

Unruly bodies at conference

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Unruly bodies at conference

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For some time I have been concerned with the response to unruly bodies at disability focused conferences. Even here within what we probably all hope are more enlightened, enabling and inclusive spaces the principles of acceptance, tolerance and appreciation are not always applied to 'unruly bodies' (Erevelles, 2000). An unruly body is defined here as coming into being when there is a misfit between bodily expression and the imposed disciplines of a particular cultural and social environment. Sometimes at conference thoughts escape suppression and erupt from these bodies in the form of comments on or critiques of the ideas being presented. Although a number of delegates might share these thoughts it is only the unruly body from whom these escape who is exposed as a disruptive agitator. These thoughts as speech transgress the norms of conference practice where the presenter has his/her time to speak followed by an ordered period of questioning or comments, preferably involving hand raising and the awaiting of approval to speak. We become so habituated to these practices that they become 'embedded in the flesh' (McLaren, 1988, cited Erevelles, 2000:33) and a sudden divergence from these can unsettle and trouble us. Erevelles (2000) argues that 'the disabled student embodies the "unruly" subject whose physiological excesses are seen as disrupting the disciplined control of schooling' (p.34) or in this case of conference. Schools often take on the responsibility of asserting control of these unruly bodies, usually without any sense

of the student possibly also being troubled by her/his own body. When schools fail to discipline into submission the bodies of these students they are then transferred to other sites of education that have 'special' ways of bringing such bodies into line (Erevelles, 2000). At conference, without access to these established systems of transferring out unruly bodies such delegates are instead encouraged to self-exclude; their life at conference is made uncomfortable through demonstrations by other delegates and conference 'officials' of frustration, annoyance, irritation and other similar acts of veiled aggression. Fortunately there are also allies at conference who have some recognition of and understanding or personal experience of unruly bodies and the struggle to contain them. These allies can offer support to unruly bodies with resisting admonition and censure.

Boxall (2013) warns of the penalties of difference and suggests that there are a myriad of ways in which society exacts retribution upon those identified as infringing normative rules. The threat of these penalties never feels far away at conference; sometimes they even take form in responses to unruly bodies that are sarcastic or overly assertive attempts to prevent a delegate from speaking. These direct commands to an unruly body to suppress his/her thoughts until the presenter has finished speaking take away from an individual the right to monitor and discipline her/his own body. They are oppressive reactions to unruly bodies that are made publically and sometimes from a delegate who castigates the unruly body with an apparent sense of confidence that he/she is expressing the unspoken frustrations of all delegates, the one prepared to notice the 'elephant within the conference': no challenge from others seems to be anticipated and usually none is made. Of course these admonitions themselves might have escaped from other unruly bodies so it is not individuals that need to be addressed but the discourses that underlie these

exchanges. I call here for more open explorations of why as presenters we should feel so challenged by unscheduled interruptions. Perhaps they touch our insecurities about the value of our argument or the base of our knowing, or we worry that we will lose time or momentum if we feel obliged to stop our carefully planned explication of argument to respond. Interruptions might feel less threatening if as presenters we free ourselves from the embedded obligation to always respond to comments from delegates.

We will not find new ways of working whilst conference focuses on the problem of interruptions rather than on responses. Hypotheses are constructed to explain the interruptions that pay little attention to the nature of the body that produces them. Sawiuk (2013) argues that disabled students in schools are not always recognised for who they are as people because no attempt is made to understand the student's experience of being. For the disabled student it is as though, 'I am here but you are not seeing me' (Sawiuk, 2013). A lack of seeing results in random explanations for interruptions being carelessly negotiated and agreed upon by delegates without any input from the unruly body concerned. For example if the unruly body belongs to a man then it might be proposed that this is a gender issue: one more example of men overriding the voices of women. Of course this may have some justification as an interpretation of what is happening but if unfounded it becomes only a misleading and unhelpful claim that incites antagonism towards someone who may in fact be struggling to make an unruly body submit to these ableist conventions. Sometimes delegates fail to acknowledge that this is a body in struggle because the unruly body does not always behave in this way: if a body can be controlled in one presentation then it is assumed that it can in another. The unruly body becomes positioned as a faker of disability, usually a 'normate' argument used in the oppression of disabled

people and one which has been keenly contested within disability studies (Reeve, 2006). The theory of faking an unruly body does not allow for bodies that might be more resistant to discipline at different times. For example, thoughts might be more likely to erupt into speech when a delegate has just experienced significant stress at navigating her/ his way to the conference: this can then make the first keynote a challenging time for controlling the body. Anxiety about everything being in place and technology working for one's own later presentation might do the same. These stresses can then be compounded by awareness that others are becoming frustrated with you: instead of being rewarded for the strenuous efforts you are making in attempting to control your unruly body to meet unrealistic and disabling expectations the delegate receives only reproach for the moments when the body overwhelms her/him.

If however we focus on our problem responses rather than these problem interruptions we can work towards more enabling practices. We need to embrace these disruptions as sites of learning about bodies behaving differently and enjoy the challenges that unruly bodies present us with. Rees (2013) emphasises the importance and value of working as a collective to create a new egalitarian and enabling world. Together we need to challenge our old exclusionary practices of conference and negotiate more inclusive ways of coming together. As well as managing our responses to unruly bodies within presentations we will also need to think about the social spaces that we provide and the ways that we behave within them. At conference some delegates can find themselves excluded from or compelled into the margins of social spaces because of a disabling sensory environment caused, for example, by the pain of noise generated by the voices of others. As disability academics and/or activists we cannot focus on how society

needs to change without recognising our own responsibility to develop greater understandings and appreciation of human difference within our own academic community. If we who debate the grand theories of disability are not prepared to even moderate the volume of our own voices, to reflect on whether we should wave rather than clap at the end of presentations or to attend generally to the impact of our behaviour on others then how can we rebuke the immutability of social systems.

I of course am as guilty of exclusionary practice at conference as any other delegate but I welcome the challenge of change. How we move forward needs to be informed by those who currently feel excluded from all or any element of conference so that we can work collectively to develop more enabling environments. Observing those delegates who seem untroubled by the interruptions of unruly bodies and who continue to present whilst respectfully managing these comments it seems to me that there can be some starting points for change. These might include chairs of sessions reminding all delegates that we understand that some comments refuse to wait until the end of presentations but presenters are time restricted and so may decide not to respond to these at that time but no offence or disrespect is intended by this. Negotiated and practised responses can be helpful such as 'I note your comment and we will come back to this in the questions/comments section'. This then frees the presenter from being troubled by how to respond to what feels like a challenge mid presentation. It may be helpful also to give bodies permission to move; a formal acknowledgement that during presentations hands may wave, legs might shake or a body might require greater movement and so might leave the room and then return. If one delegate speaks over another who is asking a question the chair can wait until the comment is made and then just direct delegates back to the original questioner. Chairs of sessions are well positioned to model inclusive

practice. Changing our behaviour in social spaces should also happen but realistically will be difficult to achieve and especially when alcohol is involved. A reminder at the start of a formal gathering about moderating voices might help through the first glass of wine but a thinking through of the space will be essential, creating an oasis of relative quiet for those who welcome it but within the shared space so that all are enabled to be part of the main group.

The reactions to unruly bodies at disability focused conferences illustrate therefore how even within informed spaces the tyrannies of normalcy and ableism insidiously dominate. As a community of scholars and activists we must support each other with remaining alert to their manifestations and be prepared as allies to unruly bodies to challenge them. I of course am also inculcated in these hegemonies and so reflection, evaluation and change must start with me. I am looking forward to the challenge of learning that will come from disruption of norms at the next disability conference that I attend. Unruly bodies, I hope to meet you there.

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