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WHY CRIP ASSESSMENT? CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES THEORIES TO ADVANCE ASSESSMENT FOR INCLUSION

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Introduction

Theory offers a strong starting place to develop assessment for inclusion. Theory unveils current ways of thinking and doing, examines them, and identifies alternatives. Freire's (2000) call to *praxis* for social change puts theory to work in academic spaces. Praxis requires critical reflection on current conditions and prompts transformative action, through theory. Theory that reveals taken-for-granted power dynamics offers academic changemakers a starting place to interrogate and revise practice to move towards inclusion.

In this chapter, I argue that critical disability theory is a necessary lens to develop assessment for inclusion. Disability is frequently overlooked in liberatory pedagogies and associated assessment theory (Kryger and Zimmerman 2020; Waitoller and Thorius 2016). When disability is included, such as in Universal Design for Learning research, it often fails to disrupt “the desirability of the normate¹ or normative curriculum itself” (Baglieri 2020, 63). That is, traditional efforts towards inclusive practice often seek to include disabled people into existing systems with minor changes. In contrast, critical disability praxis demands fundamental transformation that disrupts notions of normalcy to create more just worlds through and with disability. Any approach to assessment for inclusion must seek to disrupt notions of normal and, therefore, requires engagement with critical disability theory. To this end, I offer three interconnected theoretical movements from critical disability studies that are necessary to problematise and reframe assessment for inclusion: studies in ableism, crip theory, and critical universal design. Pollinated with principles from disability justice (Sins Invalid 2019), these movements advance ways of thinking from disability that help to develop assessment for inclusion and build its case.

A critical disability studies lens begins from “the vantage point of the atypical” (Linton 1998, 5) to identify how assessments exclude and how such exclusion could be addressed. This way of looking assumes that disability can be desirable and creates productive friction to imagine assessment anew (McRuer 2006). Critical disability studies, however, does not stop with a disability-focused analysis; it goes further by engaging intersectionality, identifying linkages across axes of marginalisation, and challenging normalcy (Goodley 2017; McRuer 2006). Critical disability studies theories, then, offer assessment for inclusion a lens that begins from disabled peoples’ experiences to broadly question the assumptions built into assessments and their impacts. These tools demand reaching beyond mere inclusion to *cripping* (McRuer 2006), a creative disability-led approach that dismantles exclusionary arrangements. In the following sections, I introduce studies in ableism, crip theory, and critical universal design. From each theoretical move, I identify provocative questions to advance assessment for inclusion. These critical disability lenses aid reconsideration of factors that construct assessment practices at multiple levels: from university structures (e.g., semester timescape, rigid assessment word-lengths by course level), to program-level expectations (e.g., uniform assessment across all program courses), to individual course design. Thus, readers who occupy different university roles (leadership, learning designers, course leaders) will find examples that activate critical disability principles within their spheres of influence. I invite readers to activate provoking questions in their own work and bring them to collegial discussions to spark collective contemplation.

Studies in ableism

Studies in ableism (Campbell 2009, 2017) conceptualise the foundational problem of social exclusion as a system that continually (re)instantiates a false dis/ability binary wherein those coded as “disabled” are excludable and those that approximate hegemonic norms of physical and mental ability are privileged. Campbell (2017) explains that this hierarchical system is formulated and upheld through dividing practices, which she outlines as differentiation, ranking, negation, notification, and prioritisation. Scholars and activists have demonstrated that ableism is intertwined with other marginalising systems, such as white supremacy, capitalism, and cis/hetero/patriarchy, which inform and reproduce norms of physical and mental ability (Annamma, Connor, and Ferri 2013; Lewis 2022). Bailey and Mobley (2019), for example, explain that “Notions of disability inform how theories of race were formed, and theories of racial embodiment and inferiority (racism) formed the ways in which we conceptualize disability” (27). To undo this damaging system of ableism, the false binary of abled/disabled must be dismantled. With notions of intersectionality and co-constitution in mind, ableism must be dismantled in concert with other marginalising forces.

The university is deeply rooted in ableist practices. Dolmage (2017) explains that academia, figuratively and literally, maintains “steep steps” to enter, succeed in, and exit that persist despite claims of widening participation, access, and

equity. In fact, Mitchell (2016) argues that maintaining ableism appears fundamental to the business of the academy. Assessing ability and certifying mastery are core functions of the university as we know it. Assessment can be understood as a chief dividing practice of academic ableism. Differentiating and ranking students by their ability to meet markers of academic success creates insiders and outsiders. In this sense, the notion of “assessment for inclusion” creates a paradox: because assessment is a central feature of an ableist system it precludes inclusion. If we want to undo damaging systems of exclusion, ought we not dispense with assessment altogether? Are anti-ableist assessments even possible in the academy as it currently operates? Further work to explore these questions is necessary, in concert with a larger examination of academic ableism, to interrogate the purpose and mechanisms of assessment.

Undoing academic ableism requires a reckoning with the academy’s purpose in modern life. Studies in ableism demands, first, a critical examination of the purpose of assessments and what is deemed necessary to assess. To begin, we might consider the following questions:

- How do assessment practices create and reinforce division/hierarchies?
- Why must assessment occur and what must be assessed?

Taking this line of thinking further, an examination of how enablement and disablement occur in assessment practices is needed.

- How does assessment (re)construct a “normal” learner in form and function?
- What assumptions underlie this construction of normality and who does it disadvantage?
- Can assessment function in a way that does not marginalise some people? How?

If assessment must continue, careful consideration of how assessments are constructed, results interpreted and used, is necessary. Such an analysis may offer clues towards what must be dismantled to approximate a more just system. Given ableism’s grip on society, constant consideration of its operation and active resistance towards it are necessary to begin to undo its power.

Crip theory

Crip theory (McRuer 2006) offers a route to rethink the academy and assessment, to dismantle ableism. Building from queer theory’s foundations, crip theory declares that disability is a desirable force to disrupt taken-for-granted notions of ability and normality demanded by neoliberal capitalism. This potential, McRuer (2006) argues, exists when we call out, fail, or refuse to meet ableism’s demands for compulsory ablebodiedness and mindedness. Crip theory centres disability, critiques dominant formulations of it, and asserts liberatory ways to be and do through and with disability. The theoretical orientation

towards desiring disability, rather than seeking to normalise or erase it, calls on us to imagine radical futures with disability that reconceptualise seemingly fixed presents (Kafer 2013). By insisting on radically inclusive futures, possibilities for disabled peoples' presents expand. Never ending with a static notion of disability, a *crip* theory analysis leads to interconnected critiques of debilitating ideologies (e.g., capitalism, colonialism, hetero/cis/sexism, and white supremacy) and invokes possible worlds that lay beyond (McRuer 2006). *Crip* theory suggests that in assessment we must bring forth an understanding of ability and quality that assumes and values all kinds of bodies and minds.

A *crip* theory lens calls on assessment for inclusion to design from disability, to look for ways assessment can resist compulsory ablebodiedness and mindedness. To do so, we must search for existing knowledge that identifies problems and possible solutions, what Johnson and McRuer (2014) call *cripistemologies*, lived knowledge from the critical, social, sensory, political, and personal position of disability. Put more simply, Lau (2021) defines *cripistemologies* as “ways of knowing that are shaped by the ways disabled people inhabit a world not made for them” (3). Seeking *cripistemologies* of assessment might begin with considering ways disabled people fail to fit current assessment expectations and redesign from these “failures” (Mitchell, Snyder, and Ware 2014). *Crip* time and interdependence offer two illustrative examples.

Crip time concerns temporality. It is built through experiences such as pain, differing forms of cognition, communicating with sign language (and through interpreters, assistive technology, and so on), and navigating medical and social systems (Kafer 2013; Price 2011; Samuels 2017; Zola 1993). Disabled students regularly face university expectations that temporally misalign with their embodied experience, resulting in what one disabled medical student described as constantly “battling time” (Jain 2020, 127). Miller (2020) exposed the power of neoliberal temporality to marginalise students who are LGBTQ+ and disabled, including through assessment mechanisms such as attendance, participation, and rigid deadlines that did not account for experiences of disability and regular experiences of anti-LGBTQ+ bias. Such assessment regimes affected students academically and tended to limit their ability to engage in activist work and other community spaces (Miller 2020). *Crip* time suggests not just a need for more time, but an exploded concept of time that is flexibly managed, negotiated, and experienced (Kafer 2013; Price 2011; Samuels 2017; Wood 2017).

Engaging the notion of *crip* time requires that assessment assumes learners will operate on varied temporalities. Therefore, we must seek to explode notions of linear, normative time and tempo in assessment design. Beyond those with a formal disability label, assessments built on *crip* time would produce allied benefits, for example, for learners who are carers, who must work, and for whom English is not a first language. Lau (2021), for example, describes alternative strategies built through an understanding of *crip* and pandemic time that move away from time-sensitive assessments towards alternative mechanisms such as asynchronous discussion boards, cumulative and semester-long reflective journal

assignments, take-home exams with prompts provided well in advance, scaffolded essays with incremental parts and ongoing feedback, and projects with adjustable deadlines.

Disabled peoples' experiences reveal the falsity of the independent, autonomous individual, demanding that we (re)centre interdependence as a core understanding of humans' relational being, knowing, and doing in the world (Sins Invalid 2019). A cripistemology of interdependence is built through, for example, disabled peoples' understanding of the self as cyborg, reliant on technology and other non-human entities to live, communicate, perceive, and/or move, or reliance on other humans to conduct activities of daily living and achieve access to society (Reeve 2012; Wong 2020). Rather than understanding these experiences as reflective of disabled peoples' fundamental dependence, they highlight an understanding of humans as always already interdependent, with some forms socially coded as exceptional while others are made invisible. Consider our reliance on family and friends, municipal garbage collection, bus drivers, supermarket workers, and smartphones as interdependent relationships we are not often called on to recognise as fundamental forces in our lives. A cripistemology of interdependence calls on us to see relationality as a liberating force and to foreground the ways we are connected and reliant on each other (Mingus 2017).

Rather than prioritising knowing and doing alone, activating interdependence in assessment shifts towards knowing and doing with others, objects, and devices. This forces re-evaluation of what is important to assess as individual knowledge or ability, why, the benefits of imagining differently, and how to assess in interdependent ways. Beyond disability, an orientation to interdependence better reflects the realities of living and working in the world, where knowing and doing is collaborative, with other human and non-human actors. Engaging interdependence also aligns with many Indigenous knowledge systems, reflecting a decolonising praxis (Waiari et al. 2021). Enacting interdependence in assessments could include such mechanisms as cycles of peer and instructor formative feedback while producing assessments, open-book and Internet-enabled assessments that dispense with memorisation, assessment platforms with built-in spellcheck and text to speech, and equitable negotiated role-taking in group projects that enacts collective access.

The use of intermediaries in health science education offers another example of interdependence, wherein a disabled learner directs a nonmedical professional to gather information without providing clinical input (Blacklock 2017; Jauregui et al. 2020). Intermediaries are generally used when a learner cannot perform physical or sensory tasks needed to gather clinical information. Assessment of individual clinical competence while using an intermediary enacts interdependence in information-gathering, while continuing to assess clinical decision-making as an independent act. Intermediaries are not universally accepted in medical education (e.g., McCulley v. University of Kansas School of Medicine 2014), perhaps reflecting a lack of understanding of interdependence in the realm of disability and in clinical practice more generally (Sebok-Syer et al. 2018).

A *crip* theory lens on assessment for inclusion re-centres disabled students and considers how their lived experience can productively inform assessment. To begin rethinking assessment with *crip* theory, we might consider the following questions:

- How would program requirements and associated assessments shift if we assumed disabled students can be successful learners and future professionals?
- What ways of being, doing, and knowing are brought into question through disabled bodyminds and how can these reconceptualise traditional assessment?
- How can assessment incorporate manifold ways of being, doing, and knowing?

Then, to shift away from ableist assessments that enforce compulsory ablebodiedness and mindedness, we must seek to understand disabled peoples' work-arounds, resistances, or failures to meet current expectations.

- How and why do learners struggle to perform (or fail) on current assessments?
- How do learners work around, or ask for exceptions to, current assessments? How might this inform redesign?

The *crip*istemologies we identify become clues towards new ways to do assessment and imaginative principles of re-design. In short, *crip* theory asks that we embrace embodied messiness and resist standardisation in assessment for inclusion.

Critical universal design

Critical universal design offers a way towards a *cripped* future, not just in *crip* moments or revised approaches, but in the fundamental fabric of assessment. Originating in architecture, universal design offers a process towards design for maximum inclusivity without the need to retrofit (Center for Universal Design 1997). The concept has since travelled beyond architecture to spaces such as education. Arguing that universal design's radical roots have been defanged and technicised in neoliberal times, some scholars argue for a critical notion of universal design that re-invigorates its radical political origins (Baglieri 2020; Dolmage 2017; Hamraie 2016, 2017). Rather than reducing the process to checklists or a static endpoint, Dolmage (2017) explains that this conception of universal design must be an active, ongoing process, "a way to move" (116). Critical universal design eschews the post-disability ideology that has crept into universal design practice, which treats disability oppression as a thing of the past and functions to depoliticise disability (Hamraie 2016). In universities, this ideology allows diminished resourcing of the work needed to facilitate a fundamental shift away from ableism (Dolmage 2017). Instead, critical universal design leans into disability politics while attending to intersectionality, treats disability as a valued resource for transformation, and requires deliberate examination of who is imagined within the

notion of “universal” (Hamraie 2017). That is, rather than a diffused understanding of universal, critical universal design demands attention to particularity, working with those most marginalised in current systems to design anew. This approach to universal design attends to root causes of disabled peoples’ marginalisation in educational environments, taking ableism seriously, in contrast to more “pragmatic”, partial approaches that seek to de-centre disability (e.g., Tobin and Behling 2018).

Taking a critical universal design approach to assessment for inclusion would begin prior to developing assessments. The questions posed throughout this chapter provide productive starting points to think about the intention of assessments and their impacts. Stepping back to think about what must be assessed, why, and the potential consequences in the context of a broad conception of the universe of potential learners, forces deliberate contemplation towards inclusive assessment practices. The conceptualisation of potential learners must undergo critique to ensure a bold outlook that seeks to expand the learner profile and engages intersectionality. For example, this must include a broad group of students with disabilities, including those who are also Black, Indigenous, queer, and people of colour. From this intentionally broad base, design would incorporate, from the earliest stages, ongoing consultation with those learners most marginalised by current arrangements to consider pitfalls and possibilities in assessment and build more flexible and inclusive design. Such an approach would also require deep, ongoing work with academic staff to develop a critical universal design habitus, recognise the historical roots of educational exclusion and their contemporary echoes, and cultivate a critical universal design stance towards education, including in assessment. Ensuring that the process is open-ended would build in flexibility and ongoing review on multiple levels: within a single class to a program, school, and university level.

Scholars from disability studies seek more inclusive assessments through practices that align with critical universal design. Their accounts focus on thoughtful design that anticipates heterogeneous disabled students will inhabit the classroom, infuses flexibility as a matter of course, and promotes co-construction such that universal design is treated as a verb (Dolmage 2017). For example, Polish (2017) engages multimodal discussions of assessments via Google doc, in course blogs, or on paper, where students pose questions, note what they would like to change, and indicate aspects they are excited about, offering a route towards further assessment customisation. Others describe similar efforts that engage with students to actively (re)formulate assessments that amplify their strengths and interests (Castrodale 2018; Kryger and Zimmerman 2020; Lau 2021). These negotiations are conducted with all students and without the need to substantiate or justify the desire for change. Another common strategy is to build flexibility into set assessment modes. Castrodale (2018) designs assessment rubrics flexible enough to account for multiple forms of engagement, allowing students to choose the best mode to express their learning, from a written essay to a podcast, video, student-instructor conference, or poster, among other options. Bones and Evans (2021) build in dropped assignments and late passes

that may be used without negotiation, as well as a list of assessments students can choose from. Others outline the myriad ways they assess participation beyond speaking in class (McKinney 2016; Stanback 2015).

While our focus here is assessment, it is important to note that stories of larger-scale implementation of critical universal design that move beyond a single course to a program, school, or university remain thin in the literature. Though assessment is a crucial site requiring change, without larger-scale attention, ableist forces will remain central in academic environments and constrain inclusive innovation. For example, Castrodale (2018) indicates the need to query departmental or program grading expectations such as expected averages, curriculum prerequisites, and reporting timelines that may impact what is possible within a classroom.

A critical universal design praxis for assessment reactivates disability politics in design from the start. We might begin with fundamental questions about our learning environments:

- Who are our learners? Who is missing and why?

We seek to understand ways of being, doing, and knowing that are not currently assumed in educational design to consider how current practices might shift. To do so, we might pursue the following lines of inquiry:

- What do learners (in particular, those with disabilities and others most marginalised by educational and social systems) tell us about how they could best demonstrate their learning?
- How can assessments assume diverse bodies and minds from the outset?
- How will we know our assumptions are sufficiently broad?

Embracing intersectionality and *crip* theory, the practice is alive and iterative. We must consider:

- How do we keep assessment for inclusion moving, as an unsettled concept?

The aim is to dismantle ableism and other co-constituting forces by centring racialised and queer disabled people and acting continually with the aim to include this group as an ethic of practice.

Conclusion

While developed from a disability perspective, the theoretical tools introduced here broadly question how learners and learning have been conceptualised and are critical to furthering assessment for inclusion. Because assessment is rooted in hierarchies of value among minds, critical evaluation of its purpose, form, and function is needed. Examining notions of ability, how they are coded and produced in assessments and more broadly within educational environments, is

necessary to develop assessment for inclusion. This examination must unearth the implications of ability constructions for people with disabilities, broadly understood, in addition to (and intersecting with) other groups marginalised in current assessment regimes. An intersectional analysis is crucial to avoid lacuna in the development of just pedagogies of assessment. Critical disability studies praxis seeks to undo this kind of oversight, demanding that disabled bodyminds are centred as expected ways of being and doing in the classroom and that intersectional thinking is deployed to consider experiences beyond those labelled disabled, who are nonetheless disabled by educational arrangements.

If the goal of assessment is to measure students' learning in a disciplinary area, starting with theoretical tools from critical disability studies will propel introspection on how exclusionary norms have shaped dominant notions of learning, the requirements of a profession (and therefore what ought to be assessed), and measurement itself. Crippling assessment is no simple task, it requires deep and ongoing grappling. These theories build a case for crippling assessment for inclusion and pave a route towards an anti-ableist approach to assessment by design, that undoes assessment as we know it and allows students to thrive.

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Note

- 1 Garland-Thomson (1997, 8) explains that the normate is "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume can step into the position of authority and wield the power it grants them". Similar to, and bound up in, whiteness, the normate is a figure often made invisible that nonetheless dominates the workings of our social worlds. Adopting Price's (2015) argument for bodymind, I consider the normate to include mental configurations.

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