

**Cross-Disciplinary Learning and Teaching Initiative**  
*Disability Studies and the Ethics of Representation: Theoretical, Discursive and Aesthetic Approaches to Physical and Mental Impairments*  
**Summer 2017: Final Report**

**Workshop participants**

Breckenridge, Janis (Coordinator)  
Armstrong, Tom  
Forbes, Daniel  
Jenkins, Michelle  
McDermott, Lydia  
Terry, Jenna

**Workshop description**

In this CDLTI we explored a range of interdisciplinary, rhetorical, ethical, and aesthetic approaches to disability studies, with an emphasis on applying theoretical considerations to literature and graphic novels. The workshop opened with a roundtable session in which each participant led a discussion of key or foundational articles (read by all) from their discipline. This session introduced us to the field and laid out central questions to be considered throughout the workshop. We then examined diverse examples of textual and visual media in such areas as addiction, autism, Alzheimer's, visuality and the body. A primary goal of this faculty workshop was beginning to explore the vast field of disability studies through discussion of some of the leading schools of thought, major critical voices, and contemporary practices in literature and the arts. Looking back, recurring themes and considerations of both the reading materials and our discussions included the shifting definitions of (mental) illness and pathologies, the concept of personhood, ethics, textual and visual representations of disabled persons, narrative perspective and unreliable narrators, and (in)visibility in an able-ist society, among others.

**Practical Matters**

Participants represented seven distinct programs or academic departments (Spanish, Rhetoric, English, Philosophy, Psychology, General Studies, and Studio Art/Sheehan Gallery) from both Division I and Division II.

Our calendar was a little unusual, spanning from mid-March until late June and I believe this worked out well. We began our sessions in the second half of the spring semester, immediately after spring break (and after the completion of a couple of tenure track searches which with participants were involved or chairing); we continued through the first part of the summer. The first meeting was a roundtable in which each participant led a discussion of a foundational essay (or two!) from their field. We definitely front-loaded readings here. While having the two weeks of spring break to prepare for this session, it still felt a bit burdensome to prepare so much for one session. However, the theoretical foundation served us well as we explored the remaining primary texts. Six additional meetings were led in turn by each member of the group, guiding discussion of their selected text. Each meeting lasted from 4-6:15 pm, and the group met for a total of 15 hours. I have included our syllabus below which details the reading selections. Motivated by our desire to more fully and

competently incorporate this field of enquiry and body of literature not only into our research but also into our teaching, each session naturally included conversations around the pedagogical implications of the material under study, highlighting various methods of engagement used within our diverse classroom settings. Discussions also turned frequently to the ways in which disability is/is not considered on campus in particular and in the US educational system more broadly. In the days following our meetings, we often enthusiastically shared links to additional materials related to the various and at times unexpected directions our conversations had taken. I am especially appreciative of the suggested titles for more fiction readings and filmic representations.

During the semester we met in the LLC for convenience; once classes were over we chose to meet at Olive and take advantage of their patio seating which, although often busy, was a comfortable and relaxed venue. There were a few date changes from our original calendar as we worked around unexpected conflicts, including important campus-wide meetings. But overall, scheduling meeting times turned out to be a relatively smooth task. That said, I would strongly advise future coordinators to plan the calendar well in advance and remain flexible in rescheduling – it seems that is always necessary.

## **SYLLABUS: SPRING 2017 DISABILITY STUDIES CDLTI**

### **March 27 (Mon 4:00-6:15): Theoretical Foundations**

Collaborative Roundtable (each participant led discussion of selected articles from these two key texts)

- *The Disability Studies Reader* (Lennard Davis 2016)
- *Disability Aesthetics* (Tobin Siebers, 2010)

### **April 10 (Mon 4:00-6:15)**

Led by Lydia McDermott

- *Disability Rhetoric* (Jay Dolmage)

### **May 8 (Mon 4:00-6:15)**

Led by Tom Armstrong

- *Infinite Jest* (David Foster Wallace) (selections on addiction and anhedonia)

### **May 15 (Mon 4:00-6:15)**

Led by Janis Breckenridge

- *Arrugas (Wrinkles)*

### **May 22 (Mon 4:00-6:15)**

Led by Jenna Terry

- *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Mark Haddon)

**June 5 (Mon 4:00-6:15)**

Led by Michelle Jenkins

- *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy* ([Eva Feder Kittay](#), [Licia Carlson](#))

Chapter 9, "Holding One Another (Well, Wrongly, Clumsily) in a Time of Dementia" by Hilde Lindemann

Chapter 15, "How We Have Been Learning to Talk about Autism: A Role for Stories" by Ian Hacking and

Chapter 16, "The Thought and Talk of Individuals with Autism: Reflections on Ian Hacking" by Victoria McGeer

OPTIONAL: last chapter by the volume's editor, Eva Feder Kittay, about how and why she, as a mother of a child who is severely cognitively disabled, works on disability.

**June 21 (Wed 4:00-6:15)**

Led by Daniel Forbes

- *Staring: How We Look* (Rosemarie Garland-Thomson) [chapters 1-7; 12]

**Reflections from Participants**

**Armstrong, Tom**

**A-B)** I was looking forward to participating in a Cross Disciplinary Learning and Teaching Initiative at Whitman College, and the Disability Studies and the Ethics of Representation CDLTI was everything I hoped it would be. This CDLTI was particularly exciting for me, because the topics of disability studies have many important links to psychology. I teach the Abnormal Psychology Course at Whitman College, as well as an interdisciplinary seminar titled "What is mental illness?" I suspected that disability studies could inform my teaching, but I never had a good opportunity to delve into this interdisciplinary program of research. This CDLTI was extremely valuable, both in terms of gaining exposure to the disability studies literature, and getting to know and learning from fellow colleagues approaching disability studies from different disciplinary perspectives. For me, this CDLTI was very successful in achieving the aims of the initiative.

The foundational reading section was one of the highlights for me. I really liked Janis's idea to have everyone select chapters from Davis's *Disability Studies Reader*. Through the selections of other group members, I was able to gain a broad introduction to the field, and through my selections, I was able to investigate my own questions about the application of disability studies to mental illness. One of the most edifying parts of this first section was learning about the links between statisticians who are critical to the field of psychology (e.g., Pearson, known for his correlation coefficient) and the eugenics movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. I wove the

relations between eugenics, statistics, and disability into my Abnormal Psychology class when I taught about autism and the influence of Nazi eugenics on Hans Asperger.

This CDLTI has also influenced my research. A student who I collaborate with, Rachel Leiter '18, is interested in special education and working with intellectually disabled children and adults. We had been planning on adding a study to our disgust research program that addressed the role of disgust in ableism and prejudice towards disabled individuals; however, we both felt a little unsure of the intellectual terrain. This CDLTI has given me the foundation and the confidence to supervise a project on disgust, disability, and dehumanization that Rachel is developing through a Summer Research Award. The project will become her thesis next year. In the first week of the award period, Rachel read many of the readings from the CDLTI, and we discussed their relevance to her project. To my knowledge, her study is one of the first to link disability studies to the psychology of disgust and dehumanization.

C) I don't have any concerns about the workshop. For me, the literary aspect was a pleasant surprise. At first, I was thinking I might prefer to stick with theoretical texts; however, I really enjoyed reading the graphic novels and other texts. It was fun to learn how to notice and interpret the form of graphic novels, rather than just reading for the content.

### **Forbes, Daniel**

I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to participate in the 2017 Spring CDLTI on Disability Studies. While I missed the first couple meetings due to illness, once I was able to join the group, I was immediately impressed by the depth and multilayered conversations that resulted from having such a diverse interdisciplinary group. Being able to explore our themes and topics through the represented fields of Spanish, English, Philosophy, Psychology and the Visual Arts was profound.

Not only did this group reconnect me with colleagues I've worked with before, it also introduced me to new ones. These connections are extremely helpful in considering the construction of future exhibitions at the Sheehan Gallery in relation to where faculty and student interests lie.

In terms of teaching, in my courses and working with the senior art majors, identity and issues of "difference" including those that fall under the umbrella of "disability" are often the focus of students' creative productions. The information garnered from this group and an expanded understanding of how disabilities of various sorts are being considered through numerous lenses and within the larger culture will be extremely helpful navigating future conversations in class and individually as we discuss such works.

Additionally, this group also addressed the very real issue of working with students who have various disabilities in terms of mental/psychological issues, addictions, or physical concerns, as well as students who also fall outside what is considered "normative" for various reasons. These conversations created a sense of solidarity in terms of dealing with faculty/student situations that often feel isolating. It also created a place for the sharing of tools and strategies that was very helpful.

Considering my own work that often considers aspects of the "extraordinary" or nonconforming body, all the materials examined for this course were extremely valuable and I know that I'll be turning to them in the future as resources.

In light of all the above, this group has been most beneficial. This is my second CDLTI with Janis Breckenridge and she once again did an exemplary job as the group's organizer and leader. I hope that I will have the opportunity to work with her again in the future on another CDLTI, or with anyone else in this group, the experience was so rewarding.

### **Jenkins, Michelle**

Participating in this CDLTI on disability studies has been a fantastic experience to read, think about, and discuss different questions concerning disability. In particular I appreciated the multi-disciplinary approach to the topic, both in our readings and in our conversations. Coming from quite different disciplines, with different underlying knowledge and methodologies and ways of reading texts led to vibrant conversations that have resulted in a much more nuanced view of the nature of, representations of, and ethical implications regarding disability. I'll take many of these observations and questions with me into the classroom.

For example, a recurring theme throughout our CDLTI was the role of the social in the construction of disability and how the public/social representations can shape not only how those who are disabled are viewed (or not viewed) but even how those disabilities can be experienced. This has direct implications for questions of personhood and identity, topics that come up in several of my classes in reading both philosophy and fiction. The next time I teach *Still Alice*, a novel that asks about a woman's identity as she is diagnosed and progresses with early-onset Alzheimer's disease, I will incorporate some of the readings that work to complicate what it means to have, and to lose, an identity. Indeed, I am turning from this CDLTI to a philosophy reading group (co-hosted with Mitch Clearfield and involving eight philosophy students in town for the summer) where we will read *The Minority Body* which is a philosophical exploration of disability. I will bring with me the conversations, questions, and insights from this CDLTI to this reading group. I'm very grateful to Janis for proposing and organizing and Whitman for supporting this truly wonderful learning community.

### **McDermott, Lydia**

This Disability Studies CDLTI was intellectually invigorating and successful in its encouragement of cross-disciplinary thought. Many of the materials that we read have been waiting on my personal to-do list for a while, and I was grateful for the opportunity to read them and discuss them with colleagues across disciplines. For me, the most cross-disciplinary aspect of the CDLTI was actually the conversation, because we each brought very different disciplinary perspectives to a variety of issues regarding disability. Just reading across disciplines would not have helped me gain as many perspectives. In particular, I was fascinated by the ways in which someone in psychology thinks about mental illnesses, addictions, and mood disorders, as well as the interesting overlaps in the approaches philosophers and rhetoricians take to ethical questions.

For my particular teaching interests, many of the texts we read can be directly incorporated into my Rhetorical Bodies course. Additionally, as an educator more broadly, thinking through the

challenges presented by various disabilities prompts me to further adapt my syllabus and teaching style to better accommodate a variety of students' needs. I strongly believe the discussions we had as a group need to be had by all faculty members because disability enters our classrooms consistently, whether we are recognizing it or not.

**Terry, Jenna**

I learned extensively through the Disability Studies and Ethical Representation CDLTI, especially from the expertise from and discussion with my colleagues. We considered “disability” as social construction and experience, bodied and disembodied, querying implications of the word and what, exactly, it’s meant to represent. Is disability the *inability* of living an unassisted, independent life? If so, to what degree has the world in which we live been constructed toward certain abilities, with an originally arbitrary, or unintentional, negation of other abilities? Are some disabilities abilities of another kind? By one understanding at least, “If we live long enough, we will all become disabled” (Goffman as qtd. in Garland-Thomson 460).

Our discussions also dovetailed with the individual and ITL work I’m doing for my 2017-2018 courses. In Encounters and Composition, I’m working on universal design and inclusivity, which requires sensitivity toward a host of cognitive differences, especially, as well as reorienting classroom practices and values. The group has directly addressed what constitutes disability within an academic context. Further, my English courses and creative work draw heavily on cognitive disability in narrative perspective and unreliable narrators. The group’s three novels, all with point-of-view characters with some cognitive disability, played with form, information, and narrative perspective to integrate the reader into the character’s experience. Discussions of these artistic works were grounded by researched articles and our differing expertise.

By one understanding at least, “If we live long enough, we will all become disabled” (Goffman as qtd. in Garland-Thomson 460); our work in this thoughtfully organized and invigorating CDLTI will be critical to our work at Whitman.