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Voices in the Field

How Will they Learn Without Access? Ending the Exclusion of Disabled Students in Media Production Courses and Programs in Higher Education

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Abstract

As the acceptance of media literacy increases among educators, media producers and consumers, one group is often missing from the dialogue—persons with disabilities. This absence is witnessed in the marginalized media depictions of the disabled. To gain entry into the media professions, some form of higher education is required. Using muted group theory as a backdrop, this work, a narrative analysis of the author's experience with students with disabilities in media production courses, explores the de facto exclusion of persons with disabilities in such classes, due to the poorly outfitted and non-compliant nature of audio and video production facilities.

Keywords: *disabilities, media production, mass communication, higher education*

Media literacy is a necessary skill set for all students in the college and university or higher education setting. According to Hobbs (2010), media literacy is a learning process that includes the ability to access, analyze, create, reflect, and act upon media messages. A community of scholars, documented by Aufderheide and Firestone (1993) and Potter (2011) along with the National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE, 2007) have also provided working definitions of media literacy that have evolved to reflect shifting media patterns, increased awareness and acceptance of a set of core concepts deemed a necessary foundation for full participation in a media saturated world. A preliminary study on the effectiveness of a college media literacy course by

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Duran, Yousman, Walsh, and Longshore (2008), found that such a course can provide students with the necessary tools to "help them grapple with the overall influence of media in their daily lives," (p. 66). Other researchers have established the need to increase media literacy offerings in higher education to assist with the barrage of media messages consumed on a daily basis (Schmidt, 2012; 2013; Tisdell, Stuckey, & Thompson, 2007). Duran et al. (2008) also state that a holistic approach to media literacy education within a university curriculum can assist in creating a fully media literate person who is able to answer a series of media questions or challenges relating to their consumption and engagement with media. Students with disabilities are no different in their need to gain media literacy training as a part of their overall quest to become educated and fully incorporated members of society (Haller, 2006; Wolfe & Lee, 2007). But how do these students navigate the spaces where media education occurs?

College Access, ADA, and the Media Industry

The first component of media literacy, the ability to access media messages, content and technology, is problematic for many particularly in a media production environment given the tightly constructed nature of many production facilities. Typically, such facilities are cramped and offer limited space for even mobile members of society (Argibay, 2008; McEachran, 2012). With such features as drop down stairs and elevated anchor desks, the process of navigating camera systems and cramped editing bays and control rooms present a problem for those with limited mobility or who use a wheelchair.

Prior to the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, persons with physical disabilities were largely marginalized and absent from full participation in society (Haller, 2006). After ADA was passed and fully enforced through fines and lawsuits, compliance with the law became the norm and the visibility of persons with disabilities increased. Despite these strides, disabled persons are still likely to report feeling marginalized due to numerous barriers to access, both physical and intellectual (Haller, 2006; McEachran, 2012). Society must make stronger efforts to increase the numbers of persons with physical disabilities into the ranks of the employed.

The representation of people with disabilities in the media may shape people's expectations about the possibility of a media career. According to the Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA, 2011), the portrayals of the disabled in media, film and television is secondary and unrealistic. Further, such unfavorable portrayal patterns are exacerbated by the lack of disabled persons who work in media professions. The limited numbers of persons with a physical disability who work in media professions can be traced to the low numbers of disabled who pursue higher education, regardless of major (Haller, 2006; Linder, Fontaine-Rainen, & Behling, 2015; Shachmut, 2014). Such low numbers and dismal outcomes within the media professions for persons with physical disabilities (Haller, 2006; Linder, Fontaine-Rainen, & Behling, 2015) are directly related to the large number of educational barriers found system wide in the United States and in media production facilities

in colleges and universities as well as in a number of professional production houses.

The concept of muted group theory is apt for this particular case. While the theory was established by anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener to frame the phenomenon of voiceless women in male dominated societies who struggle within the confines of existing structures to communicate (Swann, Deumert, Lillis, & Mesthrie, 2004), it is also applicable to persons living with disabilities as they, too, attempt to communicate their needs and desire for accommodation with self-constructed messages and methods. As such, persons living with disabilities are more likely to be excluded from the media production process than those without disabilities (ADA.gov, 2016; Rendon, et al., v. Valleycrest Productions, Ltd., 2002). From a media literacy perspective, this exclusion limits a person's ability to become fully media literate and to train in and understand the inner workings of media production by taking part in the process of content creation, which often takes place in a studio or production facility. The National Association of Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) has established a set of media literacy principles (NAMLE, 2007) and the facet of access is directly addressed in Principle 3, which posits that: "Media literacy education builds and reinforces skills for learners of all ages. Like print literacy, those skills necessitate integrated, interactive, and repeated practice." This process is ongoing, requiring repeat exposure and practice with engaging media tools in order for learners to fully understand the underlying tenets of media literacy. For students enrolled in communication and media programs, this principle cannot be realized without full access to production facilities and media equipment located within those facilities.

Access Denied to Production Classrooms

In 2014, I experienced this phenomenon in my classroom, where a student who uses a wheelchair was unable to fully participate in the production component of the course due to space constraints in the media production facility. This situation occurred at a small, historically Black university in the northeast United States. The student, a male, had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair; he was pursuing a career in audio production and was taking Introduction to Broadcast News at the undergraduate level. The class was a combination of editorial and video production with students learning the basic elements of journalism (writing and reporting) with the fundamentals of video and audio production, including work in a television studio to facilitate the production of a student newscast. Once students gained the fundamentals of newsgathering such as scriptwriting, creating news packages voiceovers (VOs) and VO/SOT (voiceovers with sound on tape), the class moved into the studio production portion of the course.

When the students arrived in class for the student production component and were prepared to produce a newscast, the student in the wheelchair was not able to enter the control room to observe the various functions of the director, assistant director, audio operator, and teleprompter operator. As the instructor, I attempted to assist the student into the control room, however, his wheelchair

proved too cumbersome to allow comfortable entry. His chair may have fit with no other chairs in the control room and no one else there, but because of the narrowness of the room, he would not have been able to turn his chair around to face the controls and receive instruction. After several attempts, the student was bewildered and asked, "What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to learn?" I offered the student the opportunity to operate the camera instead, with the assistance of other students. Once in the main studio, together with other students, we were able to lower the tripod of one of the cameras and assist the student as he made adjustments to the camera and followed the commands of the director. While this appeared to work in the short term, the student was never able to enter the control room like the other students for the remainder of the semester and no alternative solutions were provided by me for the student. The physical barriers limited what this particular student was able to learn, compared to his peers.

In another instance, at the same school and department, with another instructor in a radio production course during the spring of 2015, a similar situation occurred. In this instance, the student (same as above) who had a motorized chair was not able to access the radio studio because it is located on the third floor of a building in a wing with no elevator access. For a time, the student and the instructor discussed possible solutions for resolution to the quandary, such as having the student lifted up the stairs in his motorized chair so that he could receive instruction. However, given the weight of his chair, that was not feasible for safety reasons. Also, in the event of an emergency, the student would not have been able to safely evacuate the third floor if necessary posing an even greater risk to himself and his peers.

With no solution found, the student, although registered for the course was not able to attend class for several weeks. In frustration, the student contacted the department chair who could not find a viable solution for the student. His frustration mounting, he then contacted the campus student disability services office, and the director contacted the department chair and the instructor to advise on how this student could be accommodated. When that series of communication proved unfruitful, the student notified his mother who threatened an ADA violation lawsuit if her son did not receive accommodation and instruction for a course he was paying for. After another round of conversation, the instructor was able to provide instruction to the student by placing a portable audio board in an accessible classroom and engaging in individualized instruction on the basics of audio board operation.

While this solution was a basic remedy for a structural and procedural shortfall within the department and its audio and video production facilities, it points to a larger oversight in the quest to provide full instruction to all students regardless of physical ability. Although the ADA states that schools must provide reasonable accommodation to all students, beyond the legalese, when disabled students are seeking to learn in production facilities, it is best for them as with other students to learn the process, as it would be practiced professionally. This is what media instructors call "real world experience" or "real world simulation" (Wolfe & Lee, 2007). Without this experience, students are not properly prepared

to take on internships, where they are expected to arrive with basic knowledge of video and audio production. Without proper and standardized in-class instruction and experiences, students are not able to gain entry into the field of television production; this barrier to workforce entry, along with issues such as lack of education, job training and ongoing support (Hagner, Dague, & Phillips, 2014; McEachran, 2012) contribute to the low numbers of persons living with physical disabilities who work in television and related media fields.

Promoting Access

Structural barriers at the college and university levels have a severe impact not only on the students who seek unfettered access, but also on student peers who observe the treatment of disabled students. They are often made to feel helpless at the flurry of administrative scrambling, which more often than not means they will be receiving instruction under different circumstances rather than with the class that he or she registered for. And while student peers may have compassion for their fellow students, they are often left voiceless in the process and have no language to express their sense of dismay at the treatment of disabled students, which further speaks to the concept of the muted group (McEachran, 2012; Swann, et al., 2008; Tisdell et al., 2007). These and similar scenarios create a muted group phenomenon, whereby, a dominant structure of able-bodied individuals write the script and prescribe methods of learning which are not inclusive for all who seek to gain entry into media professions. Despite ADA mandates for equal access for all students, physical barriers remain in place and limit the options for students who are disabled.

NAMLE Core Principle 2 states: "Media literacy education expands the concept of literacy (i.e., reading and writing) to include all forms of media" (NAMLE, 2007), which includes media technologies that are designed to accommodate those living with disabilities to assist with the learning process. These above named cases also speak to the ongoing need to include diverse voices and experiences into the process of media creation and training for entry into media professions. They also have the potential to addresses gaps in the dialogue regarding the need for enhanced perspectives surrounding the production component of media literacy, by incorporating literacy of production values and the opportunity to familiarize oneself with the process of media creation. This also, as mentioned in NAMLE Principle 3 above, requires frequent interaction (repetition and practice) in media facilities and with professional equipment to gain confidence in one's ability to produce media. Concise and effective media education, particularly under the guidance of higher education programs, offers the necessary training and skill-building opportunities to become active and informed citizens in a democracy, and to understand the full impact of media and its socializing ability (Tisdell, et al., 2007). At the same time, media consumers and producers are able to incorporate their own values, ideas and beliefs into the media consumption and production process as they understand and apply core media literacy principles (NAMLE, 2007).

The implications for accessibility from a media literacy perspective are profound. Media literacy requires full access to all media functions to be able to

understand the machinations of media production (Duran et al., 2008). While persons are not necessarily required to obtain professional-level media skills to become media literate, an overview of skills needed to produce media content can provide important insight for the media literacy framework. Several colleges and universities have implemented exemplary policies to effectively serve all students seeking to enter media professions, regardless of ability.

There are several examples of a handful of colleges and universities that have full compliance and exclusion policies. These colleges have made significant strides in engaging in inclusive practices for students living with disabilities. Temple University, for example, broadcasts a weekly talk show about sports and includes anchors who are unsighted (Lausch, 2015). The University of Colorado, Denver boasts of a full ADA compliant theater and media production facility replete with widened catwalks and wheelchair accessible seating and control room access (The Regents of the University of Colorado, 2012).

To ensure greater access for disabled students in media production courses university administrators should act immediately to create or adapt production learning facilities. The primary areas of concern are narrowed pathways in studio control rooms, catwalks, graduated seating and flooring in theaters. University departments of mass communication or multimedia production should not wait for ADA noncompliance citations to enforce rules within their own facilities. Federal grants may be available to offset construction costs associated with the removal of barriers for persons living with disabilities.

Application

- Familiarize yourself with rules and policies in your learning environment and advocate for the voiceless in your own community. When you notice disparities in treatment and services rendered, encourage inclusion for all in media production facilities.
- Work with academic leaders and administrators to assist in the process to make inclusion a cultural practice. Engage entire departments and academic divisions by joining committees, to lend voice to the creation of new policies and procedures that support and implement welcoming students living with disabilities.
- Investigate and become familiar with the best practices of other learning communities. Determine what strategies have worked and gauge which of these strategies and practices can be implemented at your own institution.
- Create a welcoming and inclusive classroom experience for students living with disabilities; allow the classroom and office space to be considered a safe space.

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