Jordana Mendelson (Department of Spanish & Portuguese)

Parent/Professor:
Lessons (Un)Learned about Technology and Cognitive Disability in the Classroom

When Dean Merlo’s call for this conversation circulated, I was struck by question number 2: “How can machine intelligence tools help alleviate the burdens of physical and/or cognitive disability?” But first, I have to expunge the word “burden” – a word, which itself is heavy with disquieting ableist, and offensive, notions around disability, care, and cure. What I think about when I bring together “intelligence tools” and “cognitive disability” is my son (who you see pictured on the screen), and I think about him constantly in relation to what we do as educators, and the potential our research holds for students across the continuum of their studies. But, to think of this continuum of learning, we need to directly address stigmas around disability and technology, to allow for a much broader, activist, and engaged conversation around neuro-diversity.

Both pictures illustrate the vital role of technology as a potential tool for access for students with cognitive disabilities: on the left is an IPad loaded with a particular speech program; on the right, one of NYU’s smart classrooms. The usefulness of either depends on guide, student, and the motivation for use.

My 12 year old son has Down syndrome and ADHD. In this picture taken during an assessment for an AAC (or Augmentative and Alternate Communication) device, he appears cooperative, yet, in fact refuses to use assistive technology, and has since he was 3.

Different iterations of supported communication programs could have been very useful to him – in making his needs known, participating in classroom discussion, and initiating conversations with peers. And yet, he refused. “No one else is using a device why should I?” His right of refusal is important – his right to choose not to use technology, while frustrating for me, is where he has set the ground for his own agency.

The picture on the right was taken when my son audited my Cultures and Contexts class.

What is impossible for me to imagine today is my son actually enrolling in a class like mine, at a University like ours. We do have the Moses Center and our student population is growing in neuro-diversity. There is broad acknowledgement of the need we have to make our campus more accessible for students with physical disabilities. We know these students are here because they self-identify as individuals with a disability. It is up to them, their “burden,” to seek supports, and it is up to individual professors to find the tools to accommodate.

But, it requires not just access to technology, smart classrooms, or more staff and attention to existing resources like the Moses Center, it also requires a shift in mindset.
Why did my son refuse a technology that could build a path for him to higher education? (he
doesn’t see it as a path, but I do). Differentiation and self-identification is a problem faced not
just by my son, but one that I have encountered too many times here at NYU. Too often, a
colleague will answer my protest to ban portable computers in the classroom with a reply that
is something like “Of course a student with a disability can use their device” – but they would
need to self-identify and differentiate themselves from their peers.

Instead, I would call on the University, and on my colleagues, to engage technology actively and
raise it as an issue of access, to be open about how different kinds of “intelligence machines”
might make your class, and access to it, more robust – not just now but in the future, when
hopefully NYU will become much more neuro-diverse than we are now. Think about the
student who depends on technology but is apprehensive to bring out their IPad because you
announced a policy banning technology in the classroom. Consider, how you might instead
model a robust, active, and engaged use of technology for your students.

I would love to see the day when these two pictures are not impossible, wish images (my son
using a speech device, and attending a class at NYU) but as fully realizable instances of the
successful interface between technology and cognitive disability.