

December 15, 2010

To: David Theo Goldberg, Director, UCHRI

From: Cathy Kudlick & Sue Schweik, Co-Conveners, Critical Disability Studies
RRG

Re: Final Report

Dear David:

First of all, thanks much to you and the staff at UCHRI for funding this cluster, for being open to a new way of proceeding through the concept of a “Distributive Residency,” and for all the financial and other support you offered. It was a great pleasure to work with you and this group.

From our perspective as co-conveners, the whole experience was outstanding. Our aim was to imagine new directions for Disability Studies. The diverse group came together remarkably quickly during our first week in residence back in September, and continued to work well together throughout the term. The time in Irvine of intensive conversation and bonding was key. The welcome dinner set a convivial tone and established mutual points of interest. During the week, we met every day for at least six hours, allowing each person ninety minutes to present current research. We soon realized that hands-on projects offered unusual opportunities for lively and deep conversation. Two examples stand out: Patrick Anderson showed a series of slides that required audio description for participants who couldn't see the images, and Georgina Kleege broke us up into groups to describe tactile picture books that she brought along. Both exercises led to lively interchanges about the meaning of detail, what knowledge conveys, the role of various senses, and how perceptions differ so dramatically even among people with “normal” vision. We enjoyed these

exchanges, and would return to them again and again during the virtual segment of our “residency.” Another important bonding moment came when Victoria Marks, a dance choreographer, led the group in movement exercises structured to make us experience the meaning of embodiment. This interlude further pushed us to think about the fluidity among bodies, art, and the life of the mind.

To carry these ideas into the virtual part of the residency, we set up a schedule of weekly 2-hour Skype conversations, with each Cluster member being responsible for leading the discussion based on “assignments” of texts or viewing. Despite fears that virtual meetings would lead to less serious engagement, these calls proved as intense and serious as our in-person gatherings. As a group we agreed that writing and circulating responses of 1-2 pages per week to each “prompt” would help us to be present. We read these before the Skype call, using them to tease out key issues and points of convergence.

A few weeks in, everyone decided it would be fruitful to supplement these large-group conversations with smaller, less-focused ones, the idea being to further replicate a real residency where informal conversations among participants might occur. We literally drew names from a hat to create three “trios”. These groups did everything from share work-in-progress to discuss suggestions for further reading. The virtual period was further enhanced by random in-person meetings whenever people from the cluster happened to be in the same place, be it in Northern California, Southern California, or the East Coast. It’s likely that such conversations will lead to unforeseen collaborations.

Our December week in Irvine rekindled our in-person connections and discussions to carry the Critical Disability Studies Faculty Research Cluster forward. From the beginning, we all agreed that a published volume was not the way to go, especially since so much of our shared work ended up exploring the relationships between art and accessibility. How, for example, can a dance piece, video, or painting be rendered in non-visual ways without compromising the medium or the message? Is there a way that if built in from the beginning (rather than added on as a compliance obligation) these “accessibility” features would enhance the artistic product in unintended ways for all?

Collectively and organically we introduced a new concept we began calling “Participatory Description”: modes of audio description for visual images/film/video/performance, both as a mode of improving accessibility and as an intellectual/creative practice. Beginning with the assumption that objectivity is not always possible or even desirable, we sought to explore the many possibilities for audio description to inform sighted and blind people alike. What do conventions of describing take for granted about what it means to see, to know, to explain? What details are most important, and why? These questions lead to bigger conversations about perception, judgement, inclusion, participation, and whether universal access automatically conveys “value-added” Such methods invite reflection regarding if/how this method might work in a variety of venues, from the classroom to the stage.

Because we wanted to bring the excitement of our work together to a broader group of people, our Final Project will be a weeklong re-residency that would bring several artists into the mix. We’d work in groups with them to create/curate specific projects that would build in access beginning with the conceptual phase. The week would culminate in a one or two-day workshop that would bring in scholars and possibly members of the community to discuss the final results. Members of the group have begun exploring additional funding opportunities through organizations such as UCIRA.

More immediately, six of the nine participants have submitted a panel to the June 2011 meeting of the Society for Disability Studies to be held in San Jose, California to discuss our work at UCHRI. Not only will this allow us to introduce the idea of Participatory Description to scholars in our field, but it will also help us gain valuable feedback as we move forward with this idea.

It’s ironic that the supposedly “virtual” cluster probably bonded more intensely than many in-residence groups. Part of this of course was the luck of synergy. But we also credit the in-person weeks together and our structuring of the virtual time. Requiring weekly responses in writing helped, as did the trios. We might suggest a clearer syllabus for those weeks, mostly to facilitate schedules for participants seeking to balance their own work with being responsible to the group. Anticipating a final week together also strengthened our virtual

participation.

Thank you again for this incredible opportunity that we believe will continue to enrich not just a group of people, but also several fields over the years to come.