DISABILITIES AND PEDAGOGY

Expanding the Theological Classroom: People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities as Theological Learners

Sarah Jean Barton
Duke University

ABSTRACT

In contexts of theological education, questions related to ableism, access, and disability remain under-investigated. This essay considers the history of disability in theological education, highlighting pressing considerations for contemporary theological educators. Offering a case study of a course in Christian ethics and pastoral care with degree-seeking Duke Divinity School students and community learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities, this essay analyzes both challenges and supports for the participation of diverse students in theological education. Emerging from the case study as well as from conversations with scholars in the areas of disability studies and education, this essay also considers some best practices for theological educators committed to inclusive pedagogy and universal design for learning.

KEYWORDS

ableism, accessibility, disability, inclusive pedagogy, theological education, universal design for learning

Introduction

Take a moment to identify who comes to mind when you imagine a student pursuing theological education.[1] Next, imagine what theological education might look like for this student. What specific practices and content will this student encounter as part of their theological formation? What particular contexts and commitments will shape this student's experience? The characteristics we assume of theological learners hold profound implications that shape our pedagogical practices, the assembly of theological learning communities, and the kinds of materials and contexts we engage as educators.

Innovative initiatives in theological education, such as certificate and degree programs for incarcerated students (Jobe 2019) as well as Princeton Theological Seminary's (2018) Farminary, provide examples that challenge theological educators to expand their imaginations about the "typical" theological learner. The shifting contexts of theological education, including an increase in distance learning and hybrid programs (ATS 2018), calls to reconsider the local parish as the primary site for theological education (Bonfiglio 2019), as well as the need for novel resources in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic (ATS 2020), continue to diversify the kinds of learners who can access and participate in formation for ministry.

In this essay, I consider current realities related to disability in theological education, offering a case study of a course populated by both degree-seeking divinity school students as well as community learners with a variety of intellectual and developmental disabilities. Attention to disability in the context of theological education is desperately needed. A critical engagement of disability can help those of us who are educators expand our imaginations about the kinds of students who constitute theological classrooms, help us to consider novel content related to disability in theology, religious studies, biblical studies, and interdisciplinary fields, as well as transform our pedagogies to focus more intentionally on accessibility and inclusion, through a particular commitment to Universal Design for Learning (UDL).[2]

While seminaries, divinity schools, and religious studies programs seek to increase curricular attention to disability (Annandale and Carter 2014, 90; Creamer 2015, 1), as well as provide foundational supports for students seeking accommodations through the Americans with Disabilities Act (Annandale and Carter 2014, 85; Creamer 2015, 2; Gilbert 2001, 75), I frame this essay by asking how the central cry of the disability rights movement—"nothing about us without us" (Charlton 1998, 1)—shapes teaching in contexts of theological education. I develop this essay in three parts: first, an overview of ableism and its impact within higher education, accompanied by a review of current intersections among disability, accessibility, and learning within theological schools. Second, I offer one account of resisting ableism in the theological classroom by reviewing a case study of a graduate course in theology and disability that I co-instructed with Dr. Warren Kinghorn at Duke Divinity School in the spring of 2018.[3] Third, I conclude with a brief reflection on the ways in which this case study reveals how theological educators might begin to embrace best practices for inclusive pedagogy through adopting the principles of UDL.

What's Going On? Ableism, Disability, and the Landscape of Theological Education

The realities of ableism, or disability-related prejudice, constitute an important area of consideration for theological educators. Disability studies scholar Michelle Nario-Redmond offers the following definition of ableism: "ableism is simply defined as prejudice and discrimination toward individuals simply because they are classified as disabled—regardless of whether their impairments are physical or mental, visible, or invisible" (2020, 2). Nario-Redmond emphasizes that ableism consists of three interconnected components: "affective emotions or attitudinal reactions, behavioral actions/practices, and cognitive beliefs/stereotypes that go beyond general negativity" (2).

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2 According to CAST (the Center for Applied Special Technology), "universal design for learning is a framework to improve and optimize teaching and learning for all people based on scientific insights into how people learn" (CAST 2017).

3 While this essay offers some insights applicable to students across a diversity of disability identities, its case study and conclusions for teaching practices focus on theological learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The reason for this particular focus of the essay is multipart. First, on a pragmatic note, the community learners in the case study for this essay were predominantly people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities. In addition, the essay responds to key concerns in the current literature on disability, the academy, and vocation. For example, Deborah Creamer raises a concern that "particularly within the academy, we have seen very little accessibility for or engagement with experiences of cognitive difference, and very little interest in it as a specific topic or category of concern" (2009, 104). Beyond academic contexts, Ben Conner argues that "while many congregations and seminaries can imagine people with mobility challenges or sensory disabilities as ministers, few can imagine a vocation in Christian leadership by someone with intellectual or developmental disabilities" (2020, 140).

Focusing on the context of higher education, disability studies scholar Jay Dolmage defines ableism as the positive valuation of non-disabled people,[4] creating rhetorical power that makes both able-bodiedness and able-mindedness "compulsory" for learners in post-secondary settings (2017, 7).[5] Dolmage writes that ableism renders disability and disabled people "as abject, invisible, disposable, less than human" in contexts of higher education (46).

In the introduction to her edited volume *Disability Studies in Education: Readings in Theory and Method*, Susan L. Gabel similarly defines ableism as the deployment of an assemblage of negative social biases "against people whose bodies function differently than what is considered 'normal'" (2005, 4). These social biases foster beliefs about disabled learners that often lead to discriminatory pedagogies. Post-secondary educational statistics highlight the implications of ableism, revealing in 2017 that only 14.3 percent of disabled people (ages 25-34) attained a bachelor's degree or greater, in comparison to 37.2 percent of non-disabled people in the same age range (Lauer and Houtenville 2019).

Considering theological schools in particular, what are the existing realities in relationship to disabled students, ableism, and best practices responsive to accessibility concerns? The answers to these questions are difficult to determine, in part because little research exists on students with disabilities and ableism in the context of theological education (Webb 2020). Take, for example, the 2018-2019 Annual Data Tables from The Association of Theological Schools (ATS 2019). Despite ample available data on age, gender, denominational affiliation, race or ethnic group, and enrollment status among students at ATS member schools, no information on disability identity or accommodations for students, administrators, or faculty is currently available. In addition, the newly released (2020) ATS survey materials for incoming students, graduating students, and alumni, do not include question about disability.

However, some theological schools have begun to make progress in regard to dismantling ableism, supporting students with disabilities, and integrating disability as a key area of curricular content. For example, some institutions have committed to removing architectural barriers to access and have also increased their efforts to provide specialized supports for students with learning disabilities (Creamer 2015, 1-2). Other theological schools have committed to integrating disability as a content area in their regular course offerings (Webb 2020). A small number of institutions support student groups focused on disability awareness and advocacy, such as Princeton Theological Seminary's Association of Disabled Seminarians and Allies (PTS 2020). Two ATS member schools offer formal certificate programs related to disability: Western Theological Seminary's Graduate Certificate in Disability and Ministry (2020) and United Theological Seminary's Certificate in Disability Ministry (2018).

Yet even with these signs of progress among theological schools, attention to institutional and pedagogical practices focused on access, disability, and anti-ableism remains a relatively low priority. Disability studies scholar Cathy Webb argues that "the current lack of intentional inclusion of disability in diversity initiatives and discussions places it squarely within the null curriculum" (2020, 114). If disability remains in the null curriculum at a majority of theological schools, it will also remain largely absent in what Elliot Eisner calls "intellectual processes"—practices of discourse, critical reflection, and learning (1979, 83). Pathways to incorporate disability into courses and curricula, as well as concrete commitments to support disabled students and take up disability as a critical hermeneutic within theological education, remain areas of significant concern.

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4 In this essay I alternate between the use of identity-first language (e.g. disabled people) and person-first language (e.g. people with disabilities) as a means of reflecting the variance of preferences for disability language among disabled people themselves. For the last several decades, person-first language has been the universal standard for academic, professional, and other public writing on disability. However, an increased turn toward identity-first language has surfaced, particularly among physically disabled people as well as the autistic community. While most professional and medically-based organizations still call for the exclusive use of person-first language, the disability community has pressed for a shift toward identity-first language, even in academic publications. For further reading on language of disability identity, see Brown (2011); Evans (2014); Gernsbacher (2017); Gustavsson, Nyberg, and Westin (2016); Haller, Dorries, and Rahn (2006); Peña, Stapleton, and Schaffer (2016).
   Throughout the essay, I also employ the term "non-disabled" (instead of "able-bodied" or "abled" person) as a more neutral descriptive term. The National Center on Disability and Journalism provides a Disability Language Style Guide (2020) with helpful background on terms related to disability as well as style recommendations for academic and professional writing.

5 Dolmage's (2017) book is available in a free, open access version through University of Michigan Press.

Disability and Theological Education: A Basic History

In what follows, I trace existing research on disability in theological education to highlight the pressing need for further investigation into this area of curricular and pedagogical importance. It is my hope that this background section provides foundational rationale for resisting ableism in theological education as well as provides necessary groundwork for theological educators to begin asking critical questions about engaging disability in their teaching contexts and practices.

In their 2010 policy guideline regarding disability, the ATS committed to "live toward a vision of inclusion of all God's people in theological education." However, calls to attend to disability in the context of theological education predate this ATS policy document, and even precede the 1990 passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in the United States. In 1979, the World Council of Churches *Faith and Order Paper 89*, authored by Harold H. Wilke, highlighted theological education as a priority area for "disability concerns." This document stressed that theological schools must become "aware and expert" about disability (Wilke 1979, 160-161).

In 2003, as part of a special issue of the *Journal of Religion, Disability, and Health*,[6] Robert Anderson calls for attention to assumptions related to "normalcy" in theological schools (2003a, 38). Anderson laments the notable underrepresentation of disabled students in theological schools as well as significant issues with accessibility (44). Anderson offers three practical proposals: first, to heighten theological and biblical reflection on disability within curricula; second, to reimagine the practice of pastoral ministry (including disabled people as ministers and not just the recipients of ministry); and finally, to make explicit efforts to contextualize theological reflection on disability by inviting disabled clergy and community members to lead portions of courses and other campus events (45).

In an additional essay for *Theological Education* in 2003, Anderson specifically commends "curricular infusion" of disability concerns within theological schools. This infusion consists not simply of adding some disability-related content to a theological school's curriculum but of actively recruiting people with disabilities as students and instructors, while also championing the importance of rigorous theological reflection on disability (2003b, 134). Additionally, Anderson recommends a focus on accessible pedagogical practices, supported by ongoing trainings and continuing education opportunities (147).

Bruce Birch's essay in the *Graduate Theological Education and the Human Experience of Disability* delivers a theological mandate for "welcoming students with disabilities" (2003, 24). Birch denies that the primary obligations for accessibility and the inclusion of disabled students should be legal matters, denominational positions, or the pressure of particular special interest groups. Instead, Birch argues, "whatever the nuance of a particular setting or tradition, theological schools are in the business of providing for and equipping the ministries of the whole people of God. If, on reflection, a portion of God's people have been pushed to the margins, denied full access, or left out altogether, then we have failed at our task" (2003, 24). For Birch, a firm commitment to support theological learners with disabilities and to embrace disability as a core subject within theological curricula "is a sign of God's Spirit continuing to work in our midst" and a means of community enrichment (31).

The ATS's 2010 policy document on disability recommends that theological schools "prepare men and women for ministry with attention to the unique gifts and needs of persons with disabilities who will be present in their congregations and communities" (13). Interestingly, this commitment is oriented toward the *future*. These disabled people, who "will be present" in ministry contexts one day, are not imagined as those who are currently learners at theological schools. The ATS policy document also commends increased curricular attention to disability, through interactions with disabled seminarians and other members of the disability community, as well as increased integration of texts from the area of disability theology (2010, 14). The ATS also encourages member schools to review their mission statements, in order "to ensure that qualified persons with disabilities are not excluded on account of those disabilities from education preparing them for the ministries of the church" (13). The policy guideline identifies the importance of addressing architectural, attitudinal, and financial barriers that face students and other community members with disabilities.

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6 The essays in this special issue were simultaneously published by The Haworth Pastoral Press as the collection *Graduate Theological Education and the Human Experience of Disability*, edited by Robert C. Anderson.

Notably, ATS identifies these approaches to disability in the context of theological education as "aspirational in nature" (2010, 14). The ATS commends their member schools to cultivate environments of "welcome, understanding, and assistance" in their relationships with disabled students, even suggesting that seminaries take up roles as "advocates and interpreters" if disabled learners encounter difficulties with their ecclesial bodies as they pursue ordained and lay ministry positions (14-16). In this way, the ATS casts a vision—theological schools "can become a model for the broader community" in embracing practices of welcome, support, and inclusion for all (16).

In their 2014 study related to disability and accessibility in North American theological education, Naomi Annandale and Erik Carter conclude that

> Most academic leaders felt that their graduates receive little or no preparation that would help them to include people with disabilities into multiple dimensions of congregational life (i.e., fellowship, worship and ritual, religious education, service, and leadership) or to respond to spiritual questions resulting from disability experiences. (2014, 94)

This striking conclusion aligns with the study's additional findings, including limited curricular attention to disability, minimal exposure to people with disabilities in non-classroom activities, and an under-resourcing of faculty and staff with regard to accessibility (95). Annandale and Carter also uncovered widespread difficulties among theological schools in providing necessary modifications and accommodations to enroll disabled students (91). The article concludes that additional efforts among theological schools in relationship to accessibility are needed—not only to change practices, but also to transform attitudes and to support the development of new competencies among theological faculties, administrators, and non-disabled students.

In 2015, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the thirtieth anniversary of the Canadian Human Rights Acts, and the thirty-third anniversary of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, Deborah Creamer of ATS wrote a short article addressing "progress and possibilities" related to disability in the context of theological education. Creamer notes the importance of centering each individual school's "mission, context, and resources" in relationship to access and disability, but argues that the most powerful barriers facing theological schools are attitudinal in nature (2015, 2). Creamer encourages schools to assess their attitudes toward disability: do they appreciate the social expectations that "disable" people with certain kinds of bodies and minds? Do schools consider disability "a common human experience" and a category of identity that all students, administrators, and faculty will likely experience at some point in their lives? Creamer stresses the importance of conscious and proactive consideration of disability within theological curriculums.[7]

To support efforts toward increased access, Creamer highlights a number of resources for theological educators. These resources include the annual gathering of the Institute on Theology and Disability (2020),[8] documents from denominational groups and other faith-based organizations related to accessibility and disability,[9] professional guilds with focus groups related to disability,[10] and co-curricular programs that provide opportunities collaboration with disabled people.[11] Finally, Creamer commends use of the ATS's "Disability and Theological Education Self-Assessment Tool" (2015).

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7 Infusing disability into curricula across theological schools requires careful consideration. Various scholars offer guidance for specific curricular changes related to disability. For example, Hebron Ndlovu (2016) suggests teaching disability content within a liberatory theological framework. Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen (2020), underscoring the precarity of core Christian doctrines for many people with disabilities, discusses the importance of foregrounding discussions of disability language and conceptual understandings of the body, as well as appreciating bodily limitations as core commitments for theological educators.

8 The Institute on Theology and Disability holds an annual gathering for ecumenical and interreligious disabled and non-disabled clergy, lay people, academics, service providers, theological educators, and other professionals and practitioners "to foster diverse and authentic interfaith conversations at the intersection of theology and disability."

9 See, for example, the United Methodist Church's accessibility audit tools (2020), as well as organizations including the Collaborative on Faith and Disability (2020) and All Belong (2020).

10 Examples of program units related to disability include AAR's Religion and Disability Studies Unit (2020a) and the SBL's Healthcare and Disability in the Ancient World (2019). AAR also supports the Status of People with Disabilities in the Profession Committee (2020b).

11 Creamer notes the work of Friendship House Partners USA (2020) in their mission to collaborate with people with intellectual and developmental disabilities to provide "safe, affordable, community-oriented housing." There are currently eight Friendship Houses in the United States, where seminary students live with young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Creamer's suggestions from 2015 remain relevant in light of the findings of Webb's (2020) recent research that investigates how curricula at accredited MDiv programs within Mainline Protestant institutions in the United States prepare students as leaders who can faithfully work with individuals and families experiencing disability. After an extensive curriculum review of eighty schools, Webb's study concludes that "future Christian leaders are poorly prepared to meet the needs of disabled people and their families due to limited curricular exposure" (2020, 65). However, Webb's study also offers a positive conclusion, emphasizing that institutions of theological education hold strong potential for systemic change. Webb expresses confidence in a capacity for transformative curricular growth among theological schools which she understands as directly related to cultivating faith communities marked by belonging, with and alongside disabled people.

Literature on Students with Disabilities in Contexts of Theological Education

A small amount of research probes the experiences of disabled students in theological education. Harold Wilke's 1978 essay, republished in 2003 by the *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, explores areas of concern and intervention for students with disabilities. Wilke's essay finds its foundations in his own experience of disability, as well as conversations with approximately one hundred disabled clergy. His essay identifies the following four attitudinal barriers facing disabled learners: negative expectations for disabled students among staff and faculty, negative general assumptions about disability, lack of familiarity with disabled people and potential access needs, and lastly, negative connotations of disability arising from particular interpretations of biblical narratives ([1978] 2003, 9). Though the article is over forty years old, Wilke's calls for intervention remain pertinent for theological schools today: a commitment to a "practicable openness" ([1978] 2003, 21) with regard to prioritizing access, partnerships to build disability-related resources, and the development of symposia on disability to help shape curriculum, culture, and programmatic support for all theological students.

A 2001 study by Laura-Jean Gilbert investigated faculty, as well as disabled student and alumni perspectives on accessibility in seminaries affiliated with the United Church of Christ. Among the thirteen alumni and current students Gilbert interviewed, negative attitudinal and emotional barriers held by faculty, staff, and non-disabled student peers proved most detrimental to the educational experiences of the surveyed learners (2001, 82).

Conclusions from the Existing Literature

These few studies on student experiences focus on students with physical disabilities, as well as d/Deaf [12] students and learners with visual impairments. However, 22.9 percent of faculty and staff surveyed in Annandale and Carter's study reported they had students with "intellectual or developmental disabilities" enrolled in their theological school (2014, 91). This percentage is striking in light of the reality that out of 282 post-secondary education programs for students with intellectual disabilities in the United States, no ATS member schools are listed (Think College 2020).

As the literature from the last five decades suggests, there are urgent questions surrounding the capacity of theological schools to adequately support students with disabilities, as well as engage disability as an explicit curricular emphasis. The current research also highlights more general questions for theological educators today: how is disability imagined or storied in the praxis of theological education itself? What models for thinking about disability and the lives of disabled people are assumed in theological classrooms?

Resisting and transforming pervasive ableism in theological education certainly requires supporting learners with disabilities, but it also demands a critical reimagining of how disability is constructed in the curriculum and classroom in the first place. As Dolmage writes, "people with disabilities have been traditionally seen as objects of study in higher education, rather than as teachers or students" (2017, 45). In the field of Christian disability theology, this has

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12 "Deaf" with an uppercase "D" is used to describe people with hearing loss who identify as culturally Deaf (typically, these individuals participate in the Deaf Community and communicate with sign language). When a lowercase "d" is used, "deaf" typically indicates the condition or impairment of hearing loss. People with hearing loss who do not participate in the Deaf Community, including many people who prefer to communicate orally, often use "deaf" as a self-descriptor.

often been the case for people with intellectual disabilities. For example, much theological reflection on people with intellectual disabilities foregrounds the capacities they lack while emphasizing their experiences of suffering (Haslam 2012, 6-9; Hauerwas 1986; Smith 2019, 505).[13] Given this often fraught attention to people with intellectual disabilities in contemporary theological literature, it is important to explore how people with intellectual and developmental disabilities might be active participants in theological learning.

Imagining people with intellectual and developmental disabilities as learners poses critical questions for theological schools—how will building inclusive theological learning communities resist the objectification of students and community members with disabilities? How will disability be "re-storied" in educational settings (Ware 2005, 108)? How will theological schools actively witness against ableism?

Toward a Critical and Faithful Response:
A Case Study of an Anti-Ableist Theological Classroom

A key aspect of cultivating an anti-ableist environment requires a renewed vision of access. In her recent book *The Disabled Church: Human Difference and the Art of Communal Worship*, theologian Rebecca Spurrier argues that "access is sacred and essential, not just something that would be good to have if possible and feasible" (2019, 210). Bethany McKinney Fox, a Christian ethicist and the pastor of Beloved Everybody Church (2019) echoes Spurrier's reframing of access in the context of theological education, writing:

> Beyond logistical modifications for accessibility of physical and pedagogical structures, creating real access means being a community that recognizes the theological importance of accessibility, and values the presence, experience, and God-given gifts of our students and other community members with disabilities and diagnoses of all kinds. Without reframing how we think about disability and access, we might incorrectly believe that accessibility simply benefits the students who directly need it, when in reality it benefits our whole community. Or we might regard accessibility-related tasks as chores we do only to meet legal requirements, or out of pity for people who we regard as lesser in some way. These ways of framing the issue create inaccessible, inhospitable learning environments. (2019, 69)

Reframing our approach to access in theological education offers one avenue to resisting ableism, part of what Gabel commends as an "emancipatory approach" (2005, 9). This approach embraces the international disability rights maxim "nothing about us without us" by seeking the full participation of disabled people in educational contexts. Disability studies scholar Alison Kafer envisions this emancipatory approach as rooted in coalitions between disabled and non-disabled people that allow for collective reimagining (2013, 9). In what follows, I offer a case study that sought to embody a coalitional and emancipatory pedagogical approach to embracing disability in the context of theological education, offering a reimagined vision of theological education.[14]

In the summer of 2017, with Duke Divinity School faculty member Warren Kinghorn, I began to critically consider who exactly constitutes a learner in the theological classroom. Building on the work of practical theologian Craig Dykstra from a disability perspective proved helpful. Dykstra argues for an imagination about theological learning that expands far beyond cognitive knowledge of theological propositions. Dykstra's vision for learners in the theological classroom destabilizes a strictly cerebral notion of knowing, creating space for theologizing through musical, intrapersonal, and bodily-kinesthetic modes (2008, 51). For Dykstra, these expansive ways of knowing enliven what it means to do theology

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13 Critiques of early work on intellectual disability by scholars such as Hans Reinders, Stanley Hauerwas, and Jean Vanier have resulted in interventions that seek alternative theological methodologies to portray people with intellectual disabilities less as objects of suffering and more as individuals with particular vocations that are indispensable to the life of the church. See Harshaw (2016), Haslam (2012), Swinton (2016), and Swinton, Mowat, and Baines (2011).
14 Rev. Dr. Erin Raffety (2020) briefly describes another novel example of cultivating an anti-ableist classroom through co-teaching with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in her blog post on Church Anew entitled Leaning Into Disability, Lamenting with Freedom.

and allow for the development of a "pastoral imagination" among those in theological formation (51). Experiences in theological education play "a crucial role that has consequences for decades" on the kind of imagination and practices embraced by theological learners (47).

This multifaceted vision of theological knowing pushes against what Deborah Gallagher calls the "technical-rational" framework for education (2005, 140). Instead, by embracing an expansive vision of theological learners that includes people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, Gallagher calls for "constructivism" as the foundation for an inclusive pedagogy. This approach views learning as an inherently social and meaning-making process, where each learners' values, interests, experiences, and cultures are inseparable from knowledge construction (148).

From this understanding of theological scholarship, Kinghorn and I set out to recruit participants for a Christian ethics class at the intersection of disability and pastoral care. Instead of asking people with disabilities to guest lecture in our course sessions or asking disabled students at the Divinity School to take on significant instructional burden, we made a decision to recruit students for the course who were community members from Durham, North Carolina that had some connection to a local community center serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We also recruited degree-seeking students at the Divinity School.

Experiences of disability were overlapping among the students enrolled in our course—our learning community consisted of degree-seeking students who were both disabled and non-disabled. While most of the community learners who joined the course experienced intellectual or developmental disabilities, some were non-disabled and others lived with forms of disability marked by difficulties with emotional regulation and social relationships, rather than cognitive impairments.[15] Kinghorn, a non-disabled theologian and physician, served as co-instructor. As the other instructor, I contributed my experiences as a theologian and an occupational therapist who lives with a disabling chronic health condition.

The course description helped to frame an emancipatory approach to learning. For example, an excerpt reads:

> This class will engage the lived experiences of people with disabilities. For approximately one half of the course meetings, enrolled students will engage in practical ministerial training alongside persons with various disabilities, primarily intellectual and developmental disabilities, through a partnership with a local community center. . . . [E]nrolled students will learn alongside persons with disabilities as a means of not only fostering skills for ministering "to" persons with disability, but engaging in shared processes of Christian formation, spiritual practices, education, and project development.

As we recruited a group of very eager learners from Duke Divinity School and the local community, Kinghorn and I continued to develop our course with explicit attention to Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL hinges on three main principles: facilitating multiple modes of learner engagement (the "why" of learning), providing multiple modes of representation to learners (the "what" of learning), and allowing for multiple modes of learner action and expression (the "how" of learning) (CAST 2017). Dolmage characterizes UDL as "about building—building community, building better pedagogy, building opportunities for agency" (2017, 118).[16] Kinghorn and I envisioned our course design as a collection of "places to start"[17] in dismantling ableism through UDL and inclusive pedagogy, rather than a maximal and exhaustive application of UDL principles.

The course began with two introductory sessions held at Duke Divinity School for degree-seeking students only. In the first session, "Framing Talk about God and Disability," we focused on exploring different frameworks for disability and establishing a collaborative space where we could investigate our assumptions about disability and practice asking each

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15 Students in this course, including both degree-seeking students and community learners, identified with a number of disability identities including (but not limited to) autistic individuals, people with Down Syndrome, students with learning disabilities and ADHD, those with disabling chronic health conditions, and non-disabled.

16 Examples of implementing UDL principles can be found within an online resource entitled "Universal Design: Places to Start" (Dolmage et al. 2017). The resource includes helpful examples for implementing UDL in the classroom that correspond to the main principles of UDL for higher education.

17 Dolmage et al.'s (2017) provision of "Places to Start" with regard to the application of UDL principles resists the notion that a singular set of practices can achieve a fully accessible and anti-ableist classroom. Dolmage instead encourages educators to take up practices that promote active and multimodal forms of learning one at a time.

other questions about these assumptions. In addition, we provided space for students to express their particular interests and questions that led them to enroll in the course, as well identify any particular excitements and anxieties they held about the semester. In the second course meeting, "Encountering One Another: Power and Pastoral Care," we explored materials on intersectionality with careful attention to perspectives from both theological studies as well as disability studies. Our course activities, including participating in the opening activity of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's TEDWomen talk (2016), as well as structured individual and small group reflection on identity, helped students raise critical awareness of issues related to intersectionality and power in the work they were about to begin in collaboration with community learners. Resonate with UDL principles, Kinghorn and I laid out clear roadmaps and goals for each of these course sessions, delivered material in interactive and multimodal avenues, allowed ample break times throughout course sessions, solicited real-time feedback on course content, format, and delivery, and finally, maintained a classroom with maximal space for free movement with clear and accessible exits.

After these two introductory sessions, the heart of the course (the middle six sessions in a semester with thirteen weeks of instruction) was held at the community center, with both community learners and degree-seeking learners together.[18] This alternative meeting space for class sessions helped to disrupt some ableist expectations of students within an "ivory tower," and also provided a setting that was highly familiar to our community learners, physically accessible, and reachable via multiple modes of free transportation. Seating in this community classroom was not fixed, allowing students to freely enter and exit the classroom from multiple accessible doors. During large group work, with about twenty-five total participants on average, we sat in a circle to allow for maximal access to visual and auditory information and modes of engagement. Consistent breaks were built into the agenda between course activities.

A single-sheet syllabus[19] was provided for all co-learners in the course. Each session included orienting questions to assist students who benefitted from increased structure and the ability to work ahead.[20] This practice was of benefit to learners from the community as well as degree-seeking students, who both upheld strenuous weekly schedules. In addition, this practice allowed for students who experienced anxiety in a classroom setting pre-class access to discussion topics. Finally, this practice eased access for students using alternative and augmentative communication supports.

Each class period at the community center (and at the final five sessions hosted at the Divinity School) started with a practice called "circle time." Circle time, adopted from a regular practice in the community center, allowed an initial chance for participation and check-in by each learner present. Going around a circle, each member of the learning community would offer their name (either by speech, augmentative communication, or introduction by a peer) and an answer to the day's question, such as "What do you bring to class today?"[21] All learners offered either a single word in response, repeated or clarified as needed for participants with hearing loss, and/or a gesture, that would be verbally described for those present with visual disabilities.

Following this opening practice, a brief roadmap for the course session was described.[22] When we discussed readings, large print hard copies of the texts were provided, and read aloud collectively, slowly, and by multiple readers (with both voice and assistive communication device output). Weekly course materials ranged from poetry, memoirs, biblical readings, and theological essays, to podcasts and YouTube videos. Course themes included disability in the Bible, preaching, prayer, and liturgy. A variety of pedagogical approaches were offered within the consistent pattern of our course meetings, including posting short lectures for access before course meetings, in-class engagement of audiovisual materials, large and small

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18 Community learners were invited to attend the last five course sessions held at Duke Divinity School, but few of these learners elected to participate due to scheduling and transportation barriers.

19 Kinghorn and I followed insights for syllabus development found on the online resource "Accessible Syllabus" (2015). Like many universities, Duke also provides its own "Accessible Syllabus Project" (2020).

20 For example, for the course session "Disability and the Old Testament," students were invited to engage 2 Samuel 9:1-13, the story of David and Mephibosheth. Questions on the syllabus included, "Who is your favorite person in this Bible reading? Why? What do you think Mephibosheth felt like when he talked to David? What do you think Mephibosheth's life was like in the beginning of the story? At the end?"

21 This question was made available ahead of class for students who benefitted from increased preparation time.

22 For example, "First we will discuss the assigned readings and questions in small groups, and then spend forty minutes working in teams on our collaborative midterm projects."

group reflections, communal close-reading exercises, and collaborative project development. Transcripts of all auditory course materials were provided. These transcripts, along with all written course materials,[23] were made into accessible files (for download to various student devices for audio access).[24]

In our final course meeting at the community center, we hosted a performance of collaborative midterm projects. Students had been assigned into groups of four to six learners (a mix of degree-seeking and community students) and were invited to develop a collaborative midterm project on a course theme of shared interest. Most groups worked together to offer a fresh interpretation of a biblical story. The presented projects included multimodal performances of shared preaching, original song composition and singing, storytelling, presentations of original visual art, as well as dramatic readings and enactments of Scripture.

After the course's conclusion, through formal course evaluations and informal conversations, students consistently expressed their enthusiasm about the diverse course materials and their rich experiences of participation. Several degree-seeking students noted their own increased confidence in skills related to facilitating accessible meetings and activities, as well as an increased awareness for disability prejudice and how to address ableist biases in their various contexts. One degree-seeking student wrote: "In my experience, disability studies has been discussed in the Divinity School as something people are either interested in or not. But this course has challenged that 'extracurricular' framing of disability by presenting theology of disability as an imperative of holistic discipleship." This comment reflected two key learning outcomes initially framed in the course description: an expanded sense of the importance of access for all people, with or without disabilities, and the priority of establishing ministry partnerships marked by collaboration, rather than practices oriented to doing "to" or "for" disabled people.

Many students expressed that they had found a "new language," especially from disability studies perspectives, to aid them in identifying, dismantling, and transforming realities of ableism in ministry settings. Part of this new language arose from community learners initiating and energizing collaborative conversations about theological questions related to disability, as well as questions of biblical interpretation. These conversations often took place after the formal class sessions had ended, and even extended beyond the course's conclusion. These new and collaborative perspectives on transforming realities of ableism also sprung from conversations related to evaluative feedback on both course participation and midterm projects. These conversations were driven by requests from community learners for reflection and critical evaluation of collaborative coursework.

Over half the degree-seeking students identified this course as the best they had taken in their entire seminary career. One of the degree-seeking students who felt this way commented,

> This course was crucial for my theological growth and preparation for ministry. Before this class, I had paid no attention to ableism, disability, and accessibility in my church (or other contexts). Now I'm noticing examples of disability and accessibility everywhere I look and feel prepared to attend to these matters in a pastoral, ethical, and intelligent manner.

Perhaps most importantly, both degree-seeking and community learners expressed a sense of meaningful and authentic collaboration within this theological classroom (and beyond). One degree-seeking student expressed it in this way:

> This course was essential in thinking critically and in-depth about disability and its relationship to the Church. . . learning alongside community participants was core. . . it centered the role of each person in ministry and fostered an environment where we were encouraged to collaborate. . . as a result, my ministry will be greatly impacted.

Several community learners reported a highlight of the course as "actually learning and working with Duke Divinity students in a real class." Co-learning provided a new and meaningful experience for most of these community learners,

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23 Conversion of written documents to accessible formats was completed using Duke University's subscription to the services of SensusAccess (2020).
24 Degree-seeking student evaluations demonstrated appreciation for various aspects of course access: "Conversion of PDFs into audio recordings was super helpful and careful attention was given to possible different learning styles of students"; "I learned a lot from the audio and visual technological components that were used."

despite previous connections with some divinity students through other activities at the community center. One degree-seeking student put it this way: "The time at the community center was the most formative experience. Not only were we learning about disability, but we were co-learners with people from outside the Divinity School of all abilities who each brought fresh perspectives and experiences."

What Lies Ahead? Limitations of the Current Case and Opportunities for the Future

In order to reimagine the theological classroom in a way that resists the rhetoric of ableism, coalitions among learners with and without disabilities are desperately needed. Dolmage helpfully emphasizes that UDL can only be truly successful when we resist erasing embodied difference (2017, 123). I would add that in the theological classroom, action is needed to also resist the assumption that possession of an "able mind" is compulsory for the generation of theological knowledge. Collaborative partnerships that resist the erasure of disabled bodies and rethink assumptions about theological learning in light of disability might begin in curriculum committee meetings, with the adoption of new supports for disabled students, or through forging novel partnerships with disabled co-learners in the community. These kinds of coalitions provide the foundation for embracing the kind of multifaceted approach to theological learning championed by Dykstra—an approach resonate with the principles of UDL. These partnerships create a fertile context where educators and students across a diversity of disability identities can access learning through multiple modes of engagement, representation, and expression.

Several barriers, of course, challenge this vision for the future of theological education as a site of transformative coalitions with disabled learners and leaders. Concerns regarding sustainability and labor are central. For example, developing and facilitating the case study course described here required me to take on a significantly heightened workload. In addition, to the dismay of many learners in the 2018 course, the class was not offered during the subsequent academic year at Duke Divinity School, due in part to my departure for a fellowship at a different institution and Kinghorn's scheduled sabbatical. Though enthusiasm for this particular course was supported by existing informal partnerships between Duke Divinity School and the local community center, not all theological schools may have access to similar community programs.

The inequalities of academic credit present another concern. Community learners in our course, because they were not enrolled at Duke University, were unable to earn academic credit in this inaugural class. In addition, we did not collect robust learning outcomes and course evaluation materials from the community learners in the course, challenging the fullness of our commitment to "nothing about us without us." Other challenges from the course included repeated class session absences from both community learners and disabled degree-seeking students, raising questions around accommodations and how best to support collaborative group work in the midst of these multiple absences. Both Kinghorn and I served as mediators in response to occasional tensions present in the midterm project working groups. In addition, there were some audiovisual technical issues present at the community center, as well as some concerns about aural access to discussions due to noise levels that impeded optimal participation among all learners. Gratefully, we had flexible use of multiple spaces at the community center that allowed us to respond to these concerns during the course of the class sessions themselves.

Despite these challenges and limitations, the case considered in this essay raises key considerations for theological educators around best practices for inclusive pedagogy and UDL. Though not every theological educator can commit to developing and teaching an entire course within an anti-ableist paradigm, all educators can choose to embrace one or two practices resonate with UDL. In other words, educators at theological schools can decide on what Dolmage calls a "place to begin," and from this commitment to a singular practice or principle of UDL, begin building a repertoire of skills and an expanded imagination for inclusive pedagogy. Additionally, institutions of theological education might take up a commitment to train faculty, staff, and administrators about UDL and other inclusive pedagogical practices. Schoolwide attention to questions of access and disability help faculty and students alike to recognize the human experience of disability as a vital part of theological education and not merely an optional "extracurricular" focus.[25] In addition to a best

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25 In addition to the online UDL resource from Dolmage and his colleagues (2017), I have found Thomas J. Tobin and Kirsten T. Behling's (2018) book *Reach Everyone, Teach Everyone: Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education* to be a very helpful primer on UDL, with a wealth of practical suggestions applicable to the context of theological education.

practice of high-quality, ongoing training in UDL for theological educators, scholars in disability studies and education also recommend frequent and meaningful collaboration with disabled students across institutional bodies, with sensitivity and respect for issues of disclosure and labor, particularly among students with disabilities who may "pass"[26] as non-disabled (Freedman et al. 2017, 304-306). At theological schools, integration of students with disabilities is critical for committees which oversee curriculum and academic life, as well as for areas of theological education such as student care, worship, spiritual formation, and diversity.

As evidenced by the students who participated in case study course, cultivating disability-centered coalitions in theological classrooms can truly impact communities as a whole, serving as a benefit not only to theological schools but the communities in which they are embedded. Students from the course have continued in collaborative projects together, including songwriting and preaching, beyond the course's conclusion. Multiple degree-seeking students who took the course are now serving as accessibility advocates in the faith communities where they work, and I have provided them with coaching to implement anti-ableist and accessible practices in their vocational contexts around the United States. One community learner with an intellectual disability worked with me to deliver a presentation about the course at a theology conference in the summer of 2018. This individual and I are also co-authoring an article about the class for submission to a popular magazine.[27]

Conclusion

The ATS urges theological schools to model active inclusion and advocacy for people with disabilities to the broader community (2010, 16). Perhaps theological classrooms must first consider coalitions with disabled students, including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as a primary site for resisting ableism and fostering partnerships marked by access and participation. These partnerships, by embracing a commitment to "nothing about us without us," provide a powerful way for theological education to re-story its construction of disability and witness to new ways of learning together. These coalitions also support Dykstra's notion of theological education as a practice of practical theology: "a shared endeavor involving Christians who live and work in a wide variety of contexts and circumstances" (2008, 60).

Partnerships between diverse learners—disabled and non-disabled people as well as degree-seeking students and community learners—provide creative opportunities for theological educators to embrace practices of inclusive pedagogy and UDL, not only for the sake of those in their classrooms alone, but to prepare learners across a diversity of intersectional identities to support the robust participation and leadership of disabled people in ecclesial settings for the long run. Resisting ableism and embracing the fullness of God's people—disabled and non-disabled—as active participants in God's ongoing work in the world will require creative and intentional transformation in theological curricula and pedagogical practices. As Eisner warns, "what students cannot consider, what they don't know, processes they are unable to use, have consequences for the kinds of lives they lead" (1979, 88). Moving disability out of the null curriculum provides contemporary theological educators with a pressing yet exciting task—reimagining theological learners and embracing an expanded notion of the theological classroom.

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26 "Passing" refers to disabled people with imperceptible or difficult to perceive disabilities who may choose to present as non-disabled. Allison Carey (2013) writes a fascinating chapter about passing among people with intellectual disabilities.

27 I regret that due to geographical and scheduling limitations, this essay was not co-authored with a learner from the 2018 course. This shortcoming highlights the importance of ongoing accountability to the disability rights maxim "nothing about us without us."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Jean Barton is currently Assistant Professor of Occupational Therapy and Theological Ethics at Duke University, with a dual appointment in the School of Medicine and the Divinity School. Her research, writing, clinical work, and teaching explore Christian theology and ethics, disability, liturgy, and occupational therapy.