

Changing the Subject

Redefining Society's Response to Disability

IF YOU WERE TO LOOK UP THE School of Disability Studies on Ryerson's website, you'd find this explanation of the school's project:

More traditional approaches to disability focus on ways to rehabilitate or "fix" people with disabilities. In Disability Studies, we focus on society's definition and response to disability.

The school wants to talk about the social model of disability rather than the medical model of disability; it wants to change the subject.

I have some experience of trying to change the subject. I was part of a group that developed the documentary film *Working Like Crazy* (NFB, 1999); it profiles six psychiatric survivors who work in survivor-run community businesses, such as A-Way Express Couriers and the Raging Spoon Diner. We wanted to challenge the prevalent notions of the "mentally ill" as people who were violent, sick, dangerous and incapable. The film shows psychiatric survivors creating community by addressing their needs for employment and a decent income.

In the last few years, I've taken my changing-the-subject project to Ryerson, where I am team-teaching a course titled "A History of Madness" with my friend Jim Ward who, like me, has a long history of doing social research and community development, often with and within the consumer/survivor/ex-patient community.

Jim and I are walking a trail blazed by Geoffrey Reaume. Following the publication of his book *Remembrance of Patients Past: Patient Life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940*, Dr. Reaume taught "Mad People's History" at Ryerson for three years. He also developed a proposal to make "A History of Madness" a liberal studies option for all Ryerson students starting in the fall of 2004. Before that could happen, however, he was hired to teach critical disability studies at York University. That's where I

came in and, the next year, Jim as well.

Since the fall of 2004, interest in "A History of Madness" has grown. The Faculty of Arts now offers it four times a year, twice in the winter and twice in the fall. You may imagine how excited I am, as an activist, to be able to reach 220 students a year. And it's not just the numbers of students that excite me – it's where the students are from. Looking at just one of the four classes we taught in the fall and winter semesters, I see that we had students from all five faculties and 20 different programs, including aerospace engineering!

From the name of the course (it's not a history of mental illness, it's a history of madness) to the resources for the course (as much emphasis on psychiatric survivor activists like Persimmon Blackbridge, Pat Capponi and Irit Shimrat as there is on medical historians like Roy Porter) to the questions we examine ("What's the relationship between madness and gender, race and sexual orientation?"), we are inviting students to think about madness and mad people differently. When they read Blackbridge and Capponi, they see objects become subjects; they see "they" becoming "we."

The topics students chose for their essays suggests that they are up for changing the subject. One student looked at how race and gender affected black women with mental illness; several wrote about what it was like to live in a mental hospital. An essay examining the nexus between sexual orientation and psychiatry had a provocative title: "Gay Mental Health Myths: A Look at How Psychiatry Created a Mental Disorder, Reinforced Stereotypes and Made Homosexuals Ill." Another essay was extremely timely: "The Rise and Fall of Eugenics in Canada" anticipated a conference called "Eugenics and Sterilization in Alberta 35 Years Later." Several students wrote about their own encounters with madness; one included a six-song soundtrack. There were quite a few essays about mad people and employment, probably reflect-

ing how compelling the students found the documentary *Working Like Crazy*.

Two dancers and an actor developed a performance piece. Two other videos came from film students. One student made a beautiful scrapbook filled with excerpts from the course materials; pasted into the book were two letters, one addressed "Dear Mother," and the other, "The Superintendent."

Some students examined madness and culture: "Madness in *Jane Eyre* and *Alias Grace*," "American History X", "The Number 23" and "Critique of the Depiction of Dissociative Identity Disorder in *Sybil*."

In a category all by itself was a submission from an intrepid student whose thesis statement was: "My Professor is a Psychiatric Survivor."

The essays have been returned to the students, and the marks have been tabulated and submitted to the registrar. The Faculty of Arts is wondering whether we could add another "A History of Madness" class in the fall. Apparently, the appetite for changing the subject continues to grow.

David Reville calls himself a psychiatric survivor. He's been teaching "A History of Madness" at Ryerson University since the fall of 2004. For more information about the School of Disability Studies, please visit www.ryerson.ca/ds/.

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