Aspirational Epistemological Flexibility:
Some Movement Against Purity

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I want to start this by thanking the author for starting the conversation in disability at the 2015 Philosophy of Education Society conference in a new way, one that foregrounds ability diversity and disabling conditions imposed by the academy and people within it. The author also considers in detail the implications of the experiences, epistemologies, and politics of people with disabilities. This approach is a slight shift closely related to the ways philosophers of education have engaged disability already and some discussion of what has been done already would be useful. Philosophers of education have engaged disability as an aspect of diversity deserving respect, of course, and I will suggest here that our tendency to not build on work done in our field is a persistent problem (even as I also draw on work outside too). Most importantly, I think this essay advocates for a disability-based epistemological flexibility that would be a fine aspiration for most political and educational projects.

Understanding how disabilities are organized and affect epistemology is crucial to equitable education. Walter Feinberg's analysis of Deaf Culture as a particular epistemological and political formation deserving of recognition and sustaining practices in education is a core part of his book.[1] Glenn Hudak's discussion of the epistemological differences that autistic people bring to philosophy, education, and human flourishing[2] has also been taken up by Gert Biesta's analysis of autism to think further of differences in thinking and acting together.[3] In each of those analyses, as well as in the author's work here, focusing on how we think in relationship with others and how we change how we think and move and design can be encouraged by living and working in diversity.

We could distinguish these approaches using Eve Sedgwick's minoritizing and universalizing form of subjectivity.[4] Feinberg, for instance argues that schools ought to enable the flourishing of the particularities of Deaf Culture, emphasizing the specificity of cultural practices to those who practice them and the necessity of the continuation of those practices to encourage those particular communities to flourish, in other words, advocates for the validity of minoritized subjectivity. Others like Hudak and Biesta may push us to universalize how to think about diverse human capabilities, getting us to think relationally and recognize our mutual implicatedness in one another's capacities even as they also push us to realize minoritized particularity. I would add, too, from queer theory that we need to understand that there are historical formations of people with disabilities that will have different cultural understandings from those of emergent forms of disability-related subjectivity, so, as the author points out, we need to be attentive to ability diversities that not yet have considered.

For Feinberg, who has a more extended discussion of the relationship between minority cultures and public schooling, one of the key issues facing Deaf Culture is

the preservation of historical practices — including the consideration of Deafness as a foundation of culture that separate schools can enhance, rather than a disability. Philosophers of education, then, have taken up this author's challenge already and possibly from directions other than where the author starts from, possibly not, that may be for conversation to uncover. For some philosophers of education, ability diversity and the cultural implications of that diversity help us to think about identities and culturally sustaining practices in ways that emphasize the duration of a culture, the barriers to forming communities, and the obstacles to educational and lifelong flourishing found in many inaccessible institutions.

While I am wary of the author's turn to suggesting that institutions and bias is itself "disabling" — because then the term disabled becomes a quality to be undone — the point is well taken that obstacles often inhere in institutional practices, not in the people demanding access to those institutions. The language around disability is as fraught as that around any minority culture. Back in the day when crips were reclaiming terms of derision, there were also more moderate attempts to think about "challenges" or words that would shift the burden back to individuals' and institutions' exclusionary practices, and those terms seem to have not gotten traction. So, without dwelling too much on a point of language, it might be worth thinking about how people will best organize under a sign and what that sign says about them and their movement. Crip theory continues now, of course, to raise the same issues in academic and political contexts. Work in feminism and disability has pushed us to think about interrelationship and dependence in ways that both trouble the necessity to be dependent on others for access but also trouble our dominant cultural narratives of independence that disavow the dependencies in which we are all already engaged. These questions, too, are as epistemological as they are political and indicated unsettled knowledges and strategies.

A particular disability, as the author suggests, may encourage someone to develop a particular epistemology but, of course, it also may not. Part of the enabling conditions for the development of standpoint epistemologies are the creation and support of those communities Feinberg discusses or the ability of people who, to use the author's example, may be members of other communities but verge into disability as a result of experiences of obstacles (the example of a transperson who becomes clinically depressed — which is a community already at the intersection of medicalized subjectivity, for some, and, for others, not so much).

There are other complexities to be considered. Disability is a crosscutting difference and one that is experienced as intersectionally as other forms of difference are — the meanings of disability vary by subculture, place, form, and so on. The author effectively draws out the overarching interventions of people with disabilities and articulates as well the specificity of which particular disabilities may bring to epistemologies and ethics, and I think embedded within that is a very reasonable political goal that those diverse perspectives should be encouraged rather than disenabled.

Because ability diversity is also crosscutting or complex in terms of how potential obstacles are experienced, how communities are formed or not, and how connections

might be made among and between such diversities, disability offers us a way to rethink constellations of association and specificity (to get back to Sedgwick, issues of universalized concerns about embodied, sensory life in all its variation and to the more minoritized and distinctive experiences of people whose flourishing may be constrained on account of the unwillingness of others to accommodate their distinctions) — and to find ourselves, as feminists advocating for disability rights used to say, as implicated in disability whether or not we are temporarily able-bodied or disabled. That universalized concern is in constant tension with the varieties of experiences of disability the author so carefully separates out for distinctive analysis. Exploring the epistemological losses when the social field creates disability, the author shows how obstacles that may be hidden by ability privilege need to be better understood. Indeed, not only do they need to be understood, they need to be attended to: we need to to change practices and architectures as well, no matter how challenging or seemingly un-renovate-able (as so many colleges of education are).

These reworkings can play off technological affordances, too. My early experiences teaching online were done with students who embodied and taught about ability diversity. It may be that the first participants in online education were already involved in creating disability-centered communities online and so were more familiar with that context. For them, the affordances of creating community with others who shared their particular disability gave them a new way to think about the social group "disabled" and facilitated their ability to maintain the alliance with others dissimilarly disabled people in their geographic community, but it also led them to create listservs and chat rooms with people with whom they shared details of one sort of disability. Their ability, too, to traverse communities just like them, sort of like them, positioned vaguely like them, and so on, provided the opportunity to think and live through strong recognition, alliance, empathy, analogy, and other forms of making connection that don't require absolute similarity. This understanding of disability in general as a constellation or association may encourage epistemological flexibility among some people with disabilities and that is a good thing. Of course, it's hard to idealize any political group and doubtless there is as much inflexibility in disability-based formations as there are gestures of purity and innocence in any political movement, but the hope of flexible epistemologies is a fine aspiration for all of us.

1. Walter Feinberg, *Common Schools, Uncommon Identities: National Unity and Cultural Difference* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).

2. Glenn M. Hudak, "Contiguous Autism and Philosophical Advocacy: Socialization, Subjectification, and the Onus of Responsibility," *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014), 379–387.

3. Gert Biesta, "The Gap Between Identity and Subjectivity: Philosophical Advocacy and the Question of Education," *Philosophy of Education 2013*, ed. Cris Mayo (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2014), 388–390.

4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).