

A DESIGNER'S CRASH COURSE IN ABLEISM

A DESIGN LETTER ON ADDRESSING ABLEISM INTERNALIZED, FOR THE BETTERMENT OF THE CLASSROOM, STUDIO, AND FUTURE DESIGNERS

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PAPER ABSTRACT: Ableism is deeply ingrained into every part of the world we live in: our physical surroundings, the language we use, and even our culture and shared patterns of thinking. Designers like to think we are above this. We are not. Designers get comfortable with the idea of "design FOR disability" alone, picturing themselves above the disabled consumer and often with a bit of a savior complex. In actuality, disabled people are constantly forced to modify their own environments to be more accessible, and with those skills make incredible designers. Design school, however, does not produce many disabled designers. Educators who think accommodations are "shortcuts", who blame us for "making excuses", and who refuse to allow modifications are the primary reason for this. This design letter is primarily addressed to design educators. Based on personal experiences in school and the workplace, this will cover what ableism is, how to start noticing it in your surroundings and language, how to begin to eliminate it from your language and mindset, and how to better support disabled design students. When design school is better, we get more diverse designers, and when we get more diverse designers, the industry will only flourish.

Keywords: disability, education, accessibility, inclusion, anti-ableism

1. INTRODUCTION

We like to consider ourselves, as designers, to be one of the most empathetic professions, caring for our users and solving their problems. We are constantly taught and reminded to identify our assumptions, put them aside, and find the truth of the matter. But when it comes to disability, these assumptions stay put – yet nearly 27% of American adults identify as disabled (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). So why are we waiting to address our ableism when it affects a quarter of most user groups?

I think some designers get too comfortable with “Design FOR Disability”, where we as designers serve a disabled population. And I think we often separate ourselves from our users as a benefactor of good ideas and problem solving, on a sort of pedestal over them, and therefore on a sort of pedestal over the whole disabled population. (Disabled people not becoming “true” designers is another topic altogether; through the economic and access barriers that bar many from the profession regardless of skill.) The only way to take ourselves off this pedestal and step down to be peers with ALL of our users is to actively address our own ableism, in whatever form it may take.



The attitudes and behaviors that allow this inequality to remain are not primarily blatant ableism, but rather passive ableism, or a lack of active anti-ableism. Professors and senior designers who state right-out that disabled folks are below them are rare; they are not the thing that keeps us from succeeding en masse. Instead, the thing that keeps us from conquering design school and thriving in the design profession is the arbitrary definitions of what makes a "real designer," the suffer-to-succeed mentality of design school, the myth of the "lazy student," and a lack of active correction of internalized ableism.

To backtrack a moment: ableism is the judgment, stereotyping, and belittling of disabled people and disabilities. It is a mindset we have to actively challenge, as it is built so deeply into our society and way of life. From language to buildings around us down to the way we are taught and raised,, it is ingrained in all of us. It's even in those of us who are disabled; people like myself are always combating our internalized ableism in order to live well and accept ourselves. Ableism keeps us afraid of disability, but disability can happen to anyone, happens eventually to almost everyone, and is the only minority you can become a part of overnight. Combating any -ism is a huge task! But recognizing where you see it in your life and gently correcting yourself and others is the best way to start. Then, beginning to address the ways that you interact with design and other designers can instigate the changes that the modern design industry needs. I will cover a few areas for you to begin finding awareness and ways to be more inclusive in the studio, and soon enough you'll find yourself more comfortable with the idea of disability.

2. INTERNAL ANTI-ABLEISM

The best place to begin to instigate change is within yourself. None of us are immune to the bias of our society or the way we were raised. We are sponges, absorbing even the whispered and indirect statements about what is considered weird and wonderful. And so, you have to start internally. Even embracing my own disabled identity took years - I didn't feel "disabled enough", and for a long time identified as "able-bodied passing." The more I experienced disability community and culture, the more I saw the label as an identity and a declaration of existing in a world not built for me. I hope that through noticing the harsh and exclusive parts of that world, you'll start to see disability as powerful as I do.

2.1 STRUCTURES AND PHYSICAL SPACE

While you make your way through your physical surroundings, particularly in professional and university settings, consider how others would experience the space. A good place to start is to notice access for wheels. Are there ramps? Elevators? Curb cuts? Would it be possible for someone using a rollator or wheelchair to navigate the space? Are aisles and walking spaces wide enough for them to fit through? Is the ground solid and smooth enough for wheels, or is it too soft or too rough? Are ramps permanent or does someone have to request it? Is the ramp at the entrance, or is someone on wheels forced to use a back entrance? Does the door opener work? What is off-limits if someone cannot use stairs? Is there dignity provided to someone using a mobility aid, or are they forced to jump through hoops for access?



Access for wheels often makes designers and architects think first of the ADA and other access legislation. Unfortunately, these laws are not as golden as they may seem. First, these laws vary a lot by country. Second, most disability-related laws are only consistently enforceable in government spaces. Either they only legally apply in places run or funded by government programs, like the web requirements of the ADA (US Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, 2022), or the only places properly judged for compliance are government spaces. Third, these laws are the bare minimum. ADA compliant spaces can force visitors on wheels to enter in a back way, wander through hallways for an elevator, and be left behind in case of emergency. There is also an exception in the ADA for when access would “ruin the historic integrity” of a building, and many inaccessible older buildings claim this. The ADA, WCAG, and similar laws are good beginnings, but they are not the ideal.

Moving past access for wheels: you can break disabilities down into categories as you start looking for access. Most will be related to physical mobility, energy, pain, the senses, or something cognitive (understanding, memory, language, seizures, migraines, or more). Is there available seating for people with pain, heart conditions, or fatigue? Do doors have knobs that require grip strength, or handles that can be manipulated without grip? Is sensory input overwhelming? Does this just make it hard to identify important information, or is it enough to send someone into a meltdown or seizure? Is signage largely printed and clear? Is there tactile or audio information available for low-vision or Blind patrons? On the other hand, is any information audio-only? Is it captioned or visually notated, or does it bar Deaf and hard-of-hearing patrons from understanding? Is visual information presented in headings and large, concise statements, or is it in blocks of text, difficult for anyone with dyslexia or visual processing issues?

There is an endless list of considerations I could suggest here, but this is only a starting point. The full variety of disabilities spans every sensory organ, every physical part or system, and every cognitive process imaginable. Think about the physical and social spaces you interact with, and think about who is kept from interacting because of the ways they are built.

2.2 LANGUAGE

You may notice my choice of “non-disabled” as the antithesis to “disabled”, and that is on purpose. If we are lucky enough to live long enough, most of us will become disabled. To me, terms like “abled” and “able-bodied” seem to assume they are the norm, rather than something temporary and also normal.

A good start in correcting ableist language is to learn which words are slurs and insults, and avoid them. I had a professor once jokingly call me “gimpy” for a whole semester where I used a cane, thinking he was gently teasing (but that’s a slur). “Cripple” is one that is being reclaimed by the disabled community, from the “cripple-punk” aesthetic to the “Crip the Vote!” slogan, but this is one that you should probably avoid if you’re not disabled. The “m-word” for folks with dwarfism (rhymes with fidget) is absolutely a slur to avoid entirely. “Psycho” or “sp*z” should be avoided as well, along with any similar insults that

imply a mental illness or learning / developmental disability. The point in the case of these words that are commonly used as insults is that this equates these conditions to a bad thing, which does nothing to combat the stereotypes, judgment, and belittling of people who have these disabilities.

Rethink the idioms you use as well. If they reference a disabled group, the chance is they're a no-go. "The blind leading the blind" implies a directionless inability to navigate, which is simply wrong. There are blind climbers and pilots, and endless innovations into tactile mapping. "Turn a deaf ear" implies active belligerence on the part of the person being referred to, and only perpetuates the harassment that Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals face daily, questioning if they're "really" Deaf. The history behind these sayings is sometimes argued as being more important, but if avoiding them has the possibility to make tons of people more comfortable, then why not make that change?

Maybe the most prominent of the language issues I want to address is: JUST SAY DISABLED. It is its own word, and millions of people are proud of their disabled identity. When the word is replaced with phrases such as "differently abled", "special needs", or even things like "handicapable", it feels condescending. It feels like an attempt to correct the whole disabled community, by making our identity something to be ashamed of and made more palatable, when we never asked for a change. If you mean disabled, simply say disabled! It's not a bad word, and it's a much faster way to make your point.

Noticing and changing your own language is a crucial step, but it doesn't do much to actively combat the ableism around you until you begin to step out of your comfort zone and correct these things when you hear them from colleagues and students. A bonus to most design environments is that we get to speak pretty candidly and casually with one another. Unfortunately, this also means that a lot of ableist language is more likely to emerge than in stiffer environments. But it gives us the chance to help each other to change, which is an important step in correcting the ableism that is prevalent in design circles.

2.3 THOUGHT PATTERNS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

This category is perhaps the most prevalent of internalized ableism, and therefore the most important to address. Preconceived notions of disability are the things that keep us afraid of its effect on us personally or peripherally. They also keep us using examples of disabled folks accomplishing things as "inspirational," regardless of whether the individual is comfortable being seen that way or not. This is often referred to as "inspiration porn," as it is primarily created to let non-disabled people feel good at the expense of the disabled person's dignity and sometimes privacy. This media is almost always framed as succeeding "despite" disability, which is a base misunderstanding of disability in the first place.

The most common misconception about disability is that it is inherently a bad thing. As a whole, disability holds no morality; it simply is. There are two primary models for viewing disability: the medical model, and the social model. Usually, people who view disability as negative are operating off of the medical model, unaware that the social model is also a huge part of the experience. The medical model



states that the thing that disables a person is their individual condition / conditions. Medical symptoms are the thing that causes barriers in interacting with the world. On the other hand, the social model states that it is society and its lack of access that disable a person. It is the world around us that keeps us from interacting with it equally. Both of these models are proposed as complete views on disability, though myself and many other disabled folks do not see either as a whole truth on its own (Haagaard, 2022). We are still disabled by symptoms (like chronic pain, which is limiting regardless of accessibility), but societal access remains a primary barrier in interacting equitably with our non-disabled peers.

Disability is not a problem to be solved. We already work through treatment with our care teams of medical professionals in order to address what we can. It is an individual struggle, an individual experience, and not one seeking unsolicited advice. I have had professors suggest new diets to me in the first email exchange we ever had. Not only did they not know anything about my personal relationship with food, but they had no right to impose their personal suggestions on my treatment plan. If someone discloses their disability without asking for advice, unfortunately for us as professional problem solvers, we simply have to keep those things to ourselves. Without knowing someone's entire treatment history and being an active part of that team, there is no inoffensive way to suggest something new.

One of the most personal misconceptions is the assumption that accommodations are a privilege, and an "easy way out." After an hour-long meeting discussing study and project topics, planning weeks ahead, and gathering all the necessary paperwork to substitute two separate independent studies to cover a single studio credit, I was told, "Just don't tell anyone else, or everyone will want to take the easy way out!" But it was my *only* way out. Most disability resource offices aren't allowed to impose anything but the most basic of accommodations on studio or lab environments because they're so different from a standard classroom setup, so I was forced to spend another semester putting my joints through a figurative cheese grater or find an alternative. Accommodations are seen as a privilege and a gift, rather than a right legally imposed on universities and workplaces, and this alone can be detrimental. An educator's attitude about accommodations can make the difference between a student who is treated as a burden and one who can thrive. Anti-ableism isn't just access; it's understanding as well.

3. EXTERNAL ANTI-ABLEISM AND EDUCATION

Some of the worst ableism that I have faced has been in educational design environments. Much of the culture of design, but specifically design school, perpetuates the aforementioned misconceptions and promotes a culture that is unintentionally very anti-disability. Appointments, sickness, and injuries can all cause severe setbacks for design students. I have been refused the common dignity of being taken seriously simply due to working at a different pace. Better accessibility is needed where we create, as well as in what we create. Design deals with disability on a regular basis. Access, ergonomics, and design for disability are things that we see often and need the proper background knowledge to handle. The education of all designers applies here, but I will approach this within the framework of design school.



3.1 POLICY AND SYLLABUS

The hustle culture of design school is dangerous. It encourages what I have heard called “misery olympics,” which is where students compare sleep schedules and neglected health to prove themselves the most miserable. And many professors actually promote this. One studio professor told my class that if we were “eating, sleeping, [or] showering... regularly,” we were “doing design school wrong.” Another declared that if we were not literally working ourselves sick, then coming in anyway and working through that sickness, we were not working hard enough. No wonder representatives from my university’s counseling center reported during a mental health forum that they see a higher proportion of students from the design school compared to any other college on campus. This “suffer like we suffered” mentality is often pushed by professors who had a high-pressure design school experience, and feel that modern day students must survive the same to become good designers. But all this does is burn us out.

Gauging assignments based on how regularly students are overdoing it to complete them is a pretty good parameter. If you know that half of the students from last semester pulled all-nighters to complete the same assignment, it’s probably a good sign to adjust deliverables or deadlines. But having policies in place to reassure your students that you prioritize their rest and health over quantity and minor deadlines can make a world of difference. And flexibility on attendance policies can save injured, sick, or disabled students from automatic failure. Attendance is something that disability resource offices have no control over, so it is up to the individual professor to allow students to miss class when necessary.

Let me also present the myth of the lazy student. Lazy doesn’t exist. It is a descriptor tied to someone who is perceived to be consciously choosing to do less than their share. More often than not, the person perceived as lazy has factors affecting them that you are simply unaware of. Students who go to college want to learn, especially the ones who have gone through the grueling process of applying to design school. The ones who appear as lazy simply lack the support that they need to succeed, and one of those students was me. Many professors just assumed that I was not trying hard enough, rather than seeing that I needed accommodations that I didn’t yet know how to ask for. It’s not something you notice when you don’t know to look for it, but that attitude rubbed off on even my classmates, and left me alienated from my studio as a “bad student.” Not only am I missing a significant chunk of my design education due to this judgment, but I am missing the social connection, the collaboration, and the built-in networking that can come from a studio. When you run into a “lazy” student, they likely just need more support.

Often what a student in this situation needs is simply accommodations. Unfortunately, some students are unable to get the doctor’s note necessary to acquire official ones through the university. The biggest thing that you can do for this is to let students know that they can ask you about whatever they need, and follow through. When you provide yourself as an open resource, available to negotiate with students to find the best solution to help them engage more fully with your studio and their work, you make it more possible for your students to succeed. The second biggest thing is to make resources that individuals request available to the whole class. This helps a lot when students don’t know they need it.



If someone needs slides available after class, or lecture recordings for review, make them available to everyone. Even non-disabled designers can benefit from accommodations; my last design team was half ADHD, so we kept fidgets around and had extra reminders set for all of us. And even our non-ADHD team members appreciated these things! They were a shared resource that wound up helping all of us.

3.2 CURRICULUM AND LEARNING

As designers, we are taught constantly to reject our assumptions about the world, find the absolute truths and problems, and work only from those. But it is much harder to notice what is an assumption and what is an absolute when it comes to design curriculum. One of the main skills I missed in design school was sketching; it's a big part of why I transitioned to UX. The style of ID sketching requires throwing lines from the shoulder, but my shoulder is incredibly unstable, so it was very hard and painful for me. I wrecked my shoulder sketching, with little improvement. Then my senior year, a professor suggested I just try a different style. He helped me work out a smaller, scribbly style that was much less damaging to my shoulder, and I was amazed to find that I could draw at all. Nobody up until that point had recognized that the thing I really needed was a way to visually communicate, rather than hurting myself trying to learn the style imposed by the curriculum. If I had had this option sooner, and more time to refine my sketch style, I might still call myself an Industrial Designer. But I didn't, and so I don't.

As mentioned near the beginning, about one quarter of Americans are disabled. Disability is simply a truth of the human condition. It is a human factor to be designed for - and it ought to be taught that way. This is a great opportunity for educators to find disabled designers and teachers to speak with students. Jennifer White-Johnson is one of my favorites. She created the Anti-Ableist Art Educator's Manifesto (White-Johnson, 2022) which I think all design educators should have. She and her peers that work in the intersection of design and disability are incredible resources for students.

A primary factor of disability in design is that nobody can properly design for disability without including disabled folks in the process. Students must be taught that if they have chosen to build assistive tech without speaking or working with disabled people, they are engaging in exploitative design. Not only that, but it's important to consider finding ways to compensate these disabled experts for their time and efforts, because too many professional designers already take advantage of our expertise. Students should learn to consider intersections of identity within disability, as LGBTQIA+, POC, and other multiply-marginalized folks are even more disadvantaged. They need to know the disability tax / crip tax, similar to the pink tax, illustrates how disabled folks have to pay more for the same quality of life as their non-disabled peers (Stimpunks, 2022). Even worse, people on Social Security disability income can lose that income if they save more than \$2000 at any given time or get married (Musumeci & Orgera, 2021).

Legal considerations are also a huge element of the disability and design intersection. Designers in all fields are subject to laws and regulations around accessibility. When not taught early enough, they often grow to resent these things and see them as limitations on their creativity, rather than expansions on the



rights and access for disabled people that will use the things they create. The ADA is, of course, a hefty legal precedent that has to be followed in building new public buildings and publicly accessed spaces. Industrial designers branch into retail design, touch architectural projects, and design things that affect how we navigate spaces, so the ADA is important to industrial design education as well. The principles established by the most recent WCAG (Web Compatible Accessibility Guidelines) are useful for all tech-related design, with a breakdown of equal access to information for all sensory situations. I've found that the WCAG can apply in interactive retail design, in museum exhibitions, and in other forms of interaction design. Conveniently for designers, the guidelines are publicly available with lots of good resources like the W3C website, and the free Trusted Tester certification course in accessibility testing.

Then comes disability culture and history. It is rarely taught outside of the rare disability studies course, but disability has historically had a huge effect on design, instigating the creation of everything from typewriters / keyboards to touch screens to bendy straws and electric toothbrushes. Part of the reason that disability escapes our awareness in design history is that disability was hidden from the public for a long time. Until the 70s, there were still "ugly laws" in the United States barring "visually upsetting" or disabled folks from appearing in public, on threat of fines or arrest (Schweik, 2009). And our rights are even more recent than that. Some of the most effective protests in American history have been for disability rights and justice. Judy Heumann only passed this past March, and was an instrumental in the longest government building sit-in in US history, in getting section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act passed, signed, and enforced, in implementing the ADA, and in advising the US government on disability policy ("Judy Heumann," 2023). The Capitol Crawl, where 1000 disabled activists marched on Washington and about 60 of them threw down their mobility aids and crawled their way up the Capitol steps, is one of the most effective protest demonstrations ever, and is often cited as the final push which got the ADA signed into law (Orr, 2022). The legal considerations of the laws that ensure access are important in design education, but the history behind them tells our stories as well. Disability history IS design history.

4. CONCLUSION

Remember: this is only the beginning. Starting to expand your awareness, adjust your language, redefine how you think about disability, and add disability into your curriculum is a process and a life-long undertaking. Even those of us who already identify as disabled are constantly fighting the internalized ableism endowed upon us by an ableist society. The assumptions that disability makes us incapable, that we are asking too much by asking for access, and that we are a burden on the world are beasts we take on every day. But the more allies we have who strive for anti-ableism, the easier that fight becomes.

The goal isn't perfection, it is effort. The answer isn't just access, it's understanding. And anti-ableism doesn't happen quietly or alone, it happens when we are loud about it, together.



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