Blindness Enters the Classroom

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ABSTRACT *This paper addresses blindness in a university classroom. I make use of my experience as a blind professor in order to depict the social significance in the intersection of blindness, sightedness and knowledge. The paper begins with a description of the initial classroom contact between a blind professor and students. It then depicts the presence of sightedness in the classroom in terms of the classroom's social organisation. The paper moves to a discussion of how university teaching makes use of blindness and sightedness to represent ignorance and enlightenment, respectively. The paper ends by reformulating the taken for granted conception of blindness as contingency into an understanding of blindness and the body as an essential aspect of teaching and learning.*

Look! Look!
A dog, a dog!
It's a seeing eye dog!
He's blind!

Then silence, a very loud silence. 'Forward Smokie, right, find the chair'. My guide dog Smokie competently guides me to the chair situated at the large desk located at the front of N17—a large lecture hall in the university where I teach sociology.

'Good boy, Smoke' I say as I remove his harness, place it carefully on the chair, and give him a well deserved treat. I wait the few seconds that it takes Smokie to settle himself comfortably under the large desk, and then I turn my body and face the still silent mass of more than 80 students. The class list I received 2 days before showed an enrolment of 83 students for this new term in Introductory Sociology. As I stand there facing the class, I sense the mass which fills the room and I hear the students as well—not their voices, they aren't speaking clearly now—but I hear movement in the seats, bags being put on the floor, paper shuffling, throats clearing. This lecture theatre holds 75 people and as I cast my gaze over the rows of seats inclining from where I stand toward the back, I wonder where the extra eight students are sitting or if they are even in the class.

I run my hands through my hair and smile at the class. There is no need to call for silence and so I begin my first lecture of the new term. 'This is Introductory Sociology 100.12', I tell the mass, 'So, if you want biology, chemistry or psych, or something, you're in the wrong room'. There are a few murmurs of laughter, but I

don't sense anyone leaving. I continue: 'For those of you who didn't notice, there's a dog under this desk'. More murmurs of laughter. 'His name is Smokie and he's my guide dog', I say. 'Guide dogs guide blind people', I continue, 'So', I draw this word out, 'I guess that means I'm …' The laughter now goes well beyond the murmur.

'My name is Rod Michalko', I tell them, 'And it's my privilege to be your professor for the year'. I then turn and walk to the chalk board. I run my hand along its ledge and locate a piece of chalk. Raising the chalk to the chalk board, I say that I'm going to write my name on the board. As I am about to write my name, I stop and face the class. 'Anything written on here?' I ask. A few 'No's' come from the mass. 'Come on you guys, louder, let me know, I don't want to write on someone else's junk'. Loud laughter now and a resounding 'No' springs from the mass. I print my name on the chalk board and turn to face the class. 'Can you read that?' I raise my hands as I ask this question, beckoning another loud response. I hear a resounding 'Yes'.

'Not bad for a blind guy, huh?' I say. The laughter is now bouncing around the room and the mass begins to speak loudly. The students have now come to life. Holding my hand up and speaking over the din, the class settles. I now begin Introductory Sociology, 100.12.

However, I begin something else as well—something much more ominous than introducing more than 80 first-year university students to my discipline of sociology. I'm beginning to introduce them to blindness. For most, if not for all of the students, blindness has entered *their* classroom for the first time. Blindness has come into their classroom *with* me and *in* me (Michalko, 1998). Facing the students, there is much with and about me that is not so unusual for them—I am, after all, a white, male professor, a social identity with which students are more than familiar. However, these interpretive categories are shoved to the side as blindness radically makes its way to the foreground of the students' interpretive processes regarding the social identity—professor. They sit there in surprise, some are confused and others sit at their desks in disbelief. 'I couldn't believe it when you walked in with Smokie at the beginning of the class' one student told me about half way through the term. 'I phoned my Mom right after class'. He continued 'I told her, I got a blind prof! I just couldn't believe it'.

Yet, this disbelief goes much farther than merely the expression of surprise. For example, a former student dropped in to visit me about a year after he graduated. During our visit, he, Stuart, was reminiscing about the first class he took from me. He said that about a month into the class, Brian (the student who sat next to him) became suspicious of my blindness. Stuart said that Brian pointed out that 'He looks right at me', as he put it and asked Stuart if he thought I was really blind. We both laughed. 'It's true', said Stuart, 'Brian really thought you could see and he thought the class was, you know, one of those experiments. He even had me looking for one-way mirrors on the wall'.

Many students have told me similar stories over the years. What can (should?) we make of such stories? There is, of course, the obvious quantitative explanation: students rarely, if ever, experience a blind professor and, when they do, they are surprised and 'can't believe it'. As Shakespeare (1999, p. 49) says 'Because of the

widespread segregation of disabled people, many non-disabled people may not have come into contact with disabled people …' As explanations go, this one is certainly plausible. However, to leave it at that is to ignore the *particular* social context in which blindness makes an appearance and within which surprise and disbelief are framed. It is to ignore the *scene* in which blindness is a frame. To understand the surprise and disbelief when blindness unexpectedly 'shows up in a picture', it is necessary to conduct a 'scenography', to borrow from Butler (1993, p. 28), and thus to interrogate the ways in which a scene is put together, staged and socially constructed (Shildrick & Price, 1996) such that blindness becomes a surprising and even unbelievable feature.

It is just such a scenography that I will endeavour to conduct in the following pages. First, I will examine the social organisation of the university classroom into which blindness enters. What is it about this organisation that makes the entry of blindness so surprising and unbelievable? Has blindness been in the classroom before—before the blind professor entered? After addressing these questions and raising others, I will turn to a discussion of the 'place' of the disabled body in the university classroom. Is disability just one more contingency, just one more human feature? Or does the disabled body harbour a particular and valuable pedagogy? Are professors merely 'talking heads' or do our bodies speak as well and, if so, what do *bodies* say in the classroom and how are they heard?

The Prof's Blind, He Can't See!

I'm in N17 facing my Intro class for the first time. It's a new academic year and I'm quite excited. I'm very familiar with this classroom, I've taught here before. More than this, I've been in classrooms most of my life and this one is really no different from the others.

The student desks are only a few feet from where I stand and are arranged in theatre fashion, rising on an incline to the back of the room. My desk is, of course, at the front of the room and is very large, a big table really. It has the usual stuff on it—a lectern and a slide projector, both of which I place on the floor next to Smokie. There is a smaller, podium-like table next to the large desk. It too has its usual stuff; it houses a VCR, as well as a computer replete with powerpoint. I notice, despite my blindness, the overhead flourescent lighting which floods the classroom with an almost unbearable brightness. Of course, lurking behind me is that ever-present and proud symbol of university life—the chalk board.

I am just as equipped as is my classroom. In my shoulder bag are about 80 copies of the course outline, printed up very nicely. I also have copies of the two books we will be reading in Introductory Sociology this year. There is a paper clip attached at one end of the cover of each book. This is so I will know 'which way is up' when I hold the books up for the students to 'see'.

Everything is set; the students embody a quiet anticipation; I 'sense' over 80 pairs of eyes now on me, now on Smokie. Smiling, I return the 'look', I focus my gaze first toward the rows of students nearest me; then, I raise my gaze moving slowly left to right, across the middle and to the back of the room. I then reach

down, give Smokie one more quick rub behind his ears (an act designed more to assure me than him), straighten up and walk around to the front of the large table. Introductory Sociology 100.12 is about to begin.

My course, along with every other course in this university and in courses in universities everywhere, is about to begin in the midst of the ubiquitous, taken-for-granted and thus *unnoticed* 'sense of sight'. Like the air we breathe, sight is everywhere in my classroom, and like the air, it is not noticed and not even seen. The classroom—its equipment and social organisation—all bear the mark of sight; students 'see' and assume this of one another and they assume that they all see the same things and in the same way. There is no blindness visible *anywhere* in the classroom … till now.

Until Smokie and I entered the classroom, blindness was on no one's mind and, just as importantly, neither was sight. But, now what? This is a university classroom, after all. There are textbooks to read, overhead slides to see, words to be copied from the chalk board, exams and term papers to be written and graded, professors to 'watch out' for students who cheat—this site is full of sight. Now what that blindness has entered this site of sights? Now what that the professor is blind? He (I) has a lot of explaining to do.

I begin the course by doing just that—actually, I begin more by depicting than explaining. There are lessons to be had, as well, regarding the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices of our society in these depictions. For example, I ask the students how they get the 'prof's attention' during a class and how they communicate the desire to speak. The students now have an opportunity (usually the first one) to address the universal classroom symbol of the 'raising-of-the-hand'. This is our first 'sociological lesson' of the year—the interpretive transformation of a visual event (the raising of a hand) into a communication event bathed in meaning—'I want to say something'. This leads to our second sociological lesson—the construction of new symbols from the building blocks of culture. Students *always* suggest the interactional practice of the 'interruption' as a way to symbolise their desire to speak, now that they have a blind professor. 'Excuse me' or 'Rod' are now established as the oral events which are interpretively transformed into the communication event of 'I want to say something'.

The next sociological lesson has to do with the phenomenon of reading. Reading, and doing so *with the eyes* is an assumption as universal to the classroom as is the raising of the hand. I ask for a volunteer and a student comes to the front of the class. I ask her to close her eyes; then, I hand her a copy of the course outline and ask her to figure out how to read it without opening her eyes. The class comes alive, laughing and talking. Within a few seconds, the class begins shouting suggestions to the student standing beside me tentatively holding the course outline. Sooner or later, either from the student herself or shouted from the class, comes the suggestion 'Get someone else to read it to you'. 'Good', I say as I take the course outline from the student's hands, 'That's what I'll do when it comes to grading your term papers'. Sociological lesson number two—print is a cultural phenomenon and not something that stands by itself outside of the context of contemporary society. There are many ways to read and even though visually is the dominant way, it is not

the only way. Another sociological lesson—the implicit connection between vision and print is an ideology which dominates in our society leading to the hegemonic privileging of sight (Barton, 1998, p. 56).

There are other such sociological lessons during this first class, but I mention only one more, namely, recognising one another. Sight is also privileged in this regard. We see one another, we recognise one another. Does this mean that those of us who don't see, don't recognise anyone? How will the professor who 'can't see' come to recognise his students? How will he know who's asking a question? What of those students who skip class, will he know? Does he even know that there are students in the classroom? Are there other sociological lessons (Barnes, 1998) to be gleaned regarding the phenomenon of recognising one another when addressing it *within the particularity* of 'having a blind prof'? This time, I leave such addressing and such gleaning to the imagination of the reader of this paper. Surely, there is a lesson in this too.

So far I have addressed some of the ways in which sight is implicitly embedded in our classrooms. Sight is not merely and only some biological and physiological function. Instead, sight represents a symbolic order and it is implicitly used to privilege that order as both the dominant ideological and the 'normal' way of being-in-the-world (Oliver 1996; Corker, 1998). I made use of the occasion of 'blindness in the classroom' as a way to critically interrogate this order as it manifests itself in our university classrooms. I want now to turn to a discussion of how another aspect of this symbolic order 'comes into view' when blindness enters the classroom.

I See, Therefore I Know

Like every sociologist, the fundamental topic of my research and of my teaching is society and, like every sociologist, I try to 'get' my students to 'look' at their society. However, unlike every sociologist, I problematise this 'looking', as well as the understanding that society is 'seeable'. 'Looking at society' is somewhat paradoxical especially when considered from 'the point of view' that student have been living *in* society from the time of their birth. Still, if we (sociologists) are asking our students to 'look at their society', where would they look? Where is society, after all? What sort of 'sight' can 'see' society?

My students can see many things and I ask them to point to some of them—to their desks, to my desk, to me, to each other, to themselves—and they have no difficulty whatsoever doing so. I then ask them to point to society and this is where the trouble starts. When I ask the students to point to my desk, not only do they know where to point, *they also know where to look*. The latter presupposes the former. However, when it comes to pointing to society, the 'knowing-where-to-look' loses its pre-suppositional and taken-for-granted character. Students are never sure of where to look let alone of where to point. This is not the case when I ask students to point at my desk—they *know* where to look and thus where to point and this *knowledge* is steeped within an implicit understanding of the sense of sight as a *necessary condition* for knowing—'I see, therefore I know' (Michalko, 1998).

But, like the rest of us, students also know that they live in a society; they know

that society exists. Yet, their sense of sight with its subsequent 'ability to look' fails them when I ask them to point at their society. Their bewilderment at this 'inability' may be understood as a temporary and pseudo blindness. The students *cannot* point at society; they *cannot* even look at it; they have 'gone blind!'

The sense of sight that the students so implicitly and so 'naturally' relied upon as the conjoining of 'seeing and knowing' has failed them. This temporary and pseudo blindness, however, penetrates our classroom *as a teacher*. The students and I begin to 're-view' what they know without seeing—we discuss knowing ideas, thoughts, emotions and we ask what it means to know a friend, a family, each other and to know ourselves. We begin to interrogate the role of sight in these knowledges. The discussion then moves from the role of sight to sight *as a role*. Somehow the students know not only that they see, but also that others do. The question now becomes, how? How do we know (see) that, like us, others see and, like us, others see that we see? From this form of questioning, flows the first and most important of all class assignments: 'When you leave here today, I want you to spend the rest of the day, this evening and tomorrow looking and seeing how it is that you know that people around you can see and how it is that you know that they can tell that you can also see. You have to do this without asking anyone whether they can see and without telling anyone that you can see'.

Students come to the next class with all sorts of responses to this assignment. Some example: 'He waved to me and I waved back, right across the parking lot.' 'I smiled at her and she smiled back' 'I got all ready, I looked at myself in the mirror and made sure I looked okay before I left my room.' 'You know what she said? I heard this before about a million times but I couldn't believe it when I heard it this time. She said, "I just gave him a dirty look and kept walking".' 'My psych prof just put up a slide, a slide of the brain.' 'See you later, I just said see you later.'

Students were beginning to experience what Berger (1963, p. 23) calls the 'first wisdom' of sociology—'things are not what they seem'. Although not in these terms (yet?), students experience the first trope in understanding the social character of their world. They did so by problematising the common-sense understanding of sight as a strictly physical fact. Like everything else, sight *needs* to be achieved and this can only be done through social action, interaction, through language (Corker, 2000). Seeing and knowing this, requires something other and more than the sense of sight. These students learned that in order to see and know their society, they must refocus their gaze by positioning themselves within a standpoint that offers them a view of society. These students also learned what philosophers have learned over the centuries, namely that sight cannot see itself. They learned this when blindness (the teacher) entered the classroom; they learned this from both my blindness and theirs.

Despite the blind teacher entering the classroom and despite blindness as teacher doing so as well, the story doesn't end there; in fact, it doesn't even begin there. Blindness entered the classroom long before Smokie guided me into N17 that day. I want to conclude with a discussion of this version of blindness and its place in the university classroom.

The Echo of Blindness

> Contemporary conversations about knowledge and the institution often focus on the way that academic discourse legitimates itself by disavowing the historical, cultural, and corporeal specificity of its speaking. By exposing the way that objective and neutral methodologies repress the precise locations from which the speaker comes, academic discourses have begun to interrogate themselves from within, calling scholars to account, so to speak, for their own inescapable epistemic contingencies. (Roof & Wiegman, 1995, p. ix)

Disavowal, as a form of self-legitimization engaged in by academic discourses, has traditionally been a preferred method for resolving the 'problem of subjectivity' in the academy. This problem as well as its solution is an articulation of Modernity and it is primarily to the Enlightenment that we owe this legacy. The 'precise location from which the speaker comes' has been traditionally understood and positioned as a barrier to 'objective knowledge' and this positioning has generated the solution of 'objective and neutral methodologies'. Method—framed within a positivistic understanding of the world—is Modernity's way of removing (repressing) the particular situation of the speaker/inquirer. This methodological repositioning of the speaker/inquirer relies upon an imagined location possessed of the 'power' (Foucault, 1970, 1972) to neutralise the influence of subjectivity. The problem of subjectivity is taken care of by de-historising, de-culturing and de-bodying the subject with the subsequent production of knowledge.

The Western tradition has continuously made use of visual metaphor with its concomitant spatial metaphor to express the problem of subjectivity and its solution (Jay, 1993). Thus, particular locations 'blind' us to a 'clear' and objective 'view' of reality. We (particular subjects) must 'get out of the way' in order for reality to 'come into view'. Particularity 'blinds' us to the objective 'view' of reality and any knowledge production from particular 'locations' is knowledge 'blinded' by subjectivity. Even though Roof & Wiegman point out that academic speakers are beginning to 'interrogate themselves from within' and are called to account 'for their own inescapable epistemic contingencies', the problem of subjectivity conceived of as 'blinding' knowledge production remains a dominant ideology within the academy to this day (Smith, 1999).

It is this version of blindness that precedes Smokie and me as we enter the classroom. The students sitting in front of us have had more than a decade of formal education; they have had several years of 'seeing the point', of 'not being blind to the facts', of 'looking at things objectively', of 'trying to see what the teacher is getting at'. The students have had many years of educational practice for 'seeing' that 'seeing is enlightenment and blindness is ignorance'. They have had years of encouragement to 'step out of the darkness' and 'into the light' (see what I mean?)

Now the very contingency that the students have been taught to avoid—the contingency that represents the quintessential barrier to knowledge—walks into their classroom and 'positions' himself as professor. Blindness as the contingent representation of ignorance begins to resonate and 'echo' around the classroom. The 'sounds

of blindness' reverberate in the exclamations 'He's got a seeing eye dog! He's blind!', and in the questions 'How will he mark my exams? How will he know who I am?' These remarks are expressions and representations of the more fundamental question 'How can he know, if he doesn't see?'

My blindness is, to borrow from Roof & Wiegman once again, my 'inescapable epistemic contingency'. Exposed as I am in front of more than eighty students, flexing my fingers gently around Smokie's harness, I do find at least some means of escape. Recall that I tell students how I will mark their exams and papers and I demonstrate how I read. By showing students that I do the 'ordinary things' that other 'ordinary professors' do, I escape, albeit to a small degree, the 'extraordinariness' of my contingency. I make use of the common-sense version of blindness [which not so coincidentally includes the medical sense (Zola, 1977; Oliver, 1990)] as a condition (contingency) in order to demonstrate that I can minimise the 'negative effects' of blindness on my teaching. However, this also serves to emphasise the version of blindness that greets me as I enter the classroom. My blindness 'echoes the sound' that is already resonating there.

I need to do more than account for my 'inescapable epistemic contingency'. I need to escape the conception of my blindness *as contingency* in the first place. If not, my presence *as professor* is, as Roof & Wiegman say, de-cultured and, more fundamentally, de-bodied. After all, the students, unlike me, are without contingency—they don't 'see' their eyesight as such. They are simply people, not 'people with eyesight'. They don't 'happen to see', they simply 'see'. I, on the other hand, am not simply a person—I am a person 'with blindness', with a disability—my blindness is a contingency, a condition I 'happen' to have, I am a person who 'happens to be blind'—at least 'in their eyes'. My students have *no* contingency which they must escape. They 'see' and thus potentially 'know'. I can't 'see' and thus I can't 'know'. I will be teaching ideas that must be *looked at* (examined) and ultimately *seen* (understood). I will be teaching 'seeing people' to 'see sociologically'. In the words of Dibernard (1996, p. 132), I would be involved in 'teaching what you're not in the presence of those who are'.

I enter a university classroom in which blindness is already present, a presence couched within the understanding of it as the binary opposite of sight. Since our culture metaphorically (and often concretely) connects 'seeing' with 'knowing', my presence in the classroom represents an initial echo of blindness as an obstacle to knowing. 'Seeing' blindness as merely an 'inescapable epistemic contingency' doesn't necessarily position blindness in a location of knowing. After all, 'inescapable contingency' does resonate with the sense that if it (blindness) *could* be escaped, it should be. Blindness is not typically treated as a location of epistemic advantage or standpoint (Harding, 1996, pp. 146–160; Smith, 1987, pp. 181–207) in the way that 'woman', for example, is. Womanness, as a site of inquiry and as an epistemological standpoint, does not formulate woman as contingency. Instead, there is something *essential* to be experienced and learned from the standpoint of womanness. Yet, blindness and other disabilities as well, are still usually framed within the non-disability ideology of conditionality and contingency (Titchkosky, 2000).

Such an ideology is exemplified in Dibernard's work (1996). A non-disabled

university professor, she introduced a course in disabled women's poetry. Whatever complacency she harboured with respect to her new course being merely another university course, was in her words, 'quickly shattered the first night when a woman in a wheelchair wheeled into the room', (Dibernard, 1996, p. 132). 'I knew then' Dibernard continues 'that I have a lot of work to do in coming to terms with my own relationship with and feelings about disability and my identity as an able-bodied person' (Dibernard, 1996)

In the face of disability, Dibernard not only faces the epistemic challenge of coming to terms with disability, she also recognizes herself (her identity) as located within able-bodiedness. 'I feel my identity now not as a woman who "happens to be" able-bodied, but as a woman whose able-bodiedness is a location for which I need to take responsibility' (1996). Dibernard says that she needs to acknowledge her able-bodiedness 'as the place from which I experience the world and from which I do my work' (1996). Dibernard's experience and work flow from her able-bodiedness and, as a teacher, she has retrieved her embodiment. He body is no longer 'happenstance' or contingency, it is now the place (location) from which she experiences the world, from which she works, and from which she teaches.

However, Dibernard's able-bodiedness did not come to her from her experience or from her work, *until* she taught a course on disabled women's poetry and, more significantly, *until* the woman wheeled into her classroom that night (Mairs, 1996). *Disability gave her her able-bodiedness*. Dibernard's able-bodiedness now comes to her *as identity* and not merely as contingency.

However, does Dibernard's able-bodiedness return the favour to disability? Does she see the 'disabled body' in the same way she sees her own body? Does the 'disabled body' now occupy the space of epistemic location, or does it remain mere contingency? Like those with abled bodies, do we (those of us with disabled bodies) also experience the world and do our work from the location of our bodies? Dibernard 'hopes' that her students (the able-bodied ones) will come to understand their bodies in this way but, as she says, 'it's a long journey to make in fifteen weeks if *people with disabilities* have not even been visible before' (Dibernard, 1996, author's italics).

We can glimpse an answer to these questions from Dibernard's 'hope'. Despite her new found epistemic location, Dibenard still refers to disabled people as 'people with disabilities'. While her own (able) body is now co-mingled with identity, the disabled body remains contingent and conditional. We are not so much *disabled people* as we are people *with* disabilities. Dibernard's new found epistemic location permits her to 'see' herself not as someone who 'happens to be able-bodied', but as someone who *is* able-bodied. Yet, the location of able-bodiedness does not permit the same for the disabled body.

In a similar fashion, my students learn a great deal about their able-bodiedness (eyesight) when Smokie and I (blindness) enter the classroom. They learn, for example, about such cultural practices as 'making eye contact', of giving 'dirty looks', of 'looking wide awake' in class, and so on. They learn that eye contact and 'looks' are not merely a 'natural' function of eyesight, but are instead cultural productions. Some of the students begin to 'turn their gaze' toward their own

eyesight and some of them even begin to take responsibility for their 'seeing'. It is at this intersection between the body (eyesight) and identity that I must take responsibility for my blindness and join my students.

This con-joining of the body and identity *in the classroom with my students* is a daunting task indeed. Like Dibernard, I too am tempted to let my blindness (my body) reveal the connection between able-bodiedness and identity. I am tempted to reveal the epistemic location of able-bodiedness and I too join Dibernard in the 'hope' that my students will 'see' both their identity and epistemological standpoint *in their bodies (eyes)*. This hope, however, will remain just that, a hope, *unless* I (blindness in the classroom) continue the attempt to depict *my blindness as mine*—as my identity—and as a location from which I experience the world, from which I work, from which I teach, from which a reality (one as legitimate as those of my students) comes to me and especially as a location *in which I live*. This is to depict blindness and all disability as a social identity—an identity which embodies living and learning, and not one which is contingent and from which we must escape.

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