

Classroom Disrupted: Being Trans and Disabled in Library Instruction

Debbie Krahrmer

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Land Acknowledgement

The township of Hamilton, NY, where this chapter was written, was built upon the unceded ancestral lands of the Onyota'a:ká (Oneida) of the Hodinöhsö:ni' confederacy. As a settler on this land and descendant of immigrants, I acknowledge the painful history of violence, dispossession, and betrayal that led to the colonization of these lands. I also recognize and honor the modern Indigenous experiences of the Oneida Indian Nation of New York. I am committed to combating the continued erasure of Indigenous experiences and cultures, as I continue to work towards ensuring justice and equity for all in my life and my work. I ask you to take a moment to consider these legacies before you continue reading.

Introduction

When I first started teaching at Colgate University, I was completely out as a trans person. Early on, I was invited to a sociology class to speak directly about trans issues. I have no memory of what I said, other than something about gender being an ocean and to not hold too hard to

your assumptions. One event continues to stand out to me, even thirteen years after the fact. One of the students asked, “What is the best thing about being transgender?”

After years of advocacy and being asked to share the worst experiences of my life, it was the first time I was ever asked what was good about being trans. It disrupted my whole way of thinking, and it took me a long moment to find an answer. That question opened my eyes that day, and changed how I approach my differences—what advantages do I have because I’m different?

Teaching

My favorite library classroom isn’t a typical computer classroom. It has twenty computers, but around thirty seats. The computer desks are set up in four L-shaped pods, making it easy to separate students into group-work or quickly identify the social groups in the classroom. In the middle of each pod is a round table with extra chairs that is perfect for working away from the computer (or fitting more bodies into the room, which happens more than I like to admit). It’s a favorite of mine, mostly because there’s plenty of space to move and bring along an extra chair, so I can work with students one-on-one without squeezing between seats or delicately deciding whose face my butt will be in when I bend down.

For the sighted students, the classroom comes with a terrific view. Two walls are nearly floor-to-ceiling windows, but there are automatic shades I can bring down to darken the space. When the shades are open, we’re gifted with a broad view of the township—trees and old school buildings in one direction, and the lake and more trees and distant hills in the other. We’re on the edge of town, but the thick foliage helps hide the houses away, making it a great place to work on homework.

The students come in at the front of the classroom. There’s no sneaking in; you have to parade past the first pod and to the center of the room just to find a seat. The lecture station is at the front as well,

but I tend to select a seat in the back, at least for the start of the class. Sometimes it encourages the students to sit at the front by virtue of the “teacher force field,” which naturally repels students. Sometimes they sit around me and include me in discussions, and I feel like I’m absorbed into the class.

The students’ reactions to me depend on how they see me. As a man, I have a boyish face; as a woman, my weight gives me an eternal-motherly appearance. As a professor, I’m seriously under-dressed in jeans and t-shirts. As a student, I’m oddly old-fashioned, layering a long sleeve shirt under my oversized t-shirt. I wear a black wedding ring and rainbow shoelaces, and I’m often wearing some sort of pride clothing to signify my queerness. I’m white and I’m fat—these things seem to be universal, regardless of who is looking at me. I’m wearing dark glasses, even though the shades are drawn and the lights are off. Am I blind? Or am I just weird?

When enough time has passed or enough students have filled the seats, I stand up and begin talking from the back of the room.

“Hi everyone. Welcome! I’m Debbie Krahmer. I’m the Accessible Technology & Government Documents Librarian. I prefer that you not use pronouns when you refer to me, so you can just call me Debbie or D.” Depending on the format of the class or the quality of my vision that day, I might also add, “I wanted to let you know I have a visual disability” and then explain how it will affect some of the work we’d be doing in the classroom. On good days, it’s hardly noticeable beyond the dark glasses that protect my sensitive eyes. On bad days, I frequently ask the students what they see. On the very worst days, my words slur and my eyes squint; I stand at the back of the room and rely on the students to be my eyes as we talk through and walk through any exercises.

It doesn’t matter if my introduction answers any of the questions the students may have about me, or if it just brings up even more questions. My existence, much like the library classroom, is a disruption of the “norm,” and I use that unease and ambiguity to my advantage.

Disruption

Disruptions are everywhere. They happen in technology, in the classroom, and in the crossroads of both (remember Massive Open Online Courses/MOOCs?). COVID-19 disrupted the entire world. A car breaking down will disrupt your schedule, as will a storm or traffic. A disruption can be a good thing, a bad thing, or just a thing that happens that you must deal with.

My sight is full of disruptions. Sometimes they're small, like flashes of light or sparkles of snow. Sometimes it's a blizzard that obscures the road, or TV static that causes words to dance and lines to glow. There's nothing from the outside that indicates when these visual artifacts are there. If you see me on a bad day, you wouldn't have any idea of what is between you and my image of you. They can be faded and indistinct, or dark and swimming. I'm not blind. It's all in my head (AKA neurological), but they're there just the same, an ever-present disruption to otherwise perfectly near-sighted vision.

My body is a disruption. I'm fat and ambiguous at best in my gender presentation. Among the affluent students and faculty at my university, I'm far outside the typical spectrum of body sizes. I have to ask for a seat without arms, and I test where I'm about to sit in order to avoid any weight-related pratfalls. I only started to medically transition in my forties, despite living as an out trans man for most of my life, but testosterone can only do so much when masculinity is a bit rounded and faded in my bloodline. I still don't pass except with a fleeting glance.

My name is a disruption. How the hell do you pronounce "Krahmer" anyhow? "Kr-ah-mer?" "Cray-mer?" I had promised myself as a child that I wouldn't change my name for marriage, so when I came out in 2000, I didn't bother trying to find something more masculine. Why should I? Just because Debbie sounds feminine doesn't mean it can't be my name. ("A Boy Named Sue," anyone?)

The library session, especially the one-shot, epitomizes disruption. The students are brought out of their regular classroom and into the library space. The professor is a bystander or completely absent. The

content of the session may be related to the course or may seem completely unrelated. I'm not always made aware of how the class is usually structured, and even if I were, I wouldn't teach like their professor.

We, as librarians and as trans people, are disruptions, so we might as well use it. It leaves the classroom space open to anything.

Critical

I use the disruption of my difference to bring critical information literacy into the library classroom. I am visibly trans and I out myself as having a disability, so it is always relevant in my classroom to call out problematic subject headings or point out bias in the search results. I leverage my differences to break through some of the reluctance to discuss difficult topics in the classroom, usually by drawing attention to them in the first place.

My visual impairment creates a natural space to talk about how we can access information. How do I search for information when I can't see it? How can someone like me interact with this image? I bring up those times when I run into barriers and, by doing so, I invite students to think of how other barriers might come in. I've experienced this change in the classroom: a student describes a chart to me unprompted, or they introduce themselves and point out how we know each other, or they ask about whether the article can be downloaded as an audio file. It also opens the door to talk about access—if we weren't on a university campus, would we have access to these articles or these databases at all? What kind of students don't we see on this campus? Why?

My transness also creates a natural space to bring in discussions of bias within information organization. From my own lived experience, I can point out times when important information was obscured behind strange academic terms that a young transboy couldn't understand. We still use outdated phrases like "Female Impersonator" and "Illegal Aliens" in the library catalogue, and it's important to talk about it in the classroom. When the language hurts me, I bring attention to that

feeling because sometimes the students will need to use that language in their own research.

A colleague of mine once challenged my support for critical information literacy with a question. It was something along the lines of “If I’m teaching someone how to drive, and I only have fifty minutes, and I spend forty-five talking about Henry Ford’s antisemitism, do I then expect the student to be able to drive the car?”

My comeback in the moment was that, for many people, Ford’s antisemitism is directly relevant to learning to drive, as relevant as knowing how to interact with police or what to do when your license says F while you present as M. I would bring up the topic, as appropriate, and if we needed to talk about it more, we would. If not, we can continue with the driving lesson.

Since that time, I’ve continued to turn this question over in my head and consider how to answer it. It’s a somewhat ridiculous question to begin with—if you were teaching someone a skill, do you expect them to know how to do it if you spend zero time teaching it? If you bring critical pedagogy or antiracism into the classroom, does that then mean you can’t teach anything else?

In most cases, librarians don’t have the time to cover what we need to teach in a one-shot library session, let alone anything additional. But if we’re already just skimming over the ideas in the classroom, what’s the harm of bringing in new ones? It can take thirty seconds to point out a problematic subject heading and explain that it can take many years to get controlled vocabulary changed. There’s a greater chance of doing harm to students by treating something racist or sexist as invisible. A student once broke down in angry tears because she just wanted her professor to mention Henrietta Lacks in biology, to recognize the harm done to Black women in the name of science. For myself, I’m still thrilled when a speaker at a conference describes an image on their slide without being asked or uses inclusive language when referring to people. These small opportunities to recognize and name things can mean more to students than pointing out the full text button on an

article—and you don't have to give up pointing out the full text button in order to include them in a class.

It doesn't matter what discipline the course is in; criticality and inclusiveness are always relevant. Even when we're not studying humans, we are all humans doing the research. By virtue of my existence, transness and accessibility are already centered in my classroom. To skip over it or try to hide it as being non-relevant to the situation is losing an important part of myself that adds authenticity to my teaching. When I was younger, I had to cross dress and pretend not to be trans in order to get a library job. I was miserable, and I did a terrible job (of teaching and pretending). I know I must bring my whole self into the classroom in order to teach well. Part of that is acknowledging my difference, and that acknowledgement brings attention to other areas of difference. As a trans person, I can't see something harmful without wanting to address it, because I know how it feels to have my pain disregarded.

You can teach someone to drive while also recognizing them as fully human and acknowledging their lived experiences. It doesn't make them bad drivers. It makes you a good teacher.

Conclusion

I am supremely lucky to be trans and disabled. When you're already outside the "norm," it seems almost ridiculous to not take advantage of it. It is rare that I'm ever in a "safe" space to be myself, especially in America. But being out and loud can be its own protection. I'm visibly and openly different. If someone wants the same old thing, they can go to someone who looks more like them, or acts like them, or teaches like them. Our students, ourselves, our classrooms are unique, and every librarian should take advantage of that to experiment, and explore, and teach the things that energize them.

I'm scared every time I go into the classroom. After all this time of teaching, no matter how much I prepare, I never know what I'm going to find when I stand up at the back of the room. But finding those

small spaces to make a difference, to teach what I want to teach, and reach out to students authentically, is what keeps me going. Every day I step out into an unknown, and I decide to embrace it, laughing, ready to see what happens.

About the Author

Debbie “D” Krahmer is a white, fat, trans, queer, disabled librarian who has been working in libraries most of D’s life. I prefer that others refer to me as simply Debbie or D. I have a BA in Educational Media/Library Studies from Chadron State College and a Masters in Information Science and Learning Technology from the University of Missouri-Columbia. I was born and raised in a small town in Nebraska, and I currently work in Upstate New York. My passions center on accessibility, equity, and inclusion, as well as film and media. My office is covered with toys, which keep me entertained and help to open up conversations around neurodiversity. I’m married to a wonderful man, and orange is my favorite color.