencies that are used in audiological exams; that I possess only about moderate hearing in the lower frequencies; that I am therefore very hard to fit for hearing aids (which I do sometimes now wear thanks to the wonders of digital technologies that can enhance some of the higher frequencies without also over-amplifying the lower ones); how I have never heard a bird or a bell or the last three keys on the piano; how I can’t hear whispers or even soft-spoken folks; why I tune to lower-pitched male voices easier than to female ones; how I worried so much over whether I would be able to hear my own children once they were born; why I struggle most with consonants; how I patch together the sense of what they are saying in class by “reading” body language and other contextual clues around what they say and by lipreading (explaining, too, that this is a skill that most deaf people aren’t, in fact, very adept at so please don’t take me as a representative); that I have a tendency to move in on their space—to move toward them—when they are talking so that I can maximize those clues all the more (which I illustrate even as I am explaining this...
move); how they'll be able to contact me by phone (preferably not) but why e-mail is the best bet; how they'll often have to repeat what they say in class and maybe, too, what someone else has said. "So, hey," I joke, "you gotta pay attention in this class!" At this point, they are definitely paying attention.

At this point, even for all they might or might not know about disability in general or deafness in particular, about disabled persons generally or d/Deaf people specifically, they are at a loss for words or responses. Their silence facing my presence, their muteness alongside my apparent ability, brings both them and me to the center of disability and its key issues as I've found those issues encountered, time and again, in the language and literature courses I've taught where disability figures strongly.³

First and perhaps foremost, we face dealing with the erasure of disabled subjects from the public sphere, and the apparent invisibility of disabled subjects in places like the academy. My representation, standing before class, makes visible an anomaly that is hard to fit (even doubly disconcerting, perhaps, when the disabled subject sits at the teacher's desk rather than in the student's seat).⁴ We'll have to encounter, too, the way disabled subjects are often used, then erased, from the literature we read and the popular culture that surrounds us. And all this time, I'll be standing there in the front of the classroom quite unerased, gravitating toward whomever is speaking.

Second, and tied to the first, we encounter the economic argument used to deny access; we have to consider the cost of accommodating single disabled persons (because economic arguments almost always begin by singling out, dividing and conquering) in these hallowed halls where many can't pass (let alone get in the door, either figuratively or literally) because accessibility costs (as does excellence, I might add). I represent those costs—my "specials" not necessarily hanging out all over the place but evident enough if you go looking: the cost of my hearing aids and microlink FM system; the price of an interpreter or real-time captioning from time to time; the TDD and special volume control handset hooked to my phone; the office alarm light for door knocks, phone rings, and fire alarms; and even a specially requested, acoustically favorable room for all my classes and an enrollment cap (so I can hear them all) of twenty-six students guaranteed for my courses. We'll all have to ask ourselves at some point, implicitly or explicitly, consciously or not (and yes, I'm included in this "we" since I do a lot of this asking, especially in a hard term, of myself), "Is it worth it?"
Most of the time it is, and I'd like to think that my students come away thinking the same. But even the asking of the question poses the third representational issue of disability that we encounter: the very instability of the category itself. Disability stabilizes most in its instability. The definition of disability always begins (and probably ends, too) in its ambiguity, in its indeterminate boundaries. Just ask the doctors who are often asked to certify disability. Just ask the public school teachers and administrators floating, often unanchored, in the flotsam and jetsam of "mainstreaming." Just ask the literature we'll be reading, in which disabled characters often come and go, floating to the surface and then being swept away in the current of the theme they serve. Just ask the person sitting next to you in class who may or may not be disabled (for disability is as invisible as it is visible), who may be disabled but who is only recently coming to know that him or herself and therefore to (self) identify as disabled (this happens a lot in the classes I teach), who may identify with disability through some close relationship with a disabled person, or who may not have any concept or familiarity (yet) with disability. Just ask me. There's a lot of instability shaking up any classroom like this in terms of disability before I even enter the room. But when I come in, claiming disability but markedly invisible in that claim, things really start rattling—the students don't see the hearing aids unless they get very close, my "accent" can easily be attributed to other sources, I "pass" at lipreading and contextualizing pretty well most of the time.

What also begins to rattle students in the classes in which I teach language and literature from, around, or with a disability perspective is the way disability is represented in literature and film—the fourth key issue. Particularly palpable distinctions arise when we read disability autobiography or memoir—the experience rendered firsthand—against or alongside literature, canonical or not, with disabled characters represented in it. Incongruity appears when we watch major-run theater films centered on a disabled life (and here, the able-bodied actors who portray disabled characters win Oscars with notable frequency), and then we also view some key documentaries done by disabled people about disabled people. We've been taught to love literature in part because of the way it represents life, the ways in which we can see and know ourselves even better through the characters on the page. But when first-person disability narratives or documentaries stand next to classic (and even mainstream) literature and film, those "classic" and "mainstream" representations lie. Thus, what we've been taught now seems a lie, and we will risk not liking the picture we've come to see of ourselves as well.
We won’t know how to represent ourselves then either, and this is the fifth representational dilemma handed to us by disability. Confronted with the incomplete and now obviously unstable face of disability, we’re not sure what to draw in there. We’re even less sure about how what we draw will reflect back on our own face: Should we be nice? Patently patronizing? Innocently curious? Confess our own culpability? Look away? Hold the door open for that wheelchair? Greet the blind person or just slip silently by? Feel bad that disabled persons are cheaply used and even blatantly abused in so much of our literature? Vow never to watch another film that features a disabled character? Police parking lots, reporting those who abuse the handicapped parking spaces? Write a story with a “real” disabled character now that we’ve met some in memoir and documentaries? Volunteer at an assisted living center or sign up to read for blind recordings? Promise never to think about race, class, sexuality or gender again without also thinking about disability? Or should we resist? Proclaim our own innocence, our too-easy victimization as “evil able-bodied oppressor”? Not let lies be countered with more lies (especially when we feel they are about us)? Get rowdy back? Question privilege in general (as the thing that divides disabled from able-bodied no matter which side you are on)? Suddenly that old school playground chant rings all too real in our ears: “I’m rubber, and you’re glue. Whatever you say bounces off of me and sticks to you.” What we say and do and believe about disability suddenly begins to be what we say and do and believe about ourselves. These representations are getting sticky, too.

In the trick, we can try, as we often do in our teaching and scholarly lives (as both students and teachers), to turn to theory. But in a classroom where disability sits, either peripheral or in the center, we’ll have a hard time representing a theory, too. This is yet another representational dilemma that comes when disability enters a literature and language classroom—the sixth and final one that I’ll be working to highlight in the scenes that follow. Disability, as both a lived experience and a developing field of study, struggles with its critical apparatus, searches for the right theoretical frame to fit its face(s). Disability theory can complement—both teaching to and learning from—our already existing work in gender, sexuality, race, and class. It can intersect well and even enhance our study of genre. It can both shadow and eclipse—can take from and give back to—feminist theory, queer theory, Marxism, literary criticism, historicism, and social constructionism, to name but a few. It spans literary periods and languages. It serves and is served by, as Sharon Snyder has argued, “infinities of forms.”
Most of all, as I will be arguing throughout this essay, disability enables insight—critical, experiential, cognitive, sensory, and pedagogical insight. And it is this enabling, this insight, that I am after in all my classrooms, whether disability is the “subject” or not. My (fairly recent) entry into disability studies; my use of disability memoir and documentary alongside representations of disability in literature, film, and popular culture in many of my courses now; and my self-identification as disabled (only in the last ten years of my life) have led to what I call “an enabling pedagogy,” a theory and practice of teaching that posits disability as insight.6

Disability as Insight: The Nondisability-Centered Classroom
At Ohio State University, English 467: Writing and Learning gives students, mostly English and education majors, a background in theories about the composing process and some actual practice in contemporary composition pedagogy. While 467 students are learning, they are also doing—completing twelve hours of tutoring with “at-risk” students enrolled in our required first-year composition course. In one particular quarter, my 467 class had just finished a fine discussion in the second week about diversity and differences—those disparities in race, gender, culture, class, and educational backgrounds that can complicate and enrich the tutoring relationship, altering the expected dynamics.7 I had tossed disabilities in there, stirring the stew up a little thicker. Learning disabilities rose, of course, to take the strongest flavor in this part of the discussion since on my campus alone there has been an astonishing eight-hundred percent increase in disabled students in the last two years (and students with learning disabilities make up about half of that percentage). The required first-year composition (English 110) and writing-across-the-curriculum second-level writing courses (designated as 367 courses in any department) have felt this increase most palpably. Likewise, the tutoring center—the University Writing Center, where students go for free fifty-minute tutorial sessions on their writing—has borne plenty of the brunt of this phenomenal increase, particularly with learning disabled students.8

I nudged these students to think about how almost any disability they could imagine would in fact have an impact on a person’s literacy skills, affecting either (and often both) a person’s physical or cognitive abilities in reading, processing, and producing “normal” print texts. I could see my students processing this idea, seriously considering something they hadn’t thought much about before, becoming imaginatively and intellec-
tually enabled in ways they hadn’t been before. What’s more, I suggested to them, literacy can enable passing, both socially and academically. Literacy can overcome stigma. And in this way, too, literacy can erase disability just as, paradoxically, disability can cripple and complicate literacy. They were in the process of writing their own literacy narratives when I made these remarks. I stopped the lecturing and read a brief passage from my own published literacy narrative, a piece called “On (Almost) Passing.” This essay is about my own “mainstream” education and efforts to pass at/in/through literacy, and it illustrates these things perhaps better than I could just tell them in a teacherly way.

In the next class session, Nick, one of the students, appeared with his right arm in a cast, securely slinged to his chest. “I’m getting a taste of what you were talking about,” he quipped as he passed by me on the way to his seat, shaking his slinged arm in front of him for all to see (as if we had missed it). “Injured my shoulder,” he explained. “It’s a nuisance, yeah. But my doctor says it will probably be only another seven to ten days before I have it back.” He was cheerful, didn’t really want an extension on his assignments, said he planned to voice-record his class and tutoring notes and the rest of his literacy narrative in progress and then transcribe them later when he was “able.” We made a joke about how we’d give him a release from being the “recorder” in any group discussions for the next few classes. Nick was an older, returning, nontraditional student with a journalism career half behind him. He knew about negotiation, about continuing an education in a not so “normal” way. I didn’t worry about him.

But things change. A week later he was at my office door, visibly distressed. “My doctor says I’ll have to have surgery and now I’m looking at three months in this thing,” he said, far less cheerful, lifting his slinged arm up for display again, but this time only slightly and without the playful shaking. He sat down, hunched over with bent back and shoulders, as if protecting himself. “I’m not supposed to use it at all. Can’t write. It’s going to be hard to finish this class.” Finality. Resignation.

Still, I tried to save the day: “We can work this out. Let’s see about getting you a note taker or a transcriber from Disability Services. You can use a tape recorder for your tutoring case study notes, for finishing your literacy narrative, and for keeping your notebook, too. That’s fine with me. I can’t listen to the tape-recorded notes, but that’s no problem. We’ll work around it. Take an incomplete. I know you work full-time in the summer, so if we get the transcriber to complete a copy of your tape-recorded work, then I’ll give you until the first week of fall quarter to
complete all the course work. I want this to work for you. I know you like tutoring. I know you’ll be good at it. And you wanted to become one of the writing center’s pool of volunteer tutors next year, right? You can’t do that until you complete this class. So, let’s make it work. We can call Disability Services. . . .” Rattling and rattled, I reached for my university phone book, still talking at him, determined, intent on rescuing him from his resignation. 9

“I already did that,” he replied. Finality again.

“Oh.” I put the phone book down.

“I have an appointment with them tomorrow to talk about my options. They weren’t very hopeful on the phone. Said they didn’t usually offer note takers for temporary disabilities, for injuries. But, yeah, I’ll go see anyway.”

“Good.” By then, I was hunkered down, back bent over, folded in on myself. It was quiet for a moment there in my office.

“The real problem is my two other English classes,” he said, but he wouldn’t make eye contact with me on this point. “I have the same professor for both of them. I talked with him yesterday. He wasn’t offering any options. . . .”

“Oh,” I said, staring off into space, unable to make eye contact now, too. A little more silence. “Well, maybe Disability Services will have some answers when you meet with them tomorrow.”

They didn’t, of course. Their “service” capabilities are rather limited, administratively budget-capped. I know that well enough by now. As a disabled faculty member who often can’t get the services she needs and requests (a decent interpreter for an important and large meeting on campus every now and then), and who has served as the faculty advisor to Students for Disability Awareness, a campus organization that has fought, more than once and seldom pleasantly or productively, with our Office for Disability Services over their services (or lack thereof) to students, I’m experienced in the often unfulfilled hope and necessary hesitancy that colors the Americans with Disabilities Act and its assertion of “meaningful access with dignity” in vibrant, idealized strokes. The ADA aims to do this coloring in an institutionalized, education-as-corporation driven environment that typically sees only black and white, “normal” or not, “makes us money” or “costs us money.” And suddenly, with the twist of his arm, a turn of luck, a nick of fate, Nick had gone from normal to not, from maker of money to coster of money.

Nick was gone from my class, and from OSU, too—invisible, an economic liability erased.
Oh, he did stop by my office two days later to report that ODS couldn’t do anything for him, that they didn’t normally (such a powerful word) offer note takers for “these kinds of situations.” He said that he needed to drop his other English courses—in the middle of the quarter—and so, although he was appreciative of my efforts to work something out, he couldn’t afford, literally or figuratively, to take just one class that quarter. He’d go back to work full-time, save his money and time. “Maybe,” he said, as he stood and thanked me for helping him think through this, “I’ll come back and take your 467 class next winter.”

“Sure, you do that. I’d love to have you.” I had to stand, get out of that hopeless, hunched-in place that my body was stuck in. I offered my right hand for the shaking. Nick started by offering his right, remembered the sling, and then with both of us fumbling, he briefly, nervously, touched the fingers of my right hand with those on his left. I couldn’t make eye contact. I don’t think he could either. “Sure,” I said again. As if it mattered.

And then he was gone. Another disability made invisible.

During the last English 467 class session before Nick showed up with his arm in a sling, I led the students through an exercise that I’ve used in other classes to illustrate the power of collaboration in both finding and solving problems, in coming to a fuller understanding of things. Collaboration—the trust of and even power in sharing skills, experiences, knowledge—rings the philosophy of our “Writing and Learning” course with the practice of peer tutoring at its practical core. “The blind leading the blind” is what I call this early “show, don’t tell” kind of class activity.

Now wait. It’s not a sensitivity exercise—not one of those “let’s-pretend-we’re-disabled-and-see-what-it-feels-like” kind of showing games that mostly leaves the players feeling, quite predictably, lucky and empowered in their ability and full of deeply felt pity for “that cripple.” No, not that game. I’m after rethinking differences, not erasing them. “The blind leading the blind” is an imagination and insight exercise meant to illustrate, more than anything else, that the very negativity of this notion in our culture might in fact rest on the fear that when the blind do lead the blind, they begin to learn from each other; they begin to collaborate, to gain from their shared knowledge, to grow in and from their widening sense of community. They begin to go places; they begin to get somewhere. And these gains, I suspect, are what make “the blind
leading the blind” so suspicious in more “able” eyes; if they gain so much, they might not need us.

Kenneth Bruffee’s “Peer Tutoring and ‘The Conversation of Man-kind’” is one of the literature’s dominant articles about the successes of the peer tutoring process in being a generally effective way of helping teach almost all students how to write well. In that article, Bruffee makes reference three times to the attacks on peer tutoring that are often launched in the larger literature as merely a process whereby the “blind are leading the blind.” I bristle. And then I take on imagination, asking a pair of my students to don blindfolds. It just so happens that it was a beautiful spring day and we were having class outside in a huge grassy area called The Oval that occupies the central space of OSU’s campus. I asked the blindfolded pair to find their way back to the university building we had left an hour earlier—to wind up on the steps of University Hall. “Oh, geez,” the young man muttered, only his nervous half-grin showing the panic that was surely in his blindfolded eyes. But then, the magic I had hoped for began to happen: he took the other volunteer’s arm, a young woman, and they began to take hesitant steps, arms locked, in a general, but slightly skewed direction, toward their assigned goal. They began asking each other questions: “How far do you think it is?” “Should we go this way?” “Do you remember anything . . . anything that will help us know where we are?”

The rest of the class was laughing softly; they were breathing some relief, too, that it was not they who were groping and baby-stepping on The Oval. Then the young man turned back toward that laughter: “Hey,” he asserted, half-jokingly, and half accusingly, “isn’t anyone going to help us?” The class members all looked, permission-seeking, at me. “All I said,” I reminded them, “is that they needed to get to the steps of University Hall.” So then, a few students in the class began offering general guides: “If you go about three more steps to your basic left, you’ll hit the sidewalk. That sidewalk will take you right to the steps.”

“Cool,” said the guy. “Thanks,” said the woman. And they set off. Once they got to the sidewalk, they picked up speed, lurching a little forward, while students coming toward them cleared a wide path (much as they do when I walk with one of my cane-bearing or dog-led blind friends on campus). When they got about twenty yards away, it became obvious that while the sidewalk does indeed lead to the steps of the building by veering a little to the right, it also forks off, veering to the left on a continued path that would eventually take them down a hill, past the recreation complex, and right into the football stadium. When they began
veering left and were almost past the front door of University Hall, several
class members yelled at them, but by then the distance was growing great
and the interfering sounds of so many other students on that sidewalk
made it hard for the couple to attend clearly to these distant directions.
There was a tense moment and things no longer seemed so amusing to my
class as they watched the pair drift past the assigned building. Then two
things happened simultaneously. First, the couple somehow sensed that
they had overshot their mark. (They told us later that the shade from the
trees in the grove right beyond the building was the clue that they were
close.) They stopped, turned forty-five degrees to face the building
they’d just passed, and talked over their sense of things. Second, three
of my students jumped, all at the same time, and began half-running,
half-walking toward the couple, shouting various things as they went:
“No, you’ve gone too far! Turn around! Come back!” These students
joined the couple, surrounded them much as cowboys ride point on a
herd of cattle, and in this way (but keeping some distance) they guided
the pair “home.”

Afterwards, we talked about the sense-making that happened, the
moments of questioning, collaboration, trust, and context-building that
took place. Also, we pondered why the two knew immediately to grab
each other, how some in the “audience” knew to assist, how much they
assisted, why they assisted. We talked, for example, about why no one
wanted the couple to become totally dependent on our directions, on
outside sources, and everyone worked instead to find the right balance
between enabling their independent success and fostering a helpful, but
not overwhelming, dependence on others. The moral of my story enters
here: these are exactly the dynamics that I hope they will develop in their
tutoring. This wasn’t a class about disability. This wasn’t a disability
sensitivity/awareness exercise. It was a class about writing, about leading
others to better writing through the power of peer tutoring and shared
skills. But here, in the blind leading the blind, lies a powerful enabling
metaphor. Disability can create knowledge, open doors wider, build
ramps to awareness that we all essentially have in us anyway. This
happens when any body leads anybody.12

Centering the Subject: Representations of (Dis)Ability
in Literature and Film
The first entirely disability-centered course I taught was an upper-level
English major course, “Representations of (Dis)Ability in Literature and
Film,” under my department’s slot for “Themes in Literature.” The
course was a grab bag, representing texts across multiple genres (drama, film, documentary, novels, poetry, and autobiography) and approaching disability from multiple—sometimes complementary, sometimes competing—perspectives. I had wanted to mix so much together quite deliberately and for several reasons. First, my intuition told me that introducing "disability as insight" in reading literature and studying film would be most successful for a group of junior-senior English majors just by getting them into the class in the first place. I sensed that a multiple genre approach with texts and authors who were both familiar and strange—as well as plenty of visual, non-reading material (such as film) thrown in—would help reel in enrollment. I needed to make the course "accessible" at the outset, interesting to our undergraduate student body, regardless of the status of their own individual bodies.

Second, I ranged widely across genres, and I paired and sometimes tripled texts in order to shake up norms surrounding notions of disability and disabled people. By setting texts in conversations, harmonious or discordant, with each other, I thought we might best be able to explore literary representations—in their plurality—about bodies, minds, abilities, and disabilities. I wanted to make a web of meaning for the way (dis)ability is employed in literature and film and, in so doing, to position disability as insight into reading literary and cultural representations of what bodies and minds can do and be. I opened with a preliminary lecture outlining some of the authors and characters luminous in "the canon" (ones they might already be familiar with) who also happened to be disabled: Homer, Tiresias, Captain Ahab, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Quasimodo, Benjy Compson, Flannery O'Connor, Richard III, and so on.

I led the first couple of classes in territory that I was most familiar with so that I might model some approaches to issues, discussion, and critical analysis when disability "figures" a text and our reading of it. I opened with an eighty-minute contemporary performance—a kind of disability documentary—by Neil Marcus and "Access Theater" titled Storm Reading. From the opening shot of this videotaped performance, Marcus shakes sensibilities. Stuttering profoundly in the first excruciatingly long two minutes of the performance, he mounts incredible tension in his audience (both in the live performance and, by extension, in his video-viewing audience here on a Wednesday afternoon in January in an Ohio State University classroom). We all leaned forward to listen harder, our brows furrowed, and our emotions racing between an outwardly directed sort of captive anger and fear at possibly having to listen to this
incomprehensible voice for eighty long minutes and an inwardly focused fidgeting embarrassment over Marcus's "condition"—general dystonia (an all-over spasticity that makes this body "stormy"). We were caught in his storm—a bit frightened, uncomfortable, seeking escape. Then, just in time, as the tension mounted highest and the thunder almost broke in us, both a sign language and voice interpreter joined him on stage and smoothed things out for us, accommodating us. They say and sign together, echoing Marcus: "People are always watching me. . . . They're watching to see how well I do this thing, this thing called 'human.'"

Later, we had a powerful, honest, and stormy discussion about our overwhelming physical and emotional discomfort in that opening two minutes of *Storm Reading*—our sense of discomfort at Marcus' struggling to speak and then, just as stormily, our sense of discomfort in ourselves for having been so impatient and uncomfortable in the first place. One student, speaking bravely, related it further to the power that infuses speaking:

It brought up all these bad memories of times in grade school when certain teachers would force certain students to stand and speak before the class and they just couldn't do it. The students called on would hate it. Those of us listening would hate it. We would all hate the teacher for making us all so uncomfortable. Speaking up and speaking well is always hard to do.¹³

From there I led students into a reading of Mark Medoff’s *Children of a Lesser God*, an award-winning play in which deaf Sarah Norman (the play on “normal” obvious here) challenges the high cultural premium placed on “speaking up and speaking well” that is enforced upon her. We paired that play with the film version—a film starring William Hurt and Oscar award-winning deaf actress Marlee Matlin—and we found that some representations of disability and speaking remain the same, but some significantly differ between the original play (where Medoff did careful research on oral/sign issues in Deaf communities and worked with d/Deaf actors) and the more mass-marketed Hollywood film. Then I added another complication—triangulating the representations of speech and hearing issues in culture and literature—by showing the award-winning 1994 French documentary by Nicholas Philibert, *In the Land of the Deaf*. In Philibert's documentary, filmed in French Sign Language and some spoken French, subtitled in English, we cast far broader than just speech, taking on representations of language per se. Beyond this set of three texts, whose issues and elements I am personally and profession-
ally familiar with, I stepped back from such a definitive lead on discussion and analysis. While I still offered some background into the texts and authors and key issues that comprise the rest of the course, I let groups of three to four students take turns helping to design and lead discussions for any one reading or class period. I did this not because I am a proponent of that now old-fashioned "student-centered classroom" (although I am that, too), but because I am convinced that they won't get to "disability as insight" if I put in the batteries, turn it on, and shine the light for them. I can enable, but they will have to enable themselves, too.

In this fashion, we rolled through Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (and wondered, to begin with, why the "hunchback," Quasimodo, became the center of the Anglicized title), and then we took in three different film versions—all deemed "classics"—of the novel. Disney’s version of the *Hunchback* had just come out on video and so our discussion of children and disability, the infantilizing of people with disabilities, the patronizing of people with disabilities that springs from viewing this film, led us straight and crooked into a series of texts about parent-child relationships with disability factored in. We read from Paul West’s now published-as-a-pair texts about his deaf and brain-damaged daughter—first, his long epistolary essay, *Words for a Deaf Daughter* (1972) and then *Gala* (1975), his "wish fulfillment" novel (as West himself called it). We followed that with two other books by parents: Pulitzer-prize winning author Kenzaburo Oe’s recent meditation on life with his brain-damaged son, *A Healing Family*, and Anne Finger’s gutsy "parent with a disability encounters potential child with a disability" autobiographical work, *Past Due: A Story of Pregnancy, Birth, and Disability*.¹⁴

Just as parents (and children) complicate life with and views about disability in our culture, so too does war—and disabled veterans of war in particular—further mess up the story, further fracture our representations. In class, we spent some time in this further fragmented place reading Dalton Trumbo’s classic manifesto, *Johnny Got His Gun*, and viewing Jon Voight and Jane Fonda’s poignant, award-winning, post-Vietnam film, *Coming Home*. My students had far less trouble conflating and cross-reading disability and war-veteran issues than I thought they would. They came, on their own, to interrogate the subtle but strong us/them splitting at work between official forms and less official ways of thinking that might separate “veteran, disabled” from just "disabled." This recognition of categories within categories among the disabled—a phenomenon I call “crip-casteing”—occupied their imagination for some
time as they pondered the inherent hierarchies within the category of disability itself. 

Thus, we came to talk about representations of those “born disabled” as opposed to those who have “become disabled.” And they came to note that even among the “became disabled” certain ways of “becoming” are more acceptable or fashionable or exalted than others and that it matters, too, what “caste” you belonged to before you “became disabled.” So, for example, Christopher Reeves’ grand fall during an equestrian jumping competition and Jim Brady’s gun accident rank far above Joe Citizen’s spilling across the roadway on his Harley after a three-beer pub stop. We could then—in the literature we were reading, the films we were viewing, the culture we were living in—begin to locate the distinctions within distinctions: disability as a convenient metaphor and the disability one really experiences; “deserves to be disabled” and “pity him/her for his/her disability”; a disability you stare at and one you look away from; “freaks” and “the disabled”; physical disability and mental disability; congenital and acquired disabilities; “veteran, disabled” and just “disabled”; “temporary” and “permanent” disabilities; disfigurement and disability; and “normal” and “not.”

For their final projects, the class pushed and probed these distinctions further, peeling back layer upon interesting layer of representations about bodies, exploring the depth and range of human “(dis)(abilities)”—as one student came to rewrite the operative word in the course title—that have decorated and littered our literature and culture for centuries. One student, for example, compared Bernard Pomerance’s play The Elephant Man to several “scientific” accounts of the real Elephant Man, John Merrick. Another was spurred on by Cheryl Marie Wade’s “sassy girl” poetry and performances, and this student investigated both the poster-child and Jerry Lewis inspired telethon scenes surrounding many disabilities. Intrigued by the performance approach to disability that some disabled people themselves have often used to repaint the portrait of disability in fiction and poetry, another student did a study of disabled actors and disability theater groups across the country. Hopefully headed for a Hollywood career himself, one young man carried out a careful and quite comprehensive analysis of how and why actors have often won Oscars for their performances of disabled characters.

New texts like Lucy Grealy’s Autobiography of a Face caught the eye and imagination of another student who found herself interested in disability’s complication of “beauty” as a concept that controls our culture. Current literature and cultural constructions of disability also
caught imagininations. For example, one student did a cultural studies
analysis of the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial (including a weekend trip to
Washington, DC to visit the memorial first-hand), trying to imagine it
from a disabled perspective; another spliced together a filmic collage of
key “disability moments” from box-office hit movies over the past decade
and wrote an explanatory essay of the project; one creative writer wrote
a short story with a central character based on her grandmother, recently
disabled from a stroke. Also in a creative vein, three students “performed”
their own disabled “coming out”—one with a self-made video document-
tary of his lifelong learning disability in which, among other things, he
demonstrated close up the remarkable way he must tie his shoes and
“remember” a phone number; a second—inspired by poets like Kenny
Fries, Mary Duffy, and Cheryl Marie Wade—wrote and then gave a
reading of her own poetry that stitched in her “hidden” disability; and the
third wrote a creative nonfictional “meditation” on the medical “data” she
had uncovered about her own and others’ asthma. A student whose part-
time job had her logging in hours as an assistant manager at Barnes and
Noble quantified and qualified the “disability memoirs” that stacked the
current nonfiction shelves during the last month of our class. Another
student reread a book she had read in a team-taught women’s studies and
African American studies class the quarter before—Audre Lorde’s The
Cancer Journals—in order to lend “disability as insight” to Lorde’s slim
volume this time around.

We shared all our projects during the course’s final exam period, and
I have to admit that the most powerful moment for me in that entirely
powerful closing event was when the three students who had “outed” their
own disabilities under the guise of this final class project stayed behind,
engrossed in conversations with each other, as the rest of us filed out.
Through the literature we had read and the discussions we had, these three
(and more, I hope) had found individual identity, personal strength,
creative capabilities, representative power, and community.

Composing Disability
“My mother doesn’t think it’s right that my English teacher is deaf.” I
didn’t even have to go back and read that one again; it sank in well enough
the first time. Dropped in the middle of an otherwise quite pleasant,
seemingly benign paper from one of my recent first-year composition
honors students, the exclusion of myself into an unnamed third person in
this line leaves me little space for meaningful response. I gave the paper
a “B,” making doubly sure that this grade was “fair” as measured against
the assessment criteria I’d dutifully handed out and discussed with my students (thank God) way back in the first week of the quarter. I rubbed my temples a little, picked up a stray rubber band, and twisted it tight, unmercifully and nervously. Then I went downstairs to make a cup of tea.

I made “Abilities in America” the subject of an otherwise subject-less first-year composition course last quarter, both because I believe we can read race, class, gender, sexuality, and a whole host of other cultural and academic concerns well through the lens of disability (and, therein, satisfy the required “diversity” component that my university names for both the first- and second-year writing courses). I also made the subject “Abilities in America” because in the middle of that quarter a three-day national colloquium, “Enabling the Humanities: Disability Studies in Higher Education,” was to take place on my campus. I coordinated this event at the Wexner Center for the Arts, and I arranged to have my students personally meet many of the authors they had read in this course. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

But John’s mother, for one, apparently wasn’t buying it.

I won’t lie about it: a number of dangerous, demeaning, disturbingly uncivil actions and reactions have occurred in the courses I’ve taught where disability has been the focal point. We all lash out when we feel threatened, and when something goes wrong with our body or mind, or the bodies and minds of those we know and love, we tend to feel threatened. After all, if they—no, make that we—can legally, morally, easily abort fetuses for “chromosomal aberrations” (like Down’s Syndrome) after early detection, thanks to amniocentesis (or other similar tests performed rather routinely on newly pregnant women these days), what’s to stop us from getting rid of us—or Grandpa, or Aunt Sally, or brother Mike—when chromosomes or other conditions happen to create some aberration in our, or their, form or function? We may as well all, both disabled and able-bodied, get uncivil now—while we still have the chance.

On the first day of my honors first-year composition course, after I had handed out the syllabus and course information sheet, given my spiel about my own hearing loss, given a brief speech about why “Abilities in America” was my chosen theme for this particular course, and then
gushed about how lucky they would be to have a chance to meet personally with authors and scholars and film directors and performers at the upcoming "EH" colloquium, whose material they were to cover in class, the students mostly just stared blankly at me. Finally, I asked them to brainstorm "hot issues in America." Dutifully they rattled off many, gaining speed as they went, until we had a whole board full. I asked someone to pick one, just one, "Date rape," suggested one girl, giggling. I didn’t think it was funny, but I didn’t start down that road. "Okay," I said. "Date rape and disability—how are they related?" Their stares were not so much blank as signaling "What? You are one crazy woman. What kind of question is that?" These stares were now full of meaning.

"Well, they are related," I said, a crazy woman with an answer. Forking two ways, I talked briefly first about how statistics on sexual abuse record alarmingly high numbers among disabled, institutionalized persons, both young and old (often at the hands of their "caregivers" but sometimes, too, among each other), and, second, about how disabled people are more often than not perceived as either asexual or abnormally sexual. The potential for abuse, sexual and otherwise, when humans are disregarded as somehow less than "human" is great. I ticked off examples through history, recent and long past.

They still looked a bit spooked, but not quite so suspicious of me. "Your turn," I said. "Go ahead, pick one item on this list, grab a few classmates, and spend the next five minutes seeing if you can figure out a relation to disability." Some were stretching it, but they could pretty much all do it. Euthanasia, they found, is easy; they were well aware of who Dr. Kevorkian’s "clients" had primarily been. Abortion, too, was a good "gimme." Interestingly, though, they focused mostly on how a disabled woman would most likely want an abortion. (You can be sure I took notes on this for our discussion on the intersections between feminist studies and disability studies that was to occur later in the quarter.) "And now," one of them offered hesitantly, "I think you can get an abortion if you know you will have a Down’s syndrome baby." I could tell they didn’t want to talk about that subject, so I let it go. We would come back to it, ready or not, when we got to Anne Finger’s riveting and treacherously, ethically complex personal narrative, Past Due: A Story of Disability, Pregnancy, and Birth. 17

"Body piercing," offered one young man, the chosen spokesperson for a group of non-pierced bodies in the corner by the door. He shrugged. "We couldn’t really find much connection, except maybe . . ." and here his voice lowered enough that I could see the other students lean forward
to catch it, and my lipreading skills came to my own rescue, “well, that those who do it have sick minds. Or . . .” he smirked a little, “that body piercing is a way of disabling yourself.” The air crackled a little at that remark. I jotted a quick note to myself: “What bodies can/can’t do to themselves; crippling one’s self; cf. Goffman’s Stigma.” (Although I didn’t tell them about it, I thought of sadomasochist Bob Flanagan, a performance artist with cystic fibrosis, and his profoundly transgressive film, Sick.) Then I turned the conversation quickly away from this exercise, trying to cool the air and create a “safe place” here on the first day where we could share our writing and have civil, albeit free-speaking, discussions later. I began the pedagogue’s drone about the next class assignment and gearing up for the first paper, but inside, in my disabled soul, I was singing, truly delighted: it was only the first day and they had already taught me something new. Body piercing and disability—I hadn’t thought of that. Surely, Erving Goffman, the famed sociologist of the 1950s and 1960s who studied “the performance of the self in everyday life” and how stigma works in our culture and how institutions create their own frames—surely, Goffman would get it: the visible stigma of piercing, the management of a “spoiled” identity when metal marks flesh, flashes a self.

I’ve taught first-year composition enough times to know all too well that most of the time most of the students will resist most any subject you put before them in this required class. (Honestly, even the instructor usually comes to resist the subject she herself placed on the syllabus.) I was worried, to be sure, about putting a subject I cared so passionately about in the middle of this obligatory, knee-jerk, but kicking-damn-hard-back kind of resistance. “But hey, this won’t be so bad after all,” I told myself, a little skip in my step, as I walked back over to my office.

The students that quarter kicked so hard and so often that it was hard not to fold into a fetal position, protecting my head, praying for my ribs, when I entered the classroom each day. I had a graduate student doing her teaching apprenticeship with me that quarter, so I tried hard not to look scared, feel wounded, run away. I was passing as brave—barely passing. Most hated the disability documentaries I showed—films I had laughed, cried, and cheered over with graduate students in my disability seminar the year before and with my colleagues in disability studies at national conferences. Neil Marcus, a playwright and actor with “general dystonia”
(spasticity) so general and strong that he could barely speak, wound up angering them in a scene from his performance piece, *Storm Reading*, when he dared, humorously but seriously, to portray himself as a waiter. "What gives him the right to think he can hold a job like that in the first place?" one student shot out, and half a dozen others nodded vehemently.

Deep breath. Chant civility to myself. "I don't know. What does give him the right? Can we talk about that?" I prompted, teeth grinding behind the bravery, my own feigned pleasantness nearly poisoning me. "What kind of job is waitressing?" I asked. "Who makes a living at it? Who wants to make a living at it? Why do people wait tables in the first place?" We opened a complicated discussion on economics and "access" here—a can of worms squirming with the right to work, the ability to work, the desire to work, the necessity of work, the accommodation of work. Even I was afraid to stick my hand in.

One day, after watching Billy Golfus' award-winning *When Billy Broke His Head*, a disability documentary undeniably with "attitude," another kick-back comment landed in the middle of the classroom. Golfus had documented some of the protests at the Colorado State House by disabled citizens seeking "equal access with dignity." These citizens wanted to be able to get a wheelchair, not just a foot, in both the statehouse doors and the Denver bus system. They'd gone to the statehouse and barricaded the entry escalators that take employees and visitors up one floor from the street-level entry to the actual offices. "They can't do that!" asserted my student. "They can't obstruct and prevent someone from entering that building. Those people have rights!" He was really riled.

"You're right!" I said, as if cheering him on. He beamed, righteously. And then I picked up that comment and lobbed it back to him, heavy and hard: "'Those people'—the ones in the wheelchairs—have rights, too! Those escalators prevent them from entering the building, from being citizens in their own state's government. That's the point!" But the moment I said it, while I was pleased that I had countered logic for logic, rights for rights, I was also sorry. While a good handful of the students witnessing this exchange seemed to have epiphanies and I knew then that I had gained a little disability awareness with them, I had also lost this student forever—alienated him, silenced him, pinned him to the mat. The only way he'd be back would be to try pinning me in another match. I had forfeited teaching for wrestling.

The students got pretty vicious about handicapped parking spaces, too. One student in particular brought it up almost every class period until I finally (privately, not publicly this time) invited him to do his
research paper on this topic, to find out just who, how, and how many got those parking spaces. My plan was that once he found out how complicated it was to get a handicapped parking permit and also how many nondisabled people abused the system, his anger would subside and he’d be out there, in parking lots across America, leaping to help anyone who rightfully parked in that blue-symboled, front-row space and shaking his angry fist at those who slipped illegally into those spots.

Well, he did his research. He found out that it was fairly complicated to get a special blue-symboled tag for your car—but not nearly complicated enough, he argued. He found out that yes indeed there were quite an astonishing number of Americans who used and claimed they needed these permits either permanently or temporarily. But this is the problem, he argued: the system is soft; anyone can get one if he or she is smart, sneaky, and/or persistent; there are too many cripples out there who shouldn’t probably be driving in the first place. (His next paper, in an assignment asking students to extend further the ideas from one of the previous assignments, was on the national shame and danger in senior citizens driving—and how our disability sensitive attitudes had only added to this shame and danger.) And he counted. He kept track of how many handicapped spots on central campus weren’t used over a week’s time and compared that to how many cars were turned away from several OSU parking garages each day when the “full” sign came on, and he determined how many student cars in a given hour circled around and around some of the prime surface lots. He had an e-mail exchange with the OSU Director of Traffic and Parking, who claimed that, sure, too many good spaces on campus weren’t used over a week’s time and compared that to how many cars were turned away from several OSU parking garages each day when the “full” sign came on, and he determined how many student cars in a given hour circled around and around some of the prime surface lots. He had an e-mail exchange with the OSU Director of Traffic and Parking, who claimed that, sure, too many good spaces on campus were “given up” to handicapped spots. “What a shame,” he wrote. The student took note of how empty the handicapped spots were at his favorite mall one weekend. (Some were taken, some weren’t. “This privilege is a massive waste of taxpayer’s money,” he wrote.) Oh well, I sighed, at least this student learned how to do good research. I was learning some things too.

I also learned some lessons when Nancy Mairs came to read and conduct a workshop at the “Enabling the Humanities” colloquium in mid-quarter. Most of my students chose her from among the five available “attend-an-author-reading” options. We’d read half of her essays in Waist-High in the World by that point in the class, and although the students didn’t always agree with her, they liked her simple style, her directness, and the fact that she wrote fairly short essays. And while most of them did actually hear—and some of them even liked—what she had to say in her workshop and reading, they also wrote unabashedly of how
“amazed” they were that she “wore really nice clothes, wore makeup, and fixed herself up.” They learned, as one student put it, that “disabled people care what they look like, too; they are just like the rest of us.” Visibility mattered. And although I can’t say this was the picture I most wanted them to get of or from Nancy Mairs, some other frames were becoming clearer to me.

What happens here, in the tale of my students’ resistance, makes even me suspicious. I become framed as the heroine: brave, insightful, enlightened, ever-so-kind—bad able-bodied young students, good disabled me. But in truth, the plot looks a little too simple, the characters too flat, the story too stable. Maybe I’m not telling the whole truth. Maybe I’m fictionalizing the nonfictional, creating for my convenience.

Okay, so I’m not all that bad either.

It took another six months, into the fall of the next year, when the leaves began falling and I had both their discursive and university standardized bubble-form evaluations back—and the students hadn’t, in fact, trashed me—that I started to see it another way, hear a different tune, walk a bit in their shoes. In a culture where cars aren’t just tools to get you from here to there but extensions of psyches, identities writ large, no wonder the idea of privileged parking matters, really matters. And it’s even more threatening when you are probably just settling into your first car, claiming your first parking spots. It’s a Porsche-eat-Porsche world out there.

Likewise, in bodies hard, young, and generally able—yet still not likely to have been “meaningfully employed” in a rewarding career—they are acutely aware of the place waitressing occupies on the totem pole of “things I want to be when I grow up and that Mom and Dad will be proud they paid for my college education for.” No wonder, then, that Neil Marcus and Billy Golfus weren’t funny, threatening as those two were in not only their “unemployment” but their flaunting and parodic portrayals of it. (Never mind, of course, that both Marcus and Golfus are employed—self-employed—and have obviously rewarding careers as writers, performers, film makers.) These parodies and the (non)possibilities for a man who can’t even work at McDonald’s jars and kicks at their first-year student bootstrap views of “anybody can do anything if they just work hard enough at it or pay enough money for it.” No wonder they often wanted to strike back or just curl up and roll away, protecting their heads at all costs.

I wanted them to understand me, to get in disability, to see themselves there; but I wasn’t willing to understand them, to get in their abilities, to
see myself there. I hadn’t yet gotten to disability as insight, to understanding that the us/them sword (as I myself had placed it in the middle of this classroom) cuts both ways. I was stuck, like Dr. Suess’ famous Sneetches, in enforcing and capitalizing on a direct desire to be “other.” I had forgotten just how unstable and unstabilizing (dis)ability can be.

I also wasn’t paying much attention to one of the major lessons I’ve learned from my own and others’ disabled lives and, even more so, from the way their lives are constructed socially by others around them: adaptability. It takes most of us a little time to adapt. Paradigms have to shift, and even though such a paradigm shift is often revolutionary, it takes some time and distance for the full impact of the revolution to be known. One day, nearly hyperventilating and hysterical at the same time (I’d just read the paper on handicapped parking), I lurched into a colleague’s office. She has long taught courses in twentieth-century American literature, and in recent years she has gone on to emphasize, in both her undergraduate and graduate courses, gender and sexuality in those texts, to turn to homo- and hetero-ideologies as they course through, sometimes conflicting, sometimes intricately interwoven, with each other in the canonical and noncanonical literature of our culture and century. I needed to know that I was going to be okay, that I would survive the final three weeks of the course, that I wouldn’t be some bizarre university newspaper headline in the very near future. “They’ll remember this, Brenda,” she assured me. “Years from now—maybe forty years for some of them—they’ll get it.” I wobbled out, dabbed some concealer around my red-rimmed eyes, and went off to teach that class again.

In the end, and happy endings are always best, she was right. Two students did powerful final projects investigating the medical, emotional, familial, financial, and social impact of a parent’s recent entry into a disabled life. Not only did these students find out reams about the “condition” that the doctors weren’t telling them, but they interviewed those parents and others around them in order to offer a multiply framed view of “the disability.” One student even concluded with the curious way she and others were still bracketing off “the disability” from “the person” (her parent). A student who was impressed with Susan Nussbaum’s play *Mishuginismo* and Cheryl Marie Wade’s performance piece, “Zues,” did a twin analysis of medical and social “treatments” of adolescent disabled
women, particularly in relation to their sexuality. All along, she kept comparing it to medical and social treatments of her own sexuality—which wound up not looking so good in the end either. For a group presentation, three young women interviewed two deaf/hard-of-hearing students in their dorm. The three students confessed to “watching them [the deaf students] from a distance” for all the months before they took this class, but never daring to approach them as friends, peers, human beings. In the video interview they showed in class, my three students and these two “others” are getting along pretty well. Two of them—one deaf, one not—now share leadership positions in my department’s undergraduate English organization. They’ve become good friends.

A young man wrote a response to Mary Duffy’s performance in Vital Signs. In that piece, she stands behind a velvet backdrop—beautiful, nude, statuesque, and armless, too—reciting her poems. He spent a long time looking through books of art, studying and reading about Greek statues in order to reflect for a mere two pages on why arms can seem of little sexual significance (“I never say to my buddies at the bar, ‘Hey, look at the arms on that babe.’”)—until they aren’t there. Another male student, also fascinated with bodies and physique—a body builder and a Gold’s Gym employee himself—had a grand time digging through various sources, from physical education journals to Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s edited collection, Freakery, and then layering that research with two interviews he was granted with disabled members of his own gym. Finally, a young woman who had always been drawn to Frida Kahlo’s work (she was intending to be a double major in art history and women’s studies) discovered—thanks to the cover of Thomson’s other book, Extraordinary Bodies—that Kahlo was disabled later in life. That was the subject of her final paper and project. (When I saw her just last quarter, she said that she had worked even more on that project, expanding it even further for an art history class, and she had then been asked to present at a conference with her mentor-professor about Frida Kahlo.)

My point in this litany of successful papers and projects is, I hope, more than just bragging, more than just washing out some of the bad taste that kept getting in my mouth that quarter. It’s not about what I did or didn’t do in putting disability full throttle in a course like first-year composition. It’s about what we did—how it opened up an astonishing array of topics to research and write on, how many of the students (no, not all of them) found meaningful personal and passionate ways to connect to the material, social, and individual “world of disability,” and how I
moved closer to an enabling pedagogy. Even my seemingly failed effort to convert Mr. Parking Spaces, I'd have to admit, led to research and writing done carefully and with passion.

A Final Note
I've spent a lot of time in this essay mostly on only one of the five courses I've taught with disability at its center. I suppose this is because of the weight a course like first-year composition carries in a huge land-grant university like my own. Every student who comes to Ohio State, save for a handful of very remarkable few, must take the course. That's a lot of students—year after year. It's a content-less course for the most part. Any and every composition instructor can—and often does—insert nearly any and every possible topic for readings to fill in the spaces between small and large writing assignments, for diving boards and foundations and kites to spring, ground, or fly our ideas for writing.

This course comes guaranteed with student resistance at the outset. To put disability there was truly the greatest challenge of my eighteen years of teaching students from ages twelve to sixty-eight. Teaching writing was always what I had done best. Being disabled was always what I had done—not best, but just done. But in that doing, I had also been very careful to pass at my doing, to look as if I were not doing the disability thing. Ever and always a keen observer of contextual cues (my way of "hearing"), I have noted well the stigma and fear and loathing and curiosity and staring and general perplexity that hazes over a room when a disabled person visibly enters. So, I had been careful about when and where and how I wore my star. But there, in the Spring quarter of 1998, directing a three-day colloquium on "Disability Studies in Higher Education" and walking into my honors first-year composition with a syllabus entitled "Abilities in America," I was letting it all hang out. And you know, it wasn't so discrediting after all. It was enabling.

One student wrote to me nine months later when she was seeking a letter of reference for various honors and summer positions: "I always think about 'Disability 101.' I see things in terms of disability now. I question representations of disabled people in media, in language. I question myself and my own ideas about them. I try to imagine myself into a disabled experience."

Her imagining, her move toward disability as insight, marks the enabling pedagogy I am seeking to enact.

Ohio State University
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Notes

1. Fortunately, I never stand alone. Particular colleagues and friends, some "disability-identified" and some not, often stand with me when I teach (even if it's not about disability) and certainly when I write. They have all had an active role in the writing of this essay. Georgina Kleege has taught me much about writing, about living strongly but gracefully with disability, and about teaching, too. Johnson Cheu has always challenged and enabled my own thinking about both disability and teaching. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Sharon Snyder, my coeditors for the MLA's forthcoming volume, Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities, have copiloted much of my career in disability studies, and it is their scholarship and presence I first learned from. (A briefer version of this essay appears in this forthcoming volume.) Maureen Stanton and Melissa Goldthwaite, members of my essay writer's workshop group, asked all the hardest—and best—questions in reading this essay's first draft, and they are two whose writing I am always seeking to emulate.

2. My choice of the label "hard-of-hearing" is best explained in two other essays I've written, "On (Almost) Passing" and "Are You Deaf or Hearing?" Both essays are in my book, Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness. Although my audiogram might well certify me as "severely to profoundly deaf," my predominantly mainstreamed education (in a time before there was mainstreaming as we know it today), my skills at lipreading (sometimes a source of pride, sometimes a source of shame), and my late arrival to sign language (at age twenty-nine) and some involvement in and awareness of "Deaf community" (at age thirty-one) preclude me from using or choosing either of the full-fledged designations—"deaf" (denoting an audiological condition of severe hearing loss) or "Deaf" (denoting a cultural and linguistic allegiance).

3. To date, I have taught five courses that I would claim as primarily disability-centered, and I have significantly interjected disability issues into at least four others. For syllabi and other matter pertaining to these courses, see my website: http://people.english.ohio-state.edu/Brueggemann.1. Additional disability in the humanities course descriptions and syllabi are available at the Disability in the Humanities (DS-HUM) website: http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/interests/ds-hum/index.html

4. When I first arrived at Ohio State ten years ago, the Office for Disability Services clearly did not know what to do with or for me. While they had accommodated deaf and hard-of-hearing students before in various ways, they had not yet encountered a faculty member who asked for assisted listening devices in the office, a TTY, or a sign language interpreter from time to time. (Not that there weren't faculty members around with substantial hearing loss!) Seven years later when the university sought to hire a full-time ADA Coordinator to work out of the Provost's office, I was on the hiring committee, and one of the key reasons we hired the person we did was because he spoke knowledgeably about creating access and providing accommodations for OSU faculty and
staff (not just students). He was the only one of five who did so in his on-campus interview. It is only in the last two years that the Office for Disability Services has begun to provide print and on-line materials about faculty access and accommodations; this office celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary—serving OSU students—last year.

5. Deborah Stone recounts in *The Disabled State* how physicians repeatedly testified before Congressional committees in the 1940s, as the social welfare system was being reformed principally around the category of disability, that they would more often than not be unable to adequately certify the unbounded, highly contextualized designation of "disabled" on any of their patients.

6. I cannot thank Lennard Davis enough for the insight that led to my ideas about "disability as insight." The crucial fifth chapter of his *Enforcing Normalcy: Deafness, Disability, and the Body* is "Deafness and Insight." I also acknowledge a debt to Jennifer Nelson, my colleague at Gallaudet University, who has made me think hard about the position that "disability as insight" can still, disputably, leave disabled people uncomfortably stuck in—as they are called on to educate, yet again, their nondisabled acquaintances, students, and colleagues.

7. The 2000–01 enrollment for students with disabilities at OSU, as reported by the ADA Coordinator, was 1,197 students out of a total student body of 47,952. Thus, students with disabilities comprised 2.5 percent of the OSU student body. (One might compare this to the national average of college enrollments by students with disabilities. In February of 1999, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that almost 11 percent of our college students were students with a disability.) Roughly one-third (32.7 percent) of the total OSU student population with disabilities were students with learning disabilities in 2000–01.

8. For the years 1999–2002, Ohio State University has been involved in a "Partnership Grant" with the U.S. Department of Education for Improving the Quality of Higher Education Programs for Students with Disabilities. Among the many initiatives and project accomplishments, this grant featured smaller "Faculty Innovator Grants on Disabilities." In 1999–2001, for example, the OSU writing center had one of those grants for a project called "The Accessible Writing Center"; it was aimed at (1) making the center itself more accessible, in space and technology, to disabled students; (2) training the writing center tutoring staff better in working with students with disabilities of many kinds; and (3) partnering workshops, conducting a few mutual staff meetings, linking to each other's websites, and sharing some goals with the Office for Disability Services. For more information on the Partnership Project in general or the Accessible Writing Center project in particular, see http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/index.html

9. Ironically, in offering Nick the option to audio-record his notes and work, I was enabling him even as I was disabling myself, since I would not be able to "listen" to his tape-recorded voice and would need a transcriber to recapture his
"voice" on the page. Since it takes about six to seven hours to transcribe a single hour of audio-recorded text, and since that single hour would likely create twenty pages of single-spaced text, I was definitely not creating an advantage for myself.

10. As a coda, this story has not just one, but two happy endings. First, a year after the initial draft of this essay, Nick did come back. I ran into him on campus the other day and he was, he said, plodding along toward finishing his degree while working full-time. What's more, this event led me, as the Director of the OSU writing center (writing tutorial services), to establish a partnership with the Office for Disability Services and, in the bargain, to install in the writing center a computer system that accommodates students with multiple physical and sensory disabilities, whether permanent or temporary. The Office for Disability Services helped train me and my staff to use this equipment so that we could use it to tutor and help any disabled students who wanted to benefit from the technology when they might come in for a writing tutorial. Nick, for example, could have used the "Dragon Naturally Speaking" speech-to-text program that allows the user to voice-write his or her text while the computer transfers that voice into actual print on the screen.

11. My use of this exercise and even the writing of it here is not without controversy. While one of my reader-colleagues (disability-identified) "loved" this section, another (also disability-identified) vehemently rejected it:

I really don't know what to do with this one B (and, frankly, it could just be my own feelings here). I know what you're trying to do; I'm just not sure I agree with it. It still presumes Disability is a problem to solve. But my own misgivings aside, I still think you could be in hot water with some people: "Yeah, right, it's not a simulation Brenda; you make them don blindfolds for christ's sake." "It's not collaboration; it's that dependency model all over again." "She calls it 'The Blind Leading the Blind.' What are her preconceived notions here, humph." Well, you get the idea.

The use of "simulation exercises"—where otherwise able-bodied persons attempt to understand and enact disability by spending a day in a wheelchair, letting a partner lead them around some place blindfolded, or sticking ear plugs in their ears, and so on—is quite controversial in disability circles. Most who are disabled and involved in some academic or "activist" way with "disability studies" resist simulation exercises on the grounds that the most they can ever do is provoke pity. (There's a popular T-shirt worn around academic and activist disability gatherings: "Piss on Pity" it proclaims in hot pink letters on a bold black background.) In the summer of 1998, as the Disability in the Humanities (DS-HUM) listserv was just beginning, one of its first and most volatile discussions was on the use of simulation exercises. While I don't encourage pity and even, in fact, as a qualitative researcher have my doubts about "empathy," I do aim for what I call "imagining disability." This is imagination aimed at not
usurping the experiences of others but, rather, at reaching for an understanding and acceptance of *them* along some grounds that still lets *me* stand. No, this is not easy.

12. A concept called “Universal Design for Learning” (UDL) rests, in part, on a philosophy quite similar to this “disability as insight” and “enabling pedagogy” that I pose here. For an explanation of UDL and some examples of it put into practice in various kinds of classroom activities, visit the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) website: http://www.cast.org/. Or go to the OSU Partnership Project site and explore their “Fast Facts for Faculty” about UDL: http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/fastfact/undesign.html

13. The fear of speaking in public is, coincidentally, the number one fear cited by most Americans in a recent survey, according to the *New St. Martin’s Handbook* (Lunsford et al.).

14. I would now (or the next time I teach the course) be sure to include Michael Bérbé’s personally essayistic book, *Life As We Know It: A Father, A Family, and an Exceptional Child*.

15. A TAB (temporarily able-bodied) colleague of mine in English studies recently attended his first Society for Disability Studies meeting, where his PWD (person with a disability) wife was presenting. One of his strongest impressions of the three-day international conference was the hierarchies and “crip-casteing” he felt was strongly in place where some persons with certain kinds of disabilities clearly seemed to occupy positions of more power more often than others.

16. The essays in Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch’s fine collection, *Women and Disability*, makes these points about disability, women, and sexuality over and over again.

17. Although we didn’t read it in this first-year composition course, Michael Bérbé’s *Life as We Know It: A Father, A Family, an Exceptional Child* came to the forefront of my team-taught graduate seminar, English 883: Disability Discourses, as the best personal-political argument we all confessed to having “heard” for either disabled lives or abortion politics separate, let alone together, as Bérbé so brilliantly makes them.

18. Since this time, the terminology and design have changed. The design is a little more freestyle, not so rigid looking, of the person in a wheelchair, and most of them now say “disability parking.”

**Works Cited**


Brenda Jo Brueggemann


Snyder, Sharon L. "Infinities of Form: Disability, Art, and Literature." *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, forthcoming.


