

(dis)Ability and Postsecondary Education: One Woman's Experience

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Abstract

The storied experiences of a (dis)Able student negotiating postsecondary education in Canada are highlighted within this article, including advocacy strategies and a critique of related policies. Persons with (dis)Abilities are a particularly marginalized population, traditionally excluded from society, with modern day views of pity or heroics (MacDonald & Friars, 2009). While society has made strides in reducing explicit oppression faced by (dis)Able persons, covert oppressions persist. Pervasive negative assumptions continue to exist about (dis)Able people and have led to the propagation of policies that inhibit (dis)Able people from engaging with society, including being part of the university system. Through a storying process, numerous barriers to accessible postsecondary education will be exposed. Universities are the “think tanks” of tomorrow, a place where critical thought is encouraged and “thinking outside the box” is welcomed. Postsecondary institutions have an opportunity to truly effect change, to pave the way to a barrier free zone, one that is truly accessible structurally and intellectually, providing a welcoming and safe learning environment for (dis)Able students. Through storying the experiences of one (dis)Able student, it is hoped that the reader's consciousness will be raised, barriers to postsecondary education will be better understood and ultimately, fully accessible education can be envisioned.

Keywords: (dis)Ability, accessible education, narrative/first voice, inclusion

The population of Canada is approximately 30,893,640 with persons with disabilities [referred to in this article as “(dis)Abilities”] totalling 14% of the population, or 4,417,870 people (Statistics Canada, 2006). Nova Scotia, a province with an overall population of 893,790, has persons with (dis)Abilities representing 20% of the population, or 179,100 individuals (Statistics Canada, 2006). In Canada, 25%, or 6,599,610 individuals without a (dis)Ability have attained a university or college degree, while only 12%, or 534,940 of those with (dis)Abilities have attained a university or college degree (Statistics Canada, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2001a; Statistics Canada, 2001b). Similar statistics are found in Nova Scotia, with 26%

of individuals without a (dis)Ability attaining a university/college degree, while only 11% of those with a (dis)Ability attaining a degree (Statistics Canada, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2001c; Statistics Canada, 2001d). According to Nova Scotia Postsecondary Disability Services, the number of student postsecondary enrolments for the 2009 academic year was 42,628, with 2.64%, or 1,128 students identifying as having some form of (dis)Ability.

Social work, a field that prides itself on social justice and equality, shows similarly low numbers of students with (dis)Abilities enrolled in degree programs: within Canada, 5.5% of Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students have a (dis)Ability, 4.1% of

Master in Social Work students, and only 1.3% of PhD students (Dunn, Hardie, Hanes, & MacDonald, 2006). Within the United States, “some 28 percent of disabled people ages 25 and older have less than a high school education” and “just 13 percent of disabled Americans over 25 have a bachelor’s degree or higher” (BraunAbility, 2011). The Canadian statistic is very similar, with 12% of the (dis)Able population having university education (Statistics Canada, 2001). The above statistics raise two important questions: Why are there not more students with (dis)Abilities enrolled within postsecondary education? What have the experiences of students with (dis)Abilities been within our universities?

Discrimination toward (dis)Able Persons

People with (dis)Abilities have faced indescribable oppressions. Our underlying beliefs regarding the aberrant nature of (dis)Ability has led to institutionalization, physical and emotional abuse, social segregation, eugenics, and mass murder (MacDonald & Friars, 2009). Whether it be shadows from our past in Hitler’s T-4 Eugenics program, the “mental health hygiene movement” in Canada, present day “do not resuscitate” orders placed on (dis)Able persons’ hospital charts without consent, or the denial of organ transplants for those labelled as (dis)Able, discrimination continues (MacDonald & Friars, 2009; Stienstra & Wight-Felske, 2003). The “mainstreaming” movement (Shah, 2010) has integrated (dis)Able students into public school systems. Postsecondary institutions have established accessibility services on their campuses to help (dis)Able students with access and accommodations to higher education. Yet, universities/colleges continue to possess institutional/structural barriers, attitudinal barriers of faculty and staff, and often a general sense of not knowing how to work with students with (dis)Abilities (Gilson & Dymond, 2012). According to Pingry O’Neill and French (2012), in order to improve upon the likelihood of students with (dis)Abilities graduating from postsecondary institutions, support structures for (dis)Able students need to be enhanced. Further, they found that students with (dis)Abilities most likely to graduate were female, over the age of 23, and had a physical (dis)Ability compared to cognitive or mental health (dis)Abilities. Upon graduating with a postsecondary degree, (dis)Able persons are met with systemic barriers as they try to enter the workforce (Dunn et al., 2006). The Kessler

Foundation found that 79% of their participants with (dis)Abilities were unemployed compared to 41% of non-disabled participants (Cummings, 2010). Hays (2006) found Japanese employers opted to pay fines rather than employ (dis)Able persons. Carter, Hanes, and MacDonald (2012) discovered faculty and staff with (dis)Abilities within university social work programs in Canada constituted less than 5% of the staffing ratio. As much as the (dis)Able have gained rights, barriers remain to be dismantled. The story about to be shared will highlight stigma and barriers toward (dis)Able persons, as well as present an alternative gaze to students with (dis)Abilities within postsecondary education.

Method

Atkinson (1998) acknowledges that it is through story one “gains context and recognizes meaning” (p. 7). Storying allows one to be heard, providing recognition and validation to one’s struggles and triumphs. The storying process can be an empowering engagement whereby the teller reclaims her voice and, in doing so, can deliver important messages of change (Beverley, 2000; Frank, 1995). Melissa, the female student with a (dis)Ability whose story will be the central focus of this article, had years of studying at postsecondary institutions and, subsequently, years of self-advocacy and (dis)Ability rights promotion in the process of gaining access to education and in dismantling ablist barriers that prevented full inclusion of students with (dis)Abilities. Storying her postsecondary education journey had two purposes: one, to empower her through the claiming of voice as her story is shared in printed form and, two, challenging postsecondary educational institutions to listen to Melissa’s story, to learn from her experiences, and ultimately, to promote a more inclusive and welcoming environment for (dis)Able students within universities.

The storying process began through an independent study course in Melissa’s Masters of Social Work program. Melissa worked with Dr. MacDonald over the course of three months, recalling and retelling her life’s journey through her educational process. Dr. MacDonald met with Melissa and her academic tutor bi-weekly during independent study, asking clarifying questions to the storyline, bringing an order and flow to the story, and applying a critical lens in analyzing Melissa’s experiences. Prior knowledge of Melissa’s journey was known, as Dr. MacDonald had taught

Melissa in a (dis)Abilities course during her undergraduate social work degree. The School of Social Work had stood beside Melissa during a challenge to the Department of Community Services. Further, articles had been written about elements of Melissa's story and these were reviewed and included in the storying process. For example, The Daily News (a local newspaper) ran a story with the headline, "Get a Job, Student Told: Woman cut off income assistance as she tries to get qualifications to become a social worker" (October 20, 2007).

In total, there were six newspaper articles and two magazine/newsletter articles that were reviewed (CBC News, 2007; Jackson, 2007a; Jackson, 2007b; Lambie, 2007; McNutt, 2008; Myers, 2000; Northwood Home-care, 2010). In addition, Melissa had written specific segments of her story in academic assignments and these were used to clarify memories. Melissa and Dr. MacDonald worked together creating the manuscript. With the aid of her tutors, Melissa wrote the initial story. Dr. MacDonald read and re-read the story, pulled out key themes, asked for points of clarification, brought a theoretical and methodological lens to the process, and performed numerous edits. This article is an example of a student with a (dis)Ability working with a faculty member collaboratively to bring the story forward to the readership. All parts of this article have been reviewed by Melissa and her noted changes incorporated.

As part of the empowerment process and in recognizing that language is powerful, "disability" has been specifically chosen to be written as (dis)Ability. In writing (dis)Ability this way, Melissa's tremendous abilities are recognized as she, like others with (dis)Abilities, has learned creative and endearing ways to navigate societal ablist barriers that are imposed upon (dis)Able persons. At that same time, her identity as a (dis)Able person is maintained (MacDonald & Friars, 2009).

Melissa's Story

I was born with cerebral palsy, a muscle and movement disorder caused from oxygen deprivation during childbirth (Straub & Obrzut, 2009). This (dis)Ability can affect individuals differently; in my case, cerebral palsy affected both my fine and gross motor skills. I am primarily affected by choreoathetotic cerebral palsy associated with abnormal, uncontrollable,

writhing movements of the arms and/or legs, caused by increased deep tendon reflexes (Cans, 2000). Over the years I have worked hard on trying to control these movements. To compensate for my physical (dis)Ability, I have used an electric wheelchair since the age of four. In addition, due to my limited fine motor skills, I have had an assistant working with me, with duties ranging from personal care to academics. Just months before I graduated high school, I was diagnosed with a learning (dis)Ability, which predominantly affects my memory and comprehension. I remember leaving the resource room after being told my diagnosis; I went into the library, a quiet place, where I was confronted with emotions ranging from relief to sadness. I finally understood why I had been having trouble in school, but I questioned what this meant for my future. While I understood the challenge of postsecondary education due to my physical (dis)Abilities, I knew little about managing a learning (dis)Ability within a university setting. This was a new diagnosis for me and I struggled with coming to accept it as part of my (dis)Ability identity. Further, I had received little advice on how to cope with my learning (dis)Ability. All I knew was that I was not willing to give up on my goal of postsecondary education.

Access re: Physical Barriers: Long before many of my peers, I decided that I wanted to pursue education beyond high school. However, unlike most of my peers, I had to consider not only the geographical location of the programs but their structural access as well. I had narrowed my career options down to three: lawyer, interior decorator, or social worker. After considering the physical accessibility of the local law school, it became apparent that entering Law might not be in my best interest, so I applied to a local university for a Bachelor of Arts and the local community college for an Interior Decorating course. I was accepted to both programs; however, the college with the Interior Decorating course was located 1.5 hours outside the city, making living arrangements and personal care complicated. The university had on-campus accommodations for a variety of (dis)Abilities, leading one to assume it was (dis)Ability friendly.

In preparation for my beginning semester, my parents and I arranged a meeting with two counselors, one specializing in physical (dis)Abilities and the other specializing in learning (dis)Abilities, at the on-campus resource and support centre for students with (dis)Abilities. I openly discussed my abilities and

the educational accommodations I had received within the public school system. I was pleasantly surprised to hear about the resources and accommodations that the Centre could offer. To achieve the full benefit from my educational experience I relied upon the services of an academic assistant, which I was assured by both counsellors would be readily available. I felt confident about beginning this new venture.

On my first day of university I went to the Centre to find out who had been assigned as my academic assistant for the year. To my great surprise, I was informed that the Centre did not supply academic assistants, but would help me take the necessary steps to acquire an assistant on my own. I felt absolutely devastated by this news; my first class was later that day and I was not at all prepared to attend it without an academic assistant. The confidence that I felt when I initially wheeled onto campus that morning was shattered. I found out very quickly that I was going to be learning a lot about life and how to survive yet another ablist, inaccessible environment. I certainly did not feel qualified to hire an employee. The Centre would help create flyers advertising for an academic assistant that I could post around the campus. Imagine my dismay; I am a wheelchair user who does not have the full use of both hands. This was a campus that I was not familiar with, a campus that was not fully accessible, yet I was suppose to navigate through campus sticking posters on bulletin boards. I could not believe an accessibility centre did not instantly acknowledge how this task would be physically challenging, if not impossible, for me to achieve. Upon raising this issue I did receive their assistance. However, I find it tiring to always have to explain my realities. Hughes (2012) writes, “disability is a life lived before a looking glass that is cracked and distorted by the vandalism of normality” (p. 68). Our realities, what we have to do daily to survive in an ablist world, are not recognized by the able-bodied majority.

In the meantime, I still did not have an assistant to help me with my coursework. The Centre’s solution to this was to send letters to all of my professors indicating that I would need a scribe, or note-taker, to assist with writing lecture notes. I found it very intimidating to rely on perfect strangers to handle such a crucial task. I can recall waiting in the classroom for lectures to start, watching the door, and wondering, “Are they going to show up today?” While I was waiting for applicants for the academic assistant position, I still

required help with other aspects of my coursework, such as reading course material and completing assignments. It was through the support of my father and an at-home tutor that I was able to complete my coursework. Three mornings a week, I would receive tutoring services from a tutor who had been working with me since grade 11. After working a full day, my father would come home and assist me with the rest of my schoolwork. While I was thankful for my father’s time, effort, and assistance, it was incredibly difficult and frustrating for me to have my father assist me with my schoolwork at a university level. I felt as though there was a constant barrier in my way; emotionally, I felt frustrated and ashamed. Here I was in university as a young adult striving for my independence, as most of my peers were at the time; yet, I required the help of my father to meet my course requirements.

Inaccessible university environments seemed to follow me no matter what institution I attended. The university where I did my undergraduate arts degree had a reputation for being (dis)Ability friendly, yet I struggled with accessibility issues at the beginning of my degree. The university where I did my social work degree presented new challenges. On my first day, I had difficulty navigating the campus as it was scattered throughout several blocks, which was both intimidating and confusing. What should have been a simple task, such as obtaining a university ID, quickly became a very difficult task. After tracking down the location where university IDs were issued, I discovered that the building was not accessible, as I stared up at a dozen stairs to the front door. Frustrated, my tutor went into the building while I sat outside. She explained that I was a wheelchair user and needed my student ID. She was informed that I could go to the Student Union Building, which was accessible, to get my picture taken for my university ID. Immediately, the message I received was that I did not belong at this institution. I had identified on my application that I had a (dis)Ability, yet no one contacted me to let me know that I couldn’t access university services in the same manner as other students. I felt like a second-class citizen.

After finally getting my ID, we proceeded to my first class. Upon arriving at the building where my class was being held, we discovered that the elevator was out of service. First day of classes in the opening semester of the year and the elevator was broken. Again, the message I immediately received was that students with (dis)Abilities did not matter and, in fact, were not

welcome at this institution. I felt like going home. Instead, I contacted the co-ordinator from the on-campus (dis)Ability services and explained my situation. She came to the building and inspected the situation. Her solution was to simply have someone lift me, and my chair, up the stairs. I could not believe it, she did not account for the fact that my wheelchair weighs 300 pounds, not including my own bodyweight, nor did she think about how I might feel about having strangers carry me up the stairs. Another solution was to get the placement of the classroom changed. Fortunately, this happened with relative ease and I was able to attend the first class of my BSW program. While at the time, this was a very frustrating and discouraging event, I can now look back on it and chuckle about the antics of that first day at my new university.

My first day was not my only encounter with inaccessibility on campus; in fact, it became a recurring theme. I could not enter through the front doors of the building that housed most of my classes; instead, I had to go around to the back of the building. It almost felt as though the university was too ashamed to have someone who was not able-bodied use the main entrance. The building that housed the School of Social Work offices was also inaccessible; while it was equipped with a ramp, the doors were not automatic and were very difficult to manoeuvre through with a wheelchair. Plus the offices of the professors were located on the second floor of the building, a building with no elevator. If I wanted to meet with a professor, a call had to be made asking the professor to meet me in the conference room on the main floor. Normally, these would be things that I could do on my own; however, this lack of accessibility severely decreased the level of independence that I was used to. Dunn et al., (2006) found that “many schools of social work remain structurally inaccessible, and as a consequence, potential students, staff and faculty with disabilities are denied opportunities for education and/or employment” (p. 2).

Entering my second year of the Master’s program, the School of Social Work moved into a new facility, which was championed for its environmental friendliness. It is significantly more spacious and thus easier to manoeuvre within than the former structure. Access to the building does include an automatic door, however, once inside the building there are no accessible doors. I find this to be offensive, as though I am allowed to enter the building, but not entitled to attend classes, or use the graduate facilities without eliciting

the assistance of another person, thus reinforcing the assumption that (dis)Abled persons are dependent. This facility is located centrally on campus and has two elevators with voice activation, so it would require both of them to break down before it would be suggested that I get carried up the stairs. And, I can now visit professors in their office instead of them having to meet me elsewhere.

In addition, the sidewalks were treacherous, particularly in the winter months. While able-bodied individuals can simply traverse through deep snow, I am unable to do so. Often when the sidewalks are ploughed, the snow is placed on the curb cuts; of course, these curb cuts are what allow me to cross the street. Several times, I found myself stuck in the snow required the assistance of one to two people to help me get out. Although I have lodged several complaints about this issue to the coordinator of the accessibility centre, five years later, it still happens.

While the university had (dis)Ability services similar to that of the university where I attained my Bachelor of Arts, I did not find the environment to be nearly as welcoming as I’d grown accustomed to at the Centre. The (dis)Ability services at the university was very business-oriented; it didn’t feel like a place that I could go if I had issues or concerns. In my third year, a new facility was built to house the services; a facility that was supposed to be more accessible and better suited to students’ needs. On the contrary, while perhaps this move may have benefited some individuals, it made the services significantly less accessible to individuals with physical (dis)Abilities, particularly those who use wheelchairs. For instance, if I required a meeting with one of the co-ordinators or if I required a private room to write an exam, I would have great difficulty, as my wheelchair cannot fit in either space. Ironically, in a (dis)Ability resource centre, my options are to meet with staff in the lobby or park my chair in the doorway of an office or exam room. With both options, my rights to privacy and confidentiality would be breached. Because I was very uncomfortable with the services at my new university; I was fortunate to be allowed to continue using the services of the Centre at my former university. While this may seem inconvenient, I am incredibly appreciative and thankful that I am able to continue using these services. Additionally, it has allowed me to maintain relationships with the staff, who have assisted me throughout my academic career.

I entered the university for my social work degree immediately dealing with physical barriers and, as that degree was about to be conferred upon me, structural barriers were still infringing upon my rights. Convocation is a time in a student's life where one should be able to let loose and enjoy the festivities; yet for me, this was another instance I felt personally excluded due to the lack of accessibility. In the fall of the final year of my BSW degree, I tried to be proactive in meeting with the co-ordinator of convocation in order to deal with anticipated accessibility issues. Upon meeting the co-ordinator at the arts centre, I was shown the layout of the auditorium where convocation would be held. There was no ramp and no intentions of installing one due to building regulations. The co-ordinator presented two options: I could stay behind the stage during the whole convocation, meaning I would not enter nor exit the auditorium with my peers, nor would I be sitting with them. Or, I could enter the auditorium with my peers, but when it came time for me to cross the stage and accept my degree, I had to exit through the back of the auditorium, go through a back entrance, and enter the stage from the side.

Neither of these options was satisfying to me. At my first convocation for my BA a ramp was installed, which allowed me to experience convocation just as any other student who attended that day. When I voiced my concerns to the co-ordinator, she informed me that I should be content with these options, as the university had many students with (dis)Abilities partake in convocation in this manner and no one had ever complained. I can only speculate that these individuals felt as though they had no other option but to comply. I considered whether I would actually attend convocation – I did not want to be isolated from my colleagues. However, I had been looking forward to this moment for quite some time, not to mention the fact that my parents were looking forward to the ceremony. Ultimately, I decided that, despite the situation, convocation was important to me and I would not miss it simply due to poor planning and lack of accessibility. Unfortunately, at the convocation for my BSW, I was made to feel as though I was different, as though I did not belong with my peers. Despite my feelings of displacement, I made the best of my convocation with the support of my friends and family.

Learning: Burgstahler and Cory (2008) identify a process for implementing Universal Design (UD) in physical spaces, whereby UD is defined as “the pro-

cess of creating products, which are usable by people with the widest possible range of abilities, operating within the widest possible range of situations, as is commercially practical” (p. 12). One of the steps in this process is to define the universe by considering the diverse characteristics of the population using the space. Universities need to consider the spatial needs of (dis)Able students, creating physical infrastructure that is accessible and thus welcoming to all students.

Accommodations: In one of my very first classes at the beginning of my postsecondary education, I noticed that one of my classmates was hearing (dis)Able and she had the assistance of an interpreter. In an effort to join with another student with a (dis)Ability and wanting to find out how she managed to hire her assistant, I introduced myself and directly asked how she went about the hiring process. She informed me the Centre supplied interpreters for hearing (dis)Able students. Immediately I felt devalued, as I was not important enough to have an assistant hired to help with my school needs. I also felt guilty for even questioning why she should have a sign language interpreter, for of course she was entitled to this assistance and no one should know that better than I. But I had learned at an early age that I needed to advocate for myself in this ablist world, so I asked for a meeting with a counselor at the Centre and questioned why interpreters were provided by the Centre, free of charge, to hearing (dis)Able students, yet they did not provide academic assistants for students with physical or learning (dis)Abilities? Financial constraints limited the resources of the Centre and they chose to hire American Sign Language interpreters. I could not help but feel as though I was being told my needs were not a priority. “Disabled people are not a homogenous group; we are diverse and impacted by different oppressions” (Withers, 2012, p. 11). And, therefore, our needs can be quite different. The accommodations that I initially believed to be available from the university were not forthcoming. Partly, I blamed myself for being in such a predicament. I felt I should have asked more questions and sought clarification in my initial meeting with the Centre. If I would have been more precautionous, or less naive, I could have avoided this situation. I was desperate to find someone to help me, and it took a month and a half to hire someone.

I was very nervous about interviewing the applicant; I had never had to go through this process before. I was worried about asking the right questions

and whether, upon meeting me, the applicant would still be interested in the position. Over the years, I have employed 11 academic assistants. Some individuals I will remember forever and will remain lifelong friends with, some are just as memorable, but for opposite reasons. It is a stressful situation to hire individuals year after year, but it has been an amazing way to meet people. I believe, overall, I have learned a great deal from each individual I have worked with and I would like to think that they have learned a lot from me, too, from issues relating to my (dis)Ability and beyond. Often, I can tell that people have learned from me. From when we begin working together to when we finish, I can see a shift in their thinking. I think that, to a degree, they can see things more clearly through a lens that is similar to mine.

I learned a valuable lesson - not to take information at value as I did in my initial meeting with the Centre. This created the groundwork for my thinking, where I review all possible outcomes to a situation. (dis)Abled persons cannot afford to be spontaneous, as the negotiation of societal barriers requires thoughtful planning. Paterson (2012) notes, "the ablist nature of temporal norms means" that people with disabilities "find it nigh impossible to acquire and sustain the physical and cultural capital necessary to participate in everyday social encounters" (p. 166). It takes time, energy, and thought to navigate the tremendous barriers imposed by an ablist social structure, such as a university. In this ablist world, the Centre became somewhat of a refuge, as it provided a setting where students with (dis)Abilities could socialize. Speaking to others who understood the unique experiences and struggles related to being a student with a (dis)Ability helped keep me grounded.

For the most part throughout my postsecondary education I encountered a great deal of support and understanding from my professors when seeking accommodations. However, during my first degree there was one professor who was not as supportive and certainly not understanding of the issues that a student with a physical (dis)Ability faces. The Centre provided me with accommodations, including exam accommodations, which allowed me to write my exam within the Centre with an extended timeframe, as opposed to in the classroom. Due to my physical (dis)Ability, I also needed to verbalize my exam responses to an assistant, who would then write down my answers. In a normal classroom setting, this would be very distracting to

my classmates, plus they would hear my responses. At the beginning of each semester, professors receive letters from the Centre highlighting students' accommodations. As per my routine, I wrote my first exam at the Centre. During the next class, I found out the professor had given students the answers to two exam questions while they were writing the exam in the classroom. I waited until I received my graded exam to see if I received points for these two questions, I did not. After class, with some hesitation, I approached the professor about not receiving the same two points that my classmates received. I kindly asked the professor if I could also have these points, explaining that, due to my (dis)Ability, I do not write my exams in-class. The professor's response was, quite literally, "It sucks to be you." He explained to me that regardless of my situation, it was not his fault that I was not in class to write the exam. I was absolutely shocked and speechless that a professor, an educated individual, would speak to me or anyone else in such a manner.

After some thought, I discussed the matter with my counsellor at the Centre. The counsellor advised me to contact the university conflict resolution advisor, whom I met with to discuss the matter. The conflict resolution advisor then contacted the professor in question to discuss the incident that occurred. The next class I had with that professor, he asked that I stay and talk with him following class. Being nervous and apprehensive, I asked my academic assistant to stay with me. The professor said he was very upset that I had gone to the conflict resolution advisor regarding my concerns with his professional conduct and asked why I did not discuss the matter with him. This left me feeling very frustrated because I had approached him regarding the topic. I reminded him of his comment, at which point he apologized and awarded me the two points on the exam. No other issues arose during the remainder of the semester with the professor. Despite the frustration that I felt over this situation, I would like to think that this experience educated the professor about some of the issues that students with (dis)Abilities face, predominantly the issue of equality. According to Madriaga, Hanson, Heaton, Kay, Newitt, and Walker (2010), many of the difficulties that students with (dis)Abilities face can be attributed to professors' lack of knowledge regarding (dis)Ability.

Learning: Staff at university accessibility centres, administrators, and faculty need to be cognizant of the different needs of (dis)Abled students. They also need

to be mindful of not creating an environment whereby one (dis)abled student is pitted against another (dis)abled student or against the student body. Dunn et al. (2006, 2008) note that attitudinal barriers need to be challenged and dismantled within our university structures, and that consciousness-raising workshops should become mandatory for all faculty, staff, and administrators so that inclusive education is not only possible, but also embraced.

Personal Care Dilemma: Prior to university, I accessed the help of an agency for personal care. However, because I was attending university, the agency deemed that I no longer qualified for care as they provided *homecare*, not care for individuals while at university. I still required personal care, whether I was at home or at university. The Department of Education was willing to provide funding for an academic assistant and tutor, but they were not willing to provide funding for 2 – 3 hours per week of personal care services at the university. This was yet another barrier blocking my access to postsecondary education. I spoke with the Centre, who referred me to the on-campus nurse, who agreed to assist me with personal care at specified times. While the situation was not ideal, I felt the university was going above-and-beyond to facilitate access to education. I was just happy to have the personal assistance I required.

Sometimes we find opportunities in the most unpredictable places. An introductory English class assignment was to write an article, on any topic, with the bonus that if a student was able to get his or her article published in the local newspaper, the professor would award the student with a letter-grade increase. Being the person that I am, I jumped at the opportunity to have my voice heard as well as be rewarded with bonus points. My article was published in the November 8, 2000 issue of the local newspaper, *The Chronicle Herald* (Myers, 2000). In this article, I discussed several of the issues that were dominating my life at the time: government policies, issues with life on campus, and the lack of organization at the university regarding academic assistants. Within 24 hours of the article being published in the newspaper, I received a call from the Department of Education, informing me that funding would be provided for a personal care worker.

While receiving the homecare services, I asked one of the young workers, “What kind of training have you had?” to which she replied, “I haven’t had any

training.” Upon further questioning, I found out that she, like many others, not only lacked personal care training but also lacked basic first-aid training as well. The final straw with this agency occurred when one of the homecare workers assisting me came to work with high heels on. While this may not seem like an issue, I require the aid of my homecare worker to assist in transferring me from my chair to other places I would like to sit, and high heels made this dangerous for both of us. Working with this agency became a safety concern; however, I had no alternative. Looking back, I should have filed a complaint with the agency. I was under so much pressure with school and trying to navigate the structural barriers, however, that I could not envision taking on another battle at that time.

Within weeks, I was also contacted by the agency that had previously rejected me as a client, informing me that the agency reconsidered their policy on homecare and that I now qualified to receive personal care from the agency, be it at home, the university, or the workplace. This is a perfect example of the power of social action. Had I not voiced my concerns in an open forum, such as a newspaper, I may not have received the services I was lobbying for.

While it is incredibly advantageous to have personal care services while on campus, it is not without its challenges. The agency had difficulty understanding that providing care at a university or workplace was much different from providing care within the home. A university student is on a structured schedule, thus requiring the homecare worker to arrive on time. On a number of occasions I was late for class due to the homecare worker being late for our appointment. This left me with an uneasy feeling, as I was now the tardy person appearing to be inconsiderate of the professor’s time by interrupting the class and my classmates.

I was thrilled with the reception my article received; however, the university did not share my sentiment. The President contacted my counsellor at the Centre requesting a meeting. I was shocked that I was being called into the counsellor’s office, only to be told that I should write a retraction to my article in the *Chronicle Herald*. The university was very upset with the picture that I painted of the accessibility issues on campus. I asked, “Was what I wrote accurate?” While the counsellor had no response, I felt in my heart that what I wrote was true and, unless the accessibility of the university changed dramatically overnight, I had no intention of retracting my statement. One newspaper

article facilitated access to resources that I had been fighting for and, despite this, the university criticized my view and my voice. Fortunately, the issue was quickly dropped and was never raised again by my counsellor or by the university.

Learning: Snyder and Mitchell (2006) call for ways to destabilize dominant ways of knowing (dis)Ability, while Titchkosky (2007) believes we need to unsettle how (dis)Ability is understood within our societal context, “as a clear cut problem in need of a solution . . . as an undesired difference, . . . as an add-on” (p 7). People with (dis)Abilities and their allies need to bring ablist issues to the public in order to promote change. Media sources are a vehicle that can be used to meet this goal.

Fighting for Policy Change: My first real barrier related to starting university occurred before my first semester had begun. Both my parents and I believed I would be able to access (dis)Ability benefits through the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services (DCS), once I reached my 18th birthday. These benefits would help support my university education. However, unbeknownst to me, (dis)Ability benefits were only available to individuals studying at community college, not university. Additionally, I was advised by DCS that, if I opted to stay home and not attend postsecondary education, I would be fully entitled to (dis)Ability benefits. I was outraged, as the inherent message I received was that (dis)Able persons were not intelligent enough for university or that the investment into our futures was not justified. It felt like an education ghettoization. Furthermore, the courses at community college are primarily trades-based and ‘hands-on,’ an obvious obstacle with my physical (dis)Abilities. Frank (1997), in his work on illness narratives, identifies how professionals categorize individuals or “interpellate” people into slots with the intention of making people feel as though they belong in the slot to which they were assigned. I felt as though I was being placed into a slot labelled “useless.” Mackelprang and Salsgiver (1996) identify society’s perception of (dis)Able persons as incapable of entering into the workforce.

Despite my hurt feelings and shed tears, I opted to use this situation as fuel to pursue my career. Very little was expected from me as a young (dis)Able woman and I wanted to prove them wrong. I had already made up my mind to work towards a degree in social work, so neither staying home nor attending community college was an option. I did not feel that I should be penalized

by DCS for my educational choices. Further, I believed the policy to be discriminatory; therefore, I opted to appeal the policy. The choice to appeal DCS’s policy on postsecondary education was an enormous undertaking, which I had not entirely anticipated. I questioned whether I would be able to manage appealing the DCS policy on top of pursuing my first year at university. I was scared that I could be fighting an impossible battle and would end up hurt in the end. However, this was a chance that I was willing to take, as my need to achieve my goals far surpassed any fears of failure.

The first appeal I filed was denied. However, I was unwilling to give up the fight, for I believed the policy to be truly unfair and oppressive. The battle was on and it took nearly one year, my entire first year of university, to gather political support. Initially, I sought the help of my Provincial Member of Legislature (MLA); however, it quickly became apparent that he was not interested in advancing my case. My next step was to contact my Federal Member of Parliament (MP). Within a very short time, my MLA, pressured by my MP, began advocating with me to change the policy. He suggested that I contact the Minister of Community Services. To my surprise, the Minister not only agreed to meet with me regarding my struggle, but he also agreed to meet with me in my own home, which I interpreted as a respectful accommodation for a (dis)Able person. I found this to be far beyond the call of duty and, to this day, I am still incredibly thankful for the support that I found within my MLA (albeit with hesitation), my MP, and the Minister of Community Services. Fortunately, after advocating for the amendment of this policy for over one year including the denial of my first appeal, the Department of Community Services amended their policy on postsecondary education, thus providing benefits to individuals with (dis)Abilities who chose to attend university. I was excited that the policy was amended and it was gratifying as a nineteen-year-old woman to have played an instrumental role in this process of policy change. Malhutra (2001) writes, “the first step in the liberation of disabled people (is) . . . a fundamental paradigm shift.” There needs to be a major shift in how society views (dis)Able people, especially in its legislative acts.

This was not the end of my political lobbying, for just as I was about to begin my social work degree I found out my understanding of the DCS policy on postsecondary education and (dis)Abilities was incor-

rect. While I had been under the impression that DCS would offer (dis)Ability benefits throughout one's entire postsecondary education, this was not the case. In the fine print of the policy, DCS noted that (dis)Ability benefits would only be made to individuals who were enrolled in their first degree or program of study; these benefits did not extend to a second degree or program of study. While my caseworker was aware of my intentions to pursue another degree, over the six years I worked with her while going to university, she never once mentioned that I would be cut off from my (dis)Ability benefits when I began my second degree. Not surprisingly, I was shaken by this news and, after years of remaining strong, I had enough-- tears filled my eyes, and I was overcome with emotion.

Going through this battle once in my life was more than enough; realizing I was back where I began left me feeling defeated. While I have always considered myself a strong woman, I felt my determination and strength drain out of my body. After all that I had already been through in fighting for my rights, I questioned whether I should just give up and comply with the policies of DCS. The advice of my caseworker was, "Just get a job." Unfortunately, a Bachelor of Arts, even with a double major in Psychology and Sociology, would not assist me in getting a job, especially not one in social work. It was almost as though I was looking down on myself and I could see myself shaking my head and asking, "Do I want to go through this again? Do I have the strength to go through the process again?" I reviewed the process that I had gone through to receive my (dis)Ability benefits for the first degree and decided that, if I was successful once, then I could be successful again.

As I began my first semester of my BSW, I started lobbying the Department of Community Services to change their policies. Similar to my first run-in with DCS, I tried to go through the appeal process myself, without government or legal assistance. However, once again my appeal was denied. The next step was to contact my still-reluctant MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) as well as my MP (Member of Parliament). At this time, I also discussed my issues with a professor, who advised me that my issue was a human rights issue. She advised me to contact a legal aid lawyer; I promptly set up a meeting. With this support, I figured I had nothing to lose and everything to win. My lawyer assisted me with the appeal process and also suggested that I set up a meeting with the Minister of Community

Services. Unfortunately, unlike the Minister who was more than willing to help me in my initial dealings with DCS, the current Minister would not return my calls. In the end, I not only had support from government officials (my MLA and MP) and a lawyer, but I also found support from the School of Social Work through several faculty members. My lawyer suggested I call a press conference to publicize the current policy and to determine if others were experiencing similar oppression. I was surprised by the number of individuals who attended this press conference in support of my struggles – and in several cases their own – with DCS. I also found a great deal of unexpected support through strangers who became familiar with my story through local news programs as well as the local newspaper (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007; Jackson, 2007a, 2007b; Jones, 2007; Lambie, 2007; McNutt, 2008). Several individuals sent letters to the editor of the newspaper, condemning DCS, and showing support for my cause. I had strangers approach me to offer their support.

The media aided in connecting me with individuals who were going through similar circumstances to my own. The Director of the School of Social Work was not only in attendance, but was also a speaker at the press conference, along with myself, my lawyer, and an advocate from the students' rights organization. After the press conference, I received many responses from others affected by DCS's social policies. I also learned later that professors from the School presented briefs to the Law Amendments Committee of the Legislature on this Act, supporting my case for accessible education. Ultimately, my issue was acknowledged and the Government of Nova Scotia (2008) overturned their original decision. The policy now states,

Assistance for a second degree will be provided only in cases where the first degree may be considered a pre-requisite to further study (e.g. B.A. for a B.S.W.) or the student is enrolled in a concurrent degree program (e.g. B.A. and B.Ed.). Career Seek will provide support for undergraduate degree programs only, and will not consider requests to support graduate, master or doctoral programs. (para. 6)

While this may seem like another happy ending to my dealings with DCS, unfortunately, this victory was bittersweet. As I had already begun my second post-

secondary degree, I did not qualify for the (dis)Ability benefits. The ruling would only apply to individuals who were going into their second degree, not those who had already begun their second degree. I was very disappointed in the loop-hole but I was thrilled that I had made a difference in some (dis)Able students' lives. Although the policy was again amended, and I was ultimately successful, a part of me felt as though I had lost the battle.

Learning: According to Goode (2007), it is only when people with (dis)Abilities become “extra-visible” that their needs are met. Social policies need to be in the best interest of (dis)Able persons and not anchored in misperceptions of idleness, or the inability to contribute to community and societal capital. People with (dis)Abilities “are entitled to receive the support they need within the ordinary structures of education, health, employment, and social services” (Rioux, 2009, p. 205).

Supports: While my story has many low points, there are many high points that deserve recognition. Primarily, I feel as though none of this would have been possible without the support from my parents and other family members, tutor, academic assistants, professors, and the staff at the Centre. Throughout my education, my parents have always supported my decisions. While I was concerned about my first year of university, they reminded me that if it did not work out, at least I gave it my best shot. This journey has been difficult for me, it has also been difficult for my parents, and I am grateful for all the support that they have provided over the course of my education. In addition to the emotional support that my parents have provided, they have also provided the means for me to obtain my education. I live nearly an hour away from the local universities with only my parents as a means of transportation, so I could not have attended university without them travelling an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening.

Another key player in the success of my education has been my tutor; the same individual who stood by me in high school has continued the journey with me through postsecondary education. Despite all of the supports I have received, it has been the support of this individual that has kept me grounded.

Lastly, I am thankful for the support that I have received from the Centre. I strongly believe that if I would have begun my postsecondary studies at the university where I obtained my second degree, that I

would not have completed my first degree. The Centre provided me with support and opportunities that allowed me to gain a sense of self that I may not have otherwise achieved. While I have been a strong advocate for many causes, even prior to my postsecondary experiences, the Centre afforded me the opportunity to hone my skills. I participated in several media pieces, including being interviewed for the alumni magazine regarding the Liberated Learning Project, as well as participating in a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio broadcast along with the Director of the Centre where we discussed the potential obstacles for students with (dis)Abilities in exchange programs abroad.

I was also given the opportunity to provide thank-you speeches to several high-profile individuals. This included the Lieutenant Governor as well as Rick Hanson, a man who - despite a spinal cord injury - travelled across the globe in his wheelchair to increase awareness about accessibility and inclusion. I also advocated for funding for the Centre. Typically, it was the Director of the Centre who asked me to participate in these functions, which I found, and still find, incredibly humbling. Despite all of my struggles during this period of my life, it felt as though there was a purpose to my suffering because I was actively (and at times, unintentionally) paving the way for students with (dis)Abilities within postsecondary education. The opportunities that I was given by the Centre, in retrospect, truly outshone the barriers that I encountered.

There are many reasons why I have made it to where I am today. It would be selfish to say that I did it on my own because, without all of the support that I have received across the board, I could not have made it this far. I look forward to progressing through the final stages of my education and, more so, I look forward to stepping into the workforce where I can finally utilize my skills and life experience to the fullest.

Learning: According to Stienstra (2012), “honouring the dignity, autonomy and rights” of people with (dis)Abilities “enables all of us to stretch and enhance our understandings of what it means to be human and live in a world of relationships of support and care” (p. 79). Becoming allies to people with (dis)Abilities and together working toward equitable treatment - be it in education, health, or social circumstances - makes for a more inclusive and egalitarian world.

Discussion

Stories provide context; they show glimpses into our past and, in so doing, project future possibilities (White, 1995). According to Frank (1997), the most common stories told “are stories of minor resistance” (p. 35). The story Melissa shared here is not complete; it is but one lens into what her life was like as a woman with a (dis)Ability accessing postsecondary education. Represented in the storyline are elements of her resistance toward an inaccessible society. Throughout her educational experience, others have often viewed her journey as inspirational. She would disagree. Overboe (2009) refers to this as “disabled heroes,” the glorification of (dis)Able people’s lived experiences, which creates unrealistic expectations whereby all (dis)Able people are expected to live up to the highest standard achieved by any one (dis)Able person. Inadvertently, this invalidates the experience of (dis)Able people. Moving forward, it is important to remember that “disabled people continue to be portrayed as more than or less than human, rarely as ordinary people doing ordinary things” (Oliver, 1990, p. 91). Although Melissa does experience real and numerous barriers in life, her story is but one of many (dis)Able persons. She does not want to be glorified, nor does she want to be pitied. She simply wants to be treated equitably by having her (dis)Abilities accommodated. Societal education needs to take place for this to become an ongoing reality for the (dis)Ability community; concepts of oppression and domination need to be understood. The myths and stereotypes associated with accommodating (dis)Able students’ educational needs have to be dismantled.

Dominance is perpetuated through the concept of meritocracy, which suggests that anyone can get ahead through skill, hard work, and a positive attitude (Moreau & Leonard, 1989). Persons with (dis)Abilities can work hard but, if the opportunities are not present and barriers are not addressed, there is a greater possibility that they may not benefit from their hard work. Within Melissa’s story, if academic accommodations had not been made, if environments were not made accessible, and if the Department of Community Services’ policy had not been amended, she would not have been able to attend university. Her future prospects would have looked significantly different. Most likely, she would have either remained on (dis)Ability pension for the rest of her life or she would have gone

to an employment workshop to be paid minimum wage. Either way she would have ended-up living in poverty by joining the poorest of the poor, women living with (dis)Abilities (MacDonald & Friars, 2009). Irrespective of her (dis)Ability, she had a dream to become a social worker. Melissa asked, “Why should my dream be any less attainable than an able-bodied person’s?” Universities have a golden opportunity to promote human rights and equitable treatment and to increase their enrolments by attending to the needs of the (dis)Ability community. Postsecondary institutions need to challenge attitudinal and physical barriers so that students with (dis)Abilities are welcomed and included in university life (Carter et al., 2012; Dunn et al., 2006; Dunn Hanes, Hardie, Leslie and MacDonald, 2008).

University programs need to be flexible with their rules and regulations, as illustrated by Melissa’s request for two rule exemptions during her Masters. First, she asked to begin the program during the summer months prior to the program start date of September. This allowed her to spread out her course work into a more manageable schedule. The timing worked with her academic assistant, whereas the fall was going to present conflicts in scheduling. Second, as a campus student she requested to be able to take a distance course, which traditionally is not available to campus students. This provided a more accessible environment for Melissa and met with her learning needs. Distance delivery, with the intentional addition of universal instructional design, can be an important addition to increasing students’ access to postsecondary education (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008). If she had not been granted these rule exemptions, she still would have completed her degree but it would have been more difficult. Coriale, Larson, and Robertson (2012) state, “schools must attempt to understand and work with the individual context and diverse needs of each student with a disability” (p. 431). Thinking beyond regulations, rules or policies to creatively accommodate students with (dis)Abilities is essential for an accessible education.

Within Melissa’s stored experiences advocacy was a recurring theme - advancing the issues not solely for her own interests but for the well being of (dis)Able students. Not everyone has the ability or resources to advocate on their own behalf or on behalf of others, however, nor should they be expected to carry this burden. Melissa came out of her mother’s womb ready to tackle the ablist structures and barriers that she has encountered and will continue to encounter throughout

her life. Advocating for the rights of those on the margins defines Melissa's work and social commitment, but it should not be an expectation for Melissa or for any other student with a (dis)Ability. The fight should not be this hard. Advocacy, fighting for (dis)Able students' rights, is a critical component of accessible education. Universities need to collaborate with (dis)Able students, faculty, and staff in challenging ableist structures and championing the rights of (dis)Able persons, both within and outside the university.

Uniformity does not define (dis)Able students' experiences, yet commonalities do exist as (dis)Able students experience inaccessible campuses, lack of accommodations, and attitudes of faculty and administrators. Understanding the complex weave of individual differences along with common experiences is a vital step toward meeting (dis)Able students' educational needs. Universal instructional design provides a beginning platform for access (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008), but taking it to the next step by creatively working with each student with a (dis)Ability will tailor the accommodations to their specific needs. Networking amongst and between (dis)Able students, creating a safe place where (dis)Able students can come together to support each other in their common struggle, is an important feature of services to (dis)Able students. Universities need to make these spaces available.

Conclusion

Melissa told her story of journeying through postsecondary education as a woman with a (dis)Ability. While Melissa was certainly an advocate for her rights and those of (dis)Able students, her story was not that unlike other (dis)Able students trying to navigate through postsecondary institutions (Coriale et al., 2012; Dunn et al., 2006, 2008). Highlighted within her story were the trials and tribulations of living with a (dis)Ability while trying to access a university education. Melissa brought awareness of accommodation and inclusion to faculty and administration at the universities she attended. She pushed politicians toward a fuller understanding of the experiences and needs of (dis)Able students and she modeled to other (dis)Able students that postsecondary education was within their reach. Through telling her story in this article, Melissa hopes to raise the consciousness of faculty and administrators at other universities, ultimately broadening the inclusion of (dis)Able students within

postsecondary education globally. Academics, university administrators, and policy makers are challenged to recognize the struggles of students with (dis)Abilities and empower (dis)Able students in the declaration of their own voices while aiding these individuals in achieving their goals.

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