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Recommended Citation

Bass, Chris () "Beyond Ability: How Disability Enables Us to See Injustice," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 7 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol7/iss1/15>

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Beyond Ability: How Disability Enables us to See Injustice

by Chris Bass

I first recognized the exclusive nature of my teaching when I reviewed the curriculum of my College Composition Course and realized that while I considered myself an inclusive educator who successfully accommodated student needs, my curriculum was filled with ableist perspectives. The course reading list did not include one author who identified as disabled. My failure to include the perspectives of people with differing abilities reinforced an exclusive barrier for my students. As a result, we never engaged in conversations about the life experiences of disability. Silencing such experiences created an assumption that the able-bodied experience was the only experience. In her 2012 text, *Disability Studies and The Inclusive Classroom*, Baglieri argues that inclusive education extends beyond implementing individual accommodations per I.E.P.s. She suggests that educators promote “contexts for learning in which every student can identify with and connect to the school and to one another” (4). I soon found that an inclusive list of model texts allowed students to connect in ways I did not expect. The (dis)abled perspective enabled my English classroom to think critically about not only the limitations of normative assumptions around ability, but also the intersectionality between accessibility and class.

The summative assessment for the first unit was a short memoir. I assigned five different short pieces as models of life writing. In an effort to provide more inclusive contexts for learning, I added “Public Transit” by journalist John Hockenberry. In this short personal essay, Hockenberry, a paraplegic and wheelchair user, recounts his attempt to ride a New York City subway line that is not accessible. In the essay, he describes how he maneuvers the stairs and platforms without his wheelchair. He pulls his body up and down hundreds of stairs and encounters rudeness, dirt, and inaccessibility; however, he

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also receives empathy from other minority passengers who assist him while the white passengers ignore him and avoid eye contact.

Hockenberry's essay was one of five texts that modeled personal writing; however, this essay elicited the most surprising conversation. The morning after the reading was assigned, I asked students to draw out maps of their journey to school. They were asked to note each step from their bed to the classroom. Once maps appeared to be complete, I asked the students to circle all the points on their map that were not accessible for all. I did not expect to learn as much as we did about each other. We learned how far students lived from school; **figure A** reveals a student who lived next to the Indiana border and traveled more than an hour to school. We learned how many differing modes of transportation students took; **figure B** is the map of one student who commuted from a suburb more than an hour away and took three different modes of transportation to reach campus. We also learned how accessible our campus is (**figure C**). It didn't take long for the students to notice certain patterns.

A critical reading of these maps revealed concerns that several of my students could not let go. Dominica who drew the map in **figure A** was the first to note that her route was almost entirely exclusive. Several students, all of whom lived in walk up courtyard buildings, added that they would not be able to even leave their own apartments because their buildings did not have elevators. After sharing these insights, I asked if anyone had an entirely accessible route. Sure enough, all of the students who lived in campus housing raised their hands. The University buildings were all compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements. A student raised the question, "is that why it cost so much to live on campus?" Another student quickly replied that it shouldn't matter how much you can afford:, shouldn't everyone have access to get around? "Well," I pointed out, trying to bring us back to the text, "I think that is one of Hockenberry's intentions for writing the essay."

Dominica then noted that the Metra Train, a suburban commuter, is accessible, but she doesn't take it because the train company doesn't accept her student public transit pass. Her partner asked, "is that why you labeled that Heguish station as the 'expensive station?'" (**Figure D** shows Dominica's map cropped to show details). She responded, "yeah! I'm not takin that everyday, but I guess I would have to." I noted in my research notes that at this point the classroom became noticeably uncomfortable. They all seemed to be troubled by the idea that accessibility was associated with how much one could pay. As the conversation developed, commuter students shared that they lived at home because it was cheaper, or closer to their work. More than half the class agreed that campus housing was too expensive. Nick, a student who had remained quiet almost all semester, chimed in, "It's not just the dorms. The food here costs too much. Can't bring a lunch everyday." Dominica noted that the hardest part of college was her commute.

In this moment, I could see the potential of critical literacy at work. Shore, in his essay "What is Critical Literacy?", defines critical literacy as a process that "challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development" (282). The conversation had shifted from talking about physical accessibility to economic opportunity. While the conversation was very much about real physical barriers that block inclusivity, a critical reading of the disabled perspective fostered a learning environment that challenged the status quo in many ways. Baglieri explains that the power of inclusive education is found "in the possibility of deconstructing the barriers common to all" (141).

Hockenberry's texts certainly revealed economic barriers common to all.

After discussing the student sketches, I thought most students would move on to other areas of interest. No students wrote about these topics in their short memoirs; however, as the semester

developed the students continually referenced those sketches. In an effort to forge a more inclusive classroom, I assigned a problem solution research paper as the final assignment for the semester. The students were encouraged to locate a problem in their community and research possible solutions to that problem. Locating problems and imagining solutions is a key trait to critical literacy, and as the Disability Scholar Margaret Price notes in the text *Mad at School*, disability “is becoming an important topic [in critical writing classrooms] because it brings forward the interplay of writing, ideology and material life in fundamental and vivid ways” (57).

The research paper had four parts: first students learned how to research using the school’s database system; once students had a clear understanding of the problem, the students had to research in their community and interview people impacted by the problem. Once research was collected, students wrote an argumentative paper that could persuade their peers to support the proposed solution. Finally, the students had to write a formal letter to someone in a position of power who could implement the change for which the student advocated. Throughout the entire unit, which takes about four weeks, I would remind students that these are not isolated steps for a Composition Assignment; these are the steps to initiate any type of change in the community.

Roughly 30% of the class explored problems in their communities they claimed were caused by an injustice based on either class or ability. Another 25% of the students wrote about differing barriers on campus (cost of campus food, lack of lounge space for commuting students, even the limited availability of night courses). Dominca’s awareness of inaccessibility led her to research ways in which the city of Chicago under-invests in her community. These pieces are examples of self-writing, which literacy scholar Ernest Morell associates with critical literacy because “they are potentially empowering writing practices, particularly as they help to develop empowered identities and help students to cope

with fear, alienation, and other negative outcomes associated with being a member of a marginalized group in society” (170). In her self-reflection at the end of the unit, one student commented, “I liked how we learned both how to write better and also how to make change that we want. Learning two things at once. Not just writing for the teacher.” On the same reflection, roughly half of the students acknowledged that the assignment encouraged them to think about change in their community.

While the majority of students asserted a dynamic alternative to problems in their community, not every student was moved to re-imagine their society. Inclusive education is a difficult process that may be uncomfortable for students. I should also note that the economics of accessibility is a complicated topic in Disability Studies, and I know that our class did not fully explore that issue. Students and teachers may be hesitant to identify and label barriers that exclude individuals; however, reading about these barriers provided the contexts that enabled many students to locate existing barriers that marginalize groups of people in differing communities. A significant number of my students related to Hockenberry’s perspective and claimed his essay was influential to their research paper. Inclusive Education extends beyond ability and creates a community capable of recognizing injustice of all kinds. Critical reading of the *words* and images from the (dis)abled perspective enabled a reading of the injustices present in the *world* of many of my students.

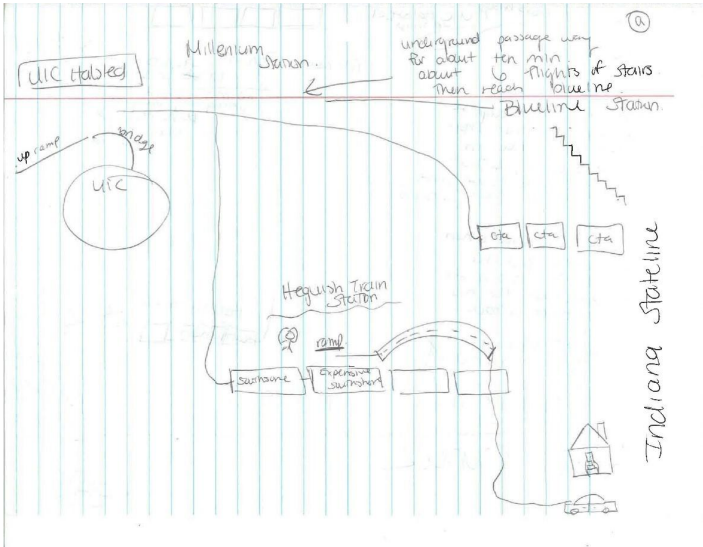
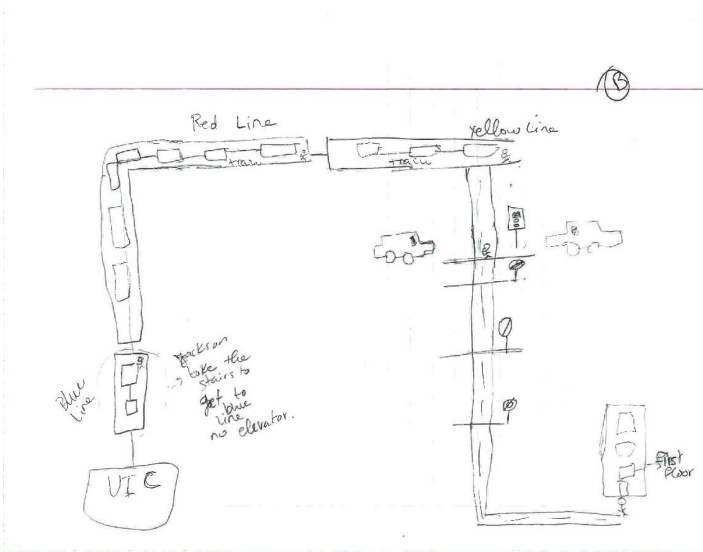


Figure A



Figure

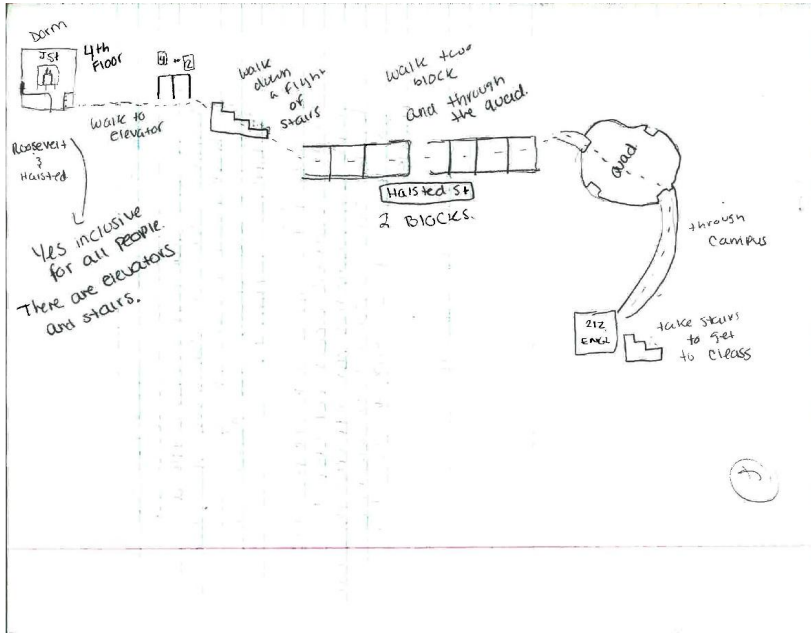


Figure C

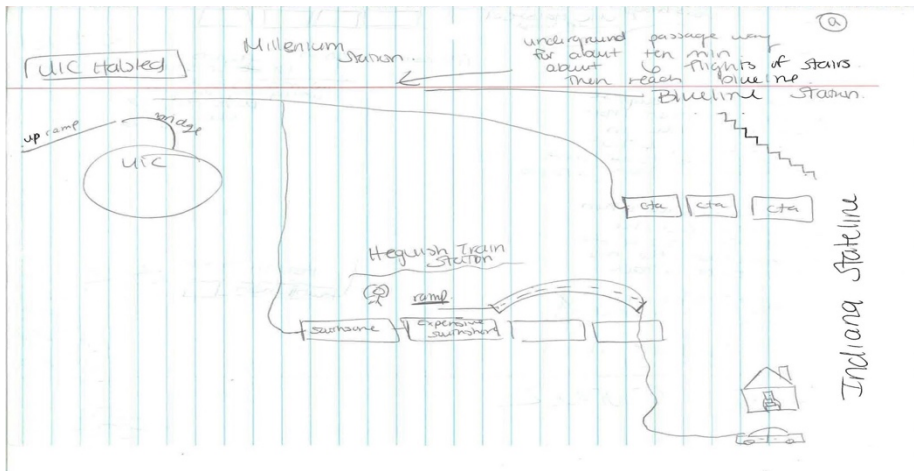


Figure D

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