Lost time: adult literacy’s neglect of disability in theory and practice

Audrey Gardner, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Canada

Paper presented at the 40th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 6-8 July 2010, University of Warwick, Coventry

Every adult literacy program in Canada deals with learning disabilities. Disabled learners are in every adult literacy program in Canada.

The philosophical underpinnings of these two seemingly similar statements, I contend are widely divergent; the first one refers to disability as it directly relates to learning and the other makes disability known as a bodily presence. Based on my experience as an adult literacy worker I posit that the first statement is assumed to be normal and the second disrupts this assumption. The idea of every adult literacy program dealing with learning disabilities is well accepted, whereas imagining disabled learners in every adult literacy program is problematic and troubling.

Most likely disabled adults make up the majority of learners in IALSS\(^1\) level one literacy programs and arguably this has been the case in the past and will continue to be in the future. Yet, there is a remarkable absence of critical inquiry on disability in adult literacy discourse in Canada. How can disability be present in the everyday of literacy programs but absent in the broader discourse? It is time to rethink how disability is and can be understood in order to better respond to learner’s intentions and experiences. In this paper disability studies is introduced as a theoretical lens to look at how disability is marginally present in adult literacy. Questioning the juxtaposition of disability as ‘present but absent’ can reveal the ‘underlying invisibility of the normative standards and able-ness ideologies’ (Mazher and Reid, 2006, 106) that confine and exclude disabled learners.

The paper begins with a brief description of the difference between disabilities studies and the study of disability, which sets the stage for a critical analysis of adult literacy literature that focuses on disability. I will look at government, academic and practitioner research and reports and scholarly literature. I will also reflect on my work experience. By examining how disability is positioned in adult literacy I hope to spark conversation and debate about the socially constructed notion of disability as a problem in adult literacy discourse. For the purpose of this paper discourse refers to the prevailing knowledge on a particular subject or discipline that is represented and reinforced in formal and informal texts and practices.

\(^1\) IALSS is the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (2005). The first IALS (International Adult Literacy Survey) was conducted in 1994. Level one is the lowest level, 20% of Canadian adults, 16-65 years old have literacy in level
Disability studies and the study of disability

The distinction between ‘the study of disability’ and ‘disability studies’ is critical and requires considerable attention. Titchkosky (2008) explains that, Disability studies is an interdisciplinary field...that rejects the idea that disability can be studied as an object in and of itself. Instead disability studies attempts to treat seriously one particular and inescapable fact: whenever disability appears, it appears in the midst of other people. Disability is, therefore, a social and political phenomenon and should be studied as such. (37-38)

The study of disability has historical roots in western medicine, eugenics, statistics, and criminology (Malacreda, 2009; Stubblefield, 2007; Davis, 1995). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the concept of ‘feeblemindedness’ (Stubblefield, 2007, 162) was used to enforce methods of social, racial and gender control. In Enforcing Normalcy Davis (1995) points out that most of the early statisticians were eugenicists who developed statistical methods of measurement in order to categorize levels of humanness; they produced the ‘concept of a norm, particularly a normal body and thus in effect create(d) the concept of the disabled body’ (30). What is perceived as the norm (normalcy) occurs through the study of abnormal bodies. The study of disability treats disabled people as objects to be assessed, measured, categorized and rehabilitated. Oliver (1996) describes this as an individual model of disability, which locates the ‘problem of disability within the individual’ and reinforces what he calls the ‘personal tragedy theory’ (31). In the individual model disability is an abnormality that tragically happens to people.

The social model of disability emerged from the disability rights movement, which argues that disability is a social issue of discrimination and stigmatization (Oliver, 1996). While most disability studies scholars support the social model, the aim of disability studies is to develop theory that offers diverse and more fluid explanations of social conceptions of disability than a social model can provide. For example, Michalko (2009) fully endorses empowerment of disabled people but challenges the up-take of the term ‘persons with disabilities’ (PWD). He argues that the use of such terminology, the ‘with’ linguistic turn as he call it is problematic because it continues to designate disability as abnormal. Michalko notes that by ‘privileging personhood over disability is to conceive of disability as the excess that ‘takes over someone’s life’ and prevents someone from being ‘like everyone else’” (69). The ‘everyone else’ is presumed to be that which is normal, unburdened of the excess and problem of disability. But what is normal, how does the idea of normalcy make disability a problem that should be ignored, avoided, and removed?

Davis (1995) argues that the concept of the ‘norm’ rooted in the science of eugenics and statistics is not about averaging, but instead about an image of ideal. He describes this phenomenon as ‘the hegemony of the normal’ (49), which creates an image of the ideal person as able-bodied, literate, worker, white, and male. A normative discourse on adult literacy education implies that the norm is an ideal learner and ideal teacher and literacy learning occurs in accordance with normative standards of skills improvement. Disability studies encourages people to deconstruct the notion of normalcy in order to ‘think with disability’ (Michalko, 2009, 66), it turns the spotlight from the disabled individual as object to exploring human relational
dynamics around what is assumed as normal and how these assumptions construct the meaning of disability.

How disability appears in definitions
Adult literacy and disability share a common social and political dilemma, they are problematic. Disability is a problem in an able-bodied world and low literacy is a problem in a knowledge-based society. Within the context of adult literacy disability is presumed to exacerbate the problem of struggling with text. It is often blamed for causing poor literacy or being a barrier to literacy learning. The individual model makes disabled adults with low literacy responsible for their lack of reading and writing skills, and their disability. Similarly, a deficiency model dominates adult literacy education where a lack of skills is viewed as the individual's problem. These models of deficiency and individualism are expressed through formal definitions that hold discursive power. The Canadian government adapted the OECD\(^2\) functional skills definition to define literacy as ‘the ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential’ (Statistics Canada, 1996). The Canadian government used the WHO framework for disability\(^3\) to produce a definition for PALS (Participation and Activity Limitations Survey, 2001) its national survey on disability that states ‘persons with disabilities are those who reported difficulties with daily living activities, or who indicated that a physical, mental condition or health problem reduced the kind or amount of activities they could do’ (Statistics Canada, 2001).

The Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL), a national independent organization which uses the UNESCO\(^4\) definition of literacy that extends the functional skills definition of literacy to include the idea that literacy also involves a continuum of learning and in varying contexts. MCL has produced fact sheets on social issues connected with literacy and in its’ fact sheet on literacy and disabilities it states, To build a society that values inclusion it is important to challenge the assumption that literacy is only reading and writing on paper. There are multiple literacies and multiple ways of communicating including American Sign Language, Braille, technologies, gestures and sounds. (www.literacy.ca).

The difference between the formal government definitions and the MCL description of literacy and disabilities is that the latter shifts the emphasis from an individual to a

\(^2\) OECD, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development commissioned the IALS and IALSS research with Statistics Canada and the Educational Testing Service, US.

\(^3\) WHO (World Health Organization) uses the International Classification of Functioning of disability and health (ICF)

\(^4\) United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition: Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society. Retrieved April 2, 2010 from http://www.literacy.ca/?q=literacy/literacyinformation#definition
social context. A stance taken by disability studies scholars is to not have a specific, fixed definition of disability. In *Rethinking Normalcy* Titchkosky and Michalko (2009) claim that,

Everyone operates with some definition of disability whether we realize it or not. Thus, whatever else disability is, it *is* (author emphasis) something that people define, understand, and come to know and live with in particular ways. (2)

A similar self-definition approach can be found in New Literacy Studies, Hamilton (2000) claims that a socially contextualized understanding of literacy ‘places at center stage, people’s own definitions of literacy because there is no one standard that is valid for everyone, for all time’ (2). These perspectives on how people make meaning of disability and of literacy offer alternative spaces that resist dominant discursive concepts of individualism, deficiency and problem. In these spaces we can look at the power relations between able-ness and disability, literate and low literacy, and what is deemed to be normal in adult literacy discourse.

**How disability appears in adult literacy literature**

Most of the literature on disability focuses on learning disabilities (LD) and reflects a philosophy of logical positivism, the ‘study of disability’. In recent years there has been an up take of research in adult literacy that challenges the positivist perspective yet disability has been overlooked. It is not explicit in the minimal amount of scholarly literature in fact Quigley et al. (2006) expresses concern with the ‘obvious gap in literacy theory from Canadian context and experience’ (18). Most of the research focuses on participation barriers and statistical analysis, with fewer studies on promising practices or developing theory (Zubrow et al., 2009; Novodvorski, 2008; Smythe and Courage, 2007; Carpenter and Readman, 2006; Gardner, 2005; Weibe, 2002; Match, 2000; Kapsalis, 1999).

Literature on adult literacy in general tends to present disability as an item on a list of marginalization. In numerous documents disability sits along side grouped individuals, cultures, and languages that highlight their difference and even deviance from the norm. This list usually includes immigrants, First Nations/Inuit/Métis (Aboriginal), English or French as a second/other language, offenders and more recently seniors. Disability studies scholars describe a phenomenon of ‘otherness’ (Graham and Slee, 2008, 92) that excludes disabled people even in the call for inclusion. For example in 2003 a historical milestone occurred with the release of the federal government’s report: *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response* (Longfield, 2003). This report commissioned by the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities held much hope for bolstering adult literacy across the country. Although the committee who authored the report was charged with attending to disability, there was no critical analysis of literacy issues for disabled adults.

---

5 New Literacy Studies describes literacy as social practices that are multiple, complex, and socially situated and best understood as how people use and make meaning of literacy in everyday activities.
How disability appears in statistics
IALSS has dramatically influenced adult literacy discourse and in the *State of the Field Report* (2006) Quigley et al. note that ‘Canadian literature has recently become dominated by a focus on numbers and statistics’ (16). Comparatively disability has been measured and counted to excess. The national PALS study is the key source for research in studying disabilities. IALSS and PALS were conducted by Statistics Canada, a national government agency that produces statistics on a broad range of social, economic and political issues. The limited research on the relationship between disability and adult literacy relies heavily on these two prominent statistical studies.

Zubrow et al. (2009) state in *Landscape of Literacy and Disability* that ‘People with disabilities have less than a grade nine education at a rate three times greater than people without disabilities’ (57). The Movement for Canadian Literacy suggests that up to 80% of adults in literacy programs have learning disabilities (MCL, nd). The PALS 2001 survey found that 35% of disabled adults between 16 and 65 years old had an annual income of only $5,000 to $15,000 compared with 16% of nondisabled adults and nearly 50% of adults with disabilities were not in the labour force compared with 20% of non-disabled adult (Zubrow, et al., 2009). While these findings are assumed to represent certain truths about adult literacy and disability, statistical representation can only provide some of the picture and only within a specific time and place.

Comparing similar surveys over time needs to be critically questioned as statistics tend to be given the authority of ‘fact’. For instance in the five years between the first PALS survey and the second the number of adults with learning disabilities rose 40% (Zubrow et al. 2009). This does not mean that a high number of adults became learning disabled over a short period of time, rather it is most likely a reflection of different data collected between the first and second survey as well as an expansion of the learning disabilities profession, particularly in assessment and classification methods. Although statistical measurement produces evidence of specific aspects of a subject its findings are only meaningful in relation to people’s perspectives on what it is that is being measured. In other words if the discourse maintains that adult literacy and disability are problems then statistical research will usually reinforce this.

How disability appears in practice
I have worked in literacy programs and projects with a community college in Calgary, Alberta, Canada for nearly a decade. Much of my work experience has been in literacy projects on community development, research, and professional development and I have been fortunate to work with many learners and literacy workers locally and across the country. My experiences in adult literacy have been about disability even though I was not always consciously aware of this. At times I have worked in projects and programs that have disability in the title or the description, and at other times disability has appeared in different ways. Looking back at projects and programs that were explicitly about disability compared with others where disability was present but not the central focus, I wonder about the assumptions I made and definitions I aligned with depending on the subject of the work. I wonder about my responses when disability appeared in my everyday work? Using the word ‘appear’ with the word ‘disability’ is a purposeful nudge on my part to
rethink my tendency to assume that I already know what disability is. By thinking about ‘appearing’ I envision a fuller picture of a social and political phenomenon that reveals what meanings are given to what, where forces of power exist, and how language, space and communication are used to dominate and subordinate people.

Disability appeared in programs and projects as body, relationships, written text, art, conversations, learning topics, sign language, personal expression, learning strategies, structural space, technologies, tutor and instructor training, and program evaluation. One program had disabled and non-disabled learners, and was defined as mainstream for IALSS level one learners. It did not openly invite disabled adults because of concerns about lack of accommodation capacity. Ferri and Connor (2006) point out that,

Terms such as mainstream or regular, however obscure any relationship to the concept of normalcy. Yet students typically know their own approximation to the current construction of normalcy (129).

Although many of the projects and programs I worked in applied progressive and radical education philosophies and holistic and empowering ways of learning there was a persistent presence of problem with the appearance of disability. The appearance of disability was constantly shifting. At times it was grounded in the margins and made present through learners voices resisting exclusion. At other times it was stared at through a ‘eugenic gaze’ (Davis, 1995, 47) that made disability absent by keeping its ‘otherness’ awkwardly present.

Conclusion
The trouble with making something a ‘problem’ is that this is what it becomes. Alternatively, examining the social and political phenomenon of disability in adult literacy can lead to questions that have rarely been considered. Questions such as: What changes when disability appears in the context of what is perceived as normal literacy learning? What does normal literacy learning look like? How is disability made invisible while spotlighting learning disabilities? What is the normative standard that defines adult literacy as problem, disability as problem? Disability studies can help us to rethink adult literacy and in the process center us on the ground we are already standing on if we are willing to take the abnormal stance and assume that disabled learners are in every adult literacy (IALSS) level one program in Canada. What would be the problem with that?

References
Keynes, UK, Open University.
Macht J (2000) Literacy and disability, persons with disabilities advisory committee, Vancouver, Government of British Columbia,
Novodvorski B (2008) Effective techniques and tools for immigrant deaf and hard of hearing adults in bilingual and bicultural literacy programs, Calgary, Bow Valley College,
Smythe S & Courage D (2007) Toward a ‘whole life’ perspective on learning disabilities in adult literacy settings; a conceptual framework to guide professional development, Vancouver, Ripal BC.

This document was added to the Education-line collection on 28 June 2010