

Disability, Technology, Communication

COMS 492 (001)—Special Topics in Power, Difference and Justice, Fall 2013¹

Tuesdays 14:30-17:30, W5 Arts

Professor Jonathan Sterne

Office: Arts W280

Office hours: M 13:00-14:00 and T 13:15-14:15 (no appointment necessary—please drop in!) and by appointment; please allow some lead time for appointments, I am heavily booked but would be happy to see you.

Office Phone: 398-5852 (I rarely pick up; I check voicemail at least once a day TTh)

Email: jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca. I check at least once daily M-F when I'm in town—please allow a couple days for a reply. If your email requires a long reply I may ask you to see me. If you have a question that is easily answered on the course website or in course materials, I will direct you there.

Prospectus

This course explores disability scholarship in order to rethink our basic concepts of communication, technology and culture. We will consider critical accounts of disability against theories of technology and communication. Most available theories of communication and technology presuppose a fully “able” subject, even though there is little warrant for doing this when we consider the full variety of human conditions. What happens if we remove that presupposition and instead begin by presupposing the human variety?

Requirements

Books:

Pullin, Graham. *Design Meets Disability*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009. ISBN: 0262516748

Additional required readings will be available through the course website.

Etiquette:

1. Your goal is full attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading all of required texts. I expect the very best you can give.
2. Show good faith and good humor toward your colleagues in the classroom. For both: disagreements are expected and encouraged, but please keep nitpicking to a minimum; personal attacks and intimidation are not acceptable under any circumstance. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones. You are free to change your mind at any time; so are others. Arguments are not contests.

¹ This course is now “on the books” as COMS 411, but it was too late to change for this year.

3. Avoid “seek and destroy” criticism of others’ ideas (or ideas in the readings). If you have something critical to say, be ready to explain how the piece could be improved. If you disagree with the premise of a piece, then read for what motivates the argument.
4. Personal experience is sometimes a necessary part of discussion, but be thoughtful before bringing it up. Is it really relevant to the topic? Do you want others to know what you are about to say? Are you prepared to seriously consider others’ (equally valid) interpretations of your experience if they differ from your own? Anecdotes are not the same thing as systematically collected scholarly evidence.
5. Be mindful of your own use of technology. You should put away laptops, mobile phones, and other personal communication technologies (apart from writing utensils, paper and class texts) except when required for an activity or necessary for a student’s accommodation.

Product (and % of Semester Grade):

I. Weekly response papers (30%)

For each class (except those noted below), write a 1-2 page (double spaced—350-500 words) response to one of the assigned readings (or part of a book if a book is assigned). The response should be “critical” in the sense that it works through and engages with an idea from the reading. Ideally, your critique will help stimulate discussion in the class. All class members should be prepared to say something about what they wrote, and I will have a few students read their critiques each week as a way of starting the discussion.

Critiques should be posted to the MyCourses site by 3pm each Monday before class. **I will grade them on a pass/fail basis to encourage risk-taking, but will note exceptional effort or achievement over the course of the term, as well as lackluster effort.** I will give your first response a letter grade to give you an idea of my assessment.

II. Dates Project (10%)

For the class on 29 October, students will write a slightly longer, 5-6 page double-spaced paper (plus scholarly apparatus) based on an assignment (due on the 21st, 3pm). Students will apply Graham Pullin’s book by planning an accessible date in Montreal, from start to finish. The date can be for any configuration of abilities, genders, sexualities or number of people: the important thing is that you think through accessibility in terms of getting around the city and engaging with its cultural life.

The assignment may be completed on its own terms, but may also be folded into a larger semester project.

III. Discussion Participation and Facilitation (15%)

Participation:

I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussion. You should come every week ready to discuss the readings. I notice (and appreciate it) when students make good contributions to the course online or in other ways besides speaking up in class. I distinguish between quantity and quality. Students will be marked down for talking while others are talking, text messaging, or using laptops for purposes other than advancing class discussion.

Facilitation:

Once during the term you (or you and a colleague) will be designated **Finder(s) of Objects**. The Finder of Objects will

- 1) locate an object or two for us to discuss in relation to the readings,
- 2) lead a discussion about the object, and
- 3) make a short post on the relevant class discussion board with links to the materials used in the presentation (if they are available online), or full bibliographic or other source information for materials that exist only in physical form (such that other class members could get ahold of them if they wanted to). Posts are due 5pm the day before your object finding.

Your object may be an image, a sound recording, a video, a device, or anything else you see fit to bring in. I prefer that people bring in objects created by someone other than themselves, but if you made something particularly cool, please consult with me. The classroom is equipped with a VGA cable and 1/8th inch (3.5mm) stereo audio cable to hook up laptops. If you require other equipment, please let me know by 10:00 Monday morning before your class. Audiovisual material should be of short duration—ideally, no more than 5 minutes. If you use a Macintosh, bring the appropriate dongle to connect your computer to a VGA projector. I can't guarantee I have the right one.

IV. Semester Project (45%)

Semester projects will result in

- a 1 paragraph (or shorter) “paper idea” email to me, due 1 October 14:30, proposing a topic and approach, and research questions if you have them.

- a 4 page proposal that includes clear research questions, a bibliography, a discussion of relevant readings from the course, and a research plan, due 8 October at 17:30.
- a 2 paragraph progress report, posted on the course website, due 5 November 14:30.
- a short presentation talk on the 26th of November
- a formal scholarly paper (15-20pp, plus scholarly apparatus) or alternative due by 5 December, 19:00, posted on the course website.

We will discuss the semester projects in more detail as the course unfolds.

If you have a brilliant alternative idea for your project, I am open to the prospect.

How to Present on November 26th

It is my preference that students present in as fluid a fashion as possible—i.e., give a speech, don't just read a paper. However, recognizing that not everyone is comfortable doing that, students may elect to read from a written text. If you choose to read to us, please make enough copies of your text so that everyone can follow along. If time limits are short, you will need to read an excerpt.

Class Schedule

Bring Printed Copies of Readings to Class

3 Sep:

Apologia: some basic concepts for the study of technology and disability

10 Sep:

Disability and Technology: Take I

Pullin, Graham. *Design Meets Disability*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

17 Sep: Stigma, Identity, Affiliation

Goffman, Erving. "Stigma and Social Identity." *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963, 1-40

Schweik, Susan. "Introduction." In *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. New York: New York University Press, 2009, 1-20

Siebers, Tobin. "Introduction." *Disability Theory*, 1-33. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.

Mills, Mara. "Hearing Aids and the History of Electronics Miniaturization." *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 33, no. 2 (April-June 2011): 24-44.

24 Sep:

Scripting Ability: Technology and Radical Monopoly

Illich, Ivan. "Radical Monopoly," *Tools for Conviviality*, 51-57. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

Akrich, Madeleine. "The De-Description of Technical Objects." *Shaping Technology, Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, edited by Wiebe Bijker and J. Law, 205-24. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

McRuer, Robert. "Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence," *Crip Theory*. 1-33. New York: New York University Press. (note: the .pdf wrongly attributes the essay to Michael Bérubé—he's the book series editor, not the author)

Jain, Sarah S. Lochlann. "Keyboard Design." *Injury: The Politics of Product Design and Safety Law in the United States*, 86-123. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

1 Oct

Representing Disability (1-paragraph paper idea email due before class)

Mitchell, David and Sharon Snyder. "Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor." In *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, 47-64. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

Kleege, Georgina. "Blindness and Visual Culture: An Eyewitness Account." *Journal of Visual Culture* 4 (2005): 179-190.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Looking Away, Staring Back." *Staring: How We Look*, 79-94. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Haller, Beth A. "Not Worth Keeping Alive? *New York Times* Narratives About Assisted Suicide." In *Representing Disability in an Ableist World*, 67-86. Louisville: The Avacado Press, 2010.

8 Oct

No class—first proposals due.

15 Oct

Of Different Minds

Grandin, Temple. "Thinking in Pictures: Autism and Visual Thought." *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism*, 19-42. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Cartwright, Lisa. "'A Child is Being Beaten': Disorders of Authorship, Agency and Affect in Facilitated Communication." *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child*, 157-227. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Peters, John Durham. "Broadcasting and Schizophrenia." *Media, Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2010): 123-40.

22 Oct

Prosthesis: Technologies, Bodies, Abilities

Lorde, Audrey. "Breast Cancer: Power vs. Prosthesis." *The Cancer Journals*, 55-77. Argyle, NY: Spinsters, Ink, 1980.

Sobchack, Vivian. "A Leg to Stand On: Prosthetics, Metaphor, and Materiality." *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, 205-225. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Cartwright, Lisa & Brian Goldfarb. "On the Subject of Neural and Sensory Prosthesis." *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a*

Biocultural Future, edited by Marquard Smith and Joanne Morra, 125-154.
Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

29 Oct: Dates Assignment

Recommended:

Hahn, Harlan. "Disability and the Urban Environment: A Perspective on Los Angeles." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 4 (1986): 279-88.

Americans with Disabilities Act Guidelines for design:

<http://www.ada.gov/adastd94.pdf>

And the website for the institute for human-centered design

<http://www.adaptiveenvironments.org/index.php?option=Project&Itemid=208&pid=176>

5 Nov

Media, Politics, Accessibility (*Progress report due online before class.*)

Bérubé, Michael. "Disability and Citizenship." *Dissent*, Spring 2003.

<http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=506%5D>

Ellis, Katie, and Mike Kent. "Does that Face-'Book' Come in Braille?: Social Networking Sites and Disability" and "Challenges and Opportunities: the Road Ahead for Disability in a Digital World." *Disability and New Media*, 95-112, 131-47. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Elcessor, Elizabeth. "Captions On, Off, on TV, Online: Accessibility and Search Engine Optimization in Online Closed Captioning," *Television and New Media*, 13:4(2011): 329-352.

Kirpatrick Bill. "'A Blessed Boon': Radio, Disability, Governmentality, and the Discourse of the 'Shut-In,' 1920-1930." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 29:3 (2011): 165-184.

12 Nov:

Graham Pullin Special Guest Star

(readings TBA)

19 Nov

Revisiting the Medical Model: The Politics of the Disability-Adjusted Life Year (Nicholas King, Special Guest Star)

Canguilhem, Georg, "From the Social to the Vital," *The Normal and the Pathological*, 145-58, trans. Carolyn R. Fawcett. Boston: D. Reidel Publishing, 1977.

Additional readings TBA.

26 Nov: Student Presentations

5 Dec: Final Projects Due

Other Policies

Grades: I am eager to help you do well on assignments before they are due. Please visit me during office hours to ask questions about material for the course and assignments on which you are working.

Generally I evaluate in terms of letter grades, and then assign them numbers in terms of the baselines on the scale set out in the Arts and Sciences calendar (85=A, 70=B, etc), which allows them to be properly weighted and averaged. Grades in the “A” range are awarded only for superior work (and not merely sufficient performance). Grades in the “B” range are awarded for work that is above satisfactory. In the “C” range they are awarded for satisfactory/sufficient work. And in the “D” range, they reflect unsatisfactory work. You can always check your grades on MyCourses.

Students are allowed to miss one class during the term without penalty, though you are still expected to notify me of your absence. Additional unexcused absences will result in a reduction of their final grade.

Accommodation: If you require special accommodations or classroom modifications of any kind, please notify both the professor and Office for Students with Disabilities by the end of the first week in which you are enrolled in the course. They are located in Room RS56, Redpath Library Bldg., 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TTY), [<http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/>].

French: You have the right to submit your written work in French. If you plan to write in French, please get in touch with me during add-drop so we can talk about how to handle it, as I am not fluent in French. Since there is a writing-intensive component to the class, we should discuss logistics.

Class discussions are in English, but you’re certainly welcome to resort to French if you can’t find the right word in English and we’ll figure it out together.

Nondiscrimination: I value equality of opportunity, and human dignity and diversity. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, ethnic or national origin, civil status, religion, creed, political convictions, language, sex, sexual orientation, social condition, age, personal difference or the use of assistive technology in negotiating that difference. Among other things, this means that you do not have to agree with your teacher, the assigned readings, or the majority of your classmates in order to do well in this course. You are, however, obligated to demonstrate an understanding of the course material *whether or not you agree with it*. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

Late papers may not receive comments and will earn a reduced grade (one increment of a letter grade for the first two days, then an increment per day, including weekends).

Activities for which you must be present (e.g., presentations, finder of objects) **cannot be made up**. If you know you will be absent on a day for which you are obligated, trade with one of your colleagues. Notify me of the trade if it happens. This is your responsibility, not mine.

It is your responsibility to make sure I receive any assignment you turn in. It is also your responsibility to properly back up your work: keep more than one digital copy and always have a paper copy of anything you submit.

You must complete all the major assignments (final paper, dates assignment, etc) to pass the course.

Required Academic Integrity Statement: McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity)

Special Required Emergency Syllabus-Eraser Clause: In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Thanks: Dylan Mulvin, Mara Mills, Julie Ellman. Comic: <http://cripzthecomix.com>

