Cripping School Curricula: 20 Ways to Re-Teach Disability

David Connor
Hunter College, City University of New York
&
Lynne Bejoian
Teachers College, Columbia University

Abstract: As instructors of a graduate level course about using film to re-teach disability, we deliberately set out to "crip" typical school curricula from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Utilizing disability studies to open up alternative understandings and reconceptualizations of disability, we explored feature films and documentaries, juxtaposing them with commonplace texts and activities found in school curricula. In doing so, we sought to challenge any simplistic notions of disability and instead cultivate knowledge of a powerful, and largely misunderstood aspect of human experience. The article incorporates twenty suggestions to re-teach disability that arose from the course. These ideas provide educators and other individuals with a set of pedagogical tools and approaches to enrich, complicate, challenge, clarify, and above all, *expand* narrowly perceived and defined conceptions of disability found within the discourse of schooling.

Key Words: media, curriculum, disability studies in education

As instructors of a graduate level course on using film to re-teach disability, we deliberately set out to crip school curricula from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Historically, representations of people with disabilities in film have been characterized as damaging, restrictive, stereotypic, pessimistic, and inaccurate (Norden, 1994; Safran, 1998a; Safran, 1998b). Acknowledging the profound degree of influence film exerts on the public's consciousness, we actively seek to challenge such depictions. Using the insights of disability studies to open up alternative understandings and reframings of disability, we explore feature films and documentaries, juxtaposing them with typical texts and activities found in school curricula. In doing so, we ask questions that deliberately seek to complicate any simplistic notions of disability, and reveal it to be a rich, powerful, and misunderstood aspect of the human experience.

In our own experiences, the concept of disability in "mainstream" school curricula is overwhelmingly associated with shame and stigmatization, echoed in narratives and experiences of other students (Connor, 2006; Mooney & Cole, 2000; Rodis, Garrod, & Boscardin, 2001; Ware, 2001). Yet we also know that for many people, disability is claimed with pride (Linton, 1998; Mooney & Cole, 2000). Traditionally, special education has been dominated by the medical model of disability, primarily casting disability as a deficit inherent within an individual; a "problem" in need of scientific "examination," "diagnosis," and "treatment" (Berninger, Dunn, Lin, & Shimada, 2004).

Over the past decade, this way of thinking has been challenged by different models of understanding, including discursive framings (Reid & Valle, 2004), socio-cultural perspectives (Torres-Velasquez, 2000), and constructivist standpoints (Danforth & Smith, 2005). While the hegemony of the medical model still prevails, it is gradually becoming weakened by the

persuasiveness of alternative understandings of disability which overlap and often coalesce within the domain of what is known as the social model of disability (Linton, 1998).

The social model focuses on disability as a culturally determined phenomenon, specific to cultural norms and expectations. Bearing this in mind, what follows are twenty ways that we believe educators can enrich, complicate, challenge, clarify, and continue to expand what we consider the positive redirection of longstanding negative conceptualizations of disability found within traditional special education (Brantlinger, 2004). Thus, our focus is on increasing options within reach of educators to teach disability in complex, varied ways, and reaffirming it as an inevitable and natural part of human diversity.

1. Teach "difference."

Introduce the notion that differences are often perceived subjectively. Furthermore, the person perceived as different (whether based on race, class, ethnicity, gender, age, body size, etc.) is neither better nor worse than the beholder. Add "disability" to this list. Compare and contrast how non-disabled people view people with disabilities versus how people with disabilities view themselves, thereby challenging notions of inferiority, incompleteness, unhappiness, and general *inability.* In addition, include the complex notion of how stereotyped people are vulnerable to the internalization of cultural biases and ways in which their resistance is exercised to transcend limitations imposed upon them (Asch, 1984; Hahn, 1988).

2. Discuss disability-related language.

Examine its widespread use at all levels of our society. Examples include: "That idea is so lame", "That's retarded", "Are you deaf?", "What a limp response", "Can I ask a dumb question?", "Are you blind?", "He's crazy", "She's insane", "Schizophrenic!", "Another case of the blind leading the blind", "I was paralyzed with fear", etc. What are the associations made with disability and the implications of these associations? Should this language be acceptable? What do disabled people think about non-disabled people using this language? What are some alternative ways of expressing the same thoughts without using disability as a "put-down" (Mairs, 1986)?

3. Contemplate disability as a minority label.

Explore whether the status of disability belongs with other "markers of identity" that have come to constitute minority group status; such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and class (Omansky-Gordon & Rosenblum, 2001). If people with disabilities claim kinship as a minority group, how does that change the way they perceive themselves and are perceived by others? What are some inequities in society that people with disabilities face? How can these inequities be addressed? How have disabled people and their allies addressed these inequalities?

4. Study the meaning of the words "able" and "disabled."

Ask: What does it mean to be able-bodied? What are able-bodied people "able" to do? This question is not a trick! In brief, able-bodied people have the luxury of not having to think about this question; most take for granted their status of having full access to most aspects of the world, feeling part of the mainstream, and being "invisible." Many people with disabilities, on the other hand, are prevented from gaining full access to the world at large, are constantly made aware of their "disabled" status, and feel excluded from the mainstream. Compare and contrast what the terms "able" and "disabled" signify. What are some structural, cultural, and economic

barriers that prevent disabled people from being present in the mainstream and how have some of these barriers been surmounted in the past (Charlton, 1998; Shapiro, 1993)?

5. Teach the history of people with disabilities.

This history can be explicitly taught in a unit, woven throughout an interdisciplinary curriculum, or offered as a class project. People with disabilities have always existed, yet the understanding of various conditions and impairments have differed within various cultures and changed over time (Stiker, 1999). People of short stature were accorded special powers in ancient Egypt. The deaf, unable to hear "the word of the Lord," were denied entrance to heaven in the Middle Ages. Those developmentally and physically impaired were interred in Nazi death camps. People with disabilities also organized the Disability Rights movement (Fleischer & Zames, 2001). This history is a distinct, fascinating, and complex account of human diversity that has yet to be fully explored.

6. Analyze stereotypes of "good guys" and "bad guys."

Have students draw representations of their understanding of how incarnations of good and bad look. Many will portray "bad" as having a physical disability--a hunched back, a hook, wooden leg, an eye-patch, an "ugly" face, or an animal-like monstrous appearance. Indeed, classic "bad guys" including pirates and witches are often generated. In contrast, "good" is often portrayed as individuals with long flowing hair and a smiling face, something akin to a stereotypic angel. Challenge the notion of evil being represented by specific physical characteristics. What do these images tell us about our society's values? What might be some analogies with racism? Which people benefit from such imagery, and which are disadvantaged? How can we create characters beyond two-dimensional representations?

7. Critique representations of disability in film.

The overwhelming majority of films portray people with disabilities in inaccurate and damaging ways, reinforcing stereotypes (Darke, 1998; Safran, 1998a; Safran, 1998b). After learning about the real life experiences of blind people, watch *Scent of A Woman.* While undeniably entertaining, Al Pacino's Oscar winning performance of a bitter, lonely, self-loathing, socially-rejected, suicidal man who feels faces to "see" a person (a myth) and has an incredible sense of smell (another myth), conforms to misunderstandings of blindness. Discuss what is problematic about such pervasive representations. More importantly, clarify the everyday experience of blindness as "normal" for some people.

8. Use progressive representations of disability in film.

Many portrayals of people with disabilities end in death. Oscar winners of 2005, *Million Dollar Baby* and *The Sea Inside* actually stress that suicide is preferable to living with a disability. Contrast widespread negative messages with portrayals of positive portrayals of disability in *The Station Agent*, in which a person of short stature leads a "normal" life. In *Finding Nemo,* where being of short stature or having a "gimpy" body part is viewed as one aspect of a person. *Shrek I* and *Shrek II* in which "monstrous" physical attributes are seen by most characters as simply another way of being.

9. Reinterpret representations of disability in children's literature.

Much of the children's literature has been criticized for inaccurately representing life with a disability, while invoking emotions of pity and/or admiration in readers (Ayala, 1999; Solis, 2004). This can be countered by teaching the broad topic of difference in texts such as *Chrysanthemum, Charlotte's Web, Rudolph-the-Red-Nosed-Reindeer,* and *The Secret Garden.* How is the character different? How is she or he perceived by others? What are the consequences? How does she or he, in turn, respond? What can we appreciate about the idea of difference from knowing a specific character? Culling from multicultural studies, several scholars in education have designed criteria that are useful in evaluating children's stories for accuracy of disability representation (see Blaska, 2004; Worotynec, 2004; Ziegler, 1980). Furthermore, inclusive education has pushed the envelope in terms of directly incorporating the teaching of disability in the curriculum (see *Nine Ways to Evaluate Children's Books that Address Disability as Part of Diversity* at http://circleofinclusion.org).

10. Use progressive representations of disability in literature.

In Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843/1986), Tiny Tim is the quintessential helpless, sickly, passive, pitiable disabled child. To counter such "classic" portraits, use contemporary books that depict being disabled as actually being able to do many things, and unable to do some things, such as *Friends in the Park* (Bunnet, 1992), *Lester's Dog* (Hesse, 1993), *The Fly Who Couldn't Fly* (Lozoff, 2002), *Mandy Sue's Day* (Karim, 1994), and the autobiographical *Trouble With School: A Family Story About Learning Disabilities* (Dunn & Dunn, 1993), thereby providing more accurate and realistic representations of disability (Blaska & Lynch, 1998). In addition, read-alouds can be a great venue for facilitating discussions about different disabilities (Richardson & Boyle, 1998).

11. Use literature designed to help students understand themselves.

There is a growing body of literature aimed at helping students understand the ways in which their own bodies and minds work. *All Kind of Minds* (Levine, 1993) is a book that describes fictional students who have difficulties with attention, organization, memory, behaviors, receptive and expressive use of language, and features ways in which they address their areas of need. In addition, *Keeping Ahead in School* (Levine, 1990) explains to children and adolescents the ways in which everyone's mind works and the way humans manage the executive functions of our brains in negotiating the academic and social demands of school.

12. Critique representations of disability in classic literature.

Most "classic" texts taught in schools are populated with disabled characters such as Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1600/2004), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851/2001), Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937/1986), Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945/1999), Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), and August Wilson's *Fences* (1986). On closer examination, disability often *defines* the character and usually acts as a plot device to further the action or advance a theme (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000). Examples include a hunchback to represent evil and inevitable doom, a slow mind that does not comprehend the physical strength of its accompanying body, a wooden leg that fuels a vengeful drive, a limp that defines a closed world of narrow opportunities for all of the family, a mentally-ill brother whose war service signifies financial reparation, and a one-legged woman who oversees an unconventional household and all it represents. Predictably, the majority of characters either die or remain at the margins of society. Students can discuss the real experience of disabled people versus those portrayed, rewrite

alternative endings, or create portrayals in which a disability is part of a character without being the defining characteristic that triggers their demise.

13. Use documentary video and films.

Many excellent documentaries exist that reveal the personal perspectives of people with disabilities and how their own understanding of impairment is often quite different than that of non-disabled people. Three examples are: The Cosby Foundation's *Ennis's Story* (Seftel, 2000), a compilation of celebrities, distinguished professionals, and actual schoolchildren who describe their "learning differences"; Jonathan Mooney's *What The Silenced Say* (Golden, 2001), describing schooling from the point of view of a struggling reader; and Mel Levine's *Misunderstood Minds* (Sicker, 2002), a glimpse into how children with different learning styles learn to accept themselves and negotiate education systems that are not always accommodating of difference. Other informative documentaries such as *Educating Peter* (Wurtzburg, 1992) and *Sound and Fury* (Weisberg, 2000) chronicle the journeys through school of students with autism and deafness respectively. In addition, *On a Roll* (Caputo, 2005) and *Emmanuel's Gift* (Lax & Stern, 2004) reveal out of school experiences for an African-American coach and a Ghanian athlete respectively, both powerful portrayals of individuals at the interstices of being disabled and a person of color.

14. Disability as way of understanding the world.

There are many excellent first person narratives from the position of a person with a disability. Most of these accounts do not posit disability as an overwhelmingly negative trait, but rather as a way to understand the world albeit differently than others. Thus, having a label like ADD or ADHD is subsequently seen as a way to multi-task, to be creative, and not be confined by the rules of society (Mooney & Coles, 2000; O'Connor, 2001). In addition, to be learning disabled is to understand how society is currently configured to privilege some ways of learning and knowing over others (Piziali, 2001). Having guest speakers with disabilities who are students and adults can be extremely informative. Educators can ask how written or oral first person accounts of disability differ from information gleaned from books, conveyed in films and television, and presented by "experts." Which information is the most accurate and valuable?

15. Use the arts.

By focusing on the "human" within the Humanities, we can see how disability has informed the creative process. Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World* portrays his next door neighbor who is unable to walk, yet he deliberately positioned her as openly facing a wide-open space and not inhibited by expectations of confinement (P. Mayer, personal communication, March 2004). Disabled painters include: Frida Kahlo and her deeply personalized works that depict the effect of a road accident on her body and mind, yet have produced arguably the most famous female painter in the world; Matisse and Monet, whose later works in particular were in part because of limitations on their eye-sight (Linton, 2004); Van Gogh and his canvases that portray an unparalleled intensity, vivid and alive, created throughout an emotionally turbulent life; and Toulouse Lautrec, with his ability to capture the "underground life" of Paris. In US in the late twentieth century, "outsider art" became accepted as a genre for artists without formal training, many of whom are labeled "mentally challenged" and have spent part of their lives institutionalized. Students can discuss the influence of bodily difference on the creative process, and the role of disability in the lives of various artists.

16. Research projects.

Students can research the broad and multifaceted theme of disability in many ways. For example, once introduced to the ethics of doing research, they can informally interview members of the immediate family, neighbors, and family friends who have a disability to see how people with disabilities come to view themselves in general. Do they consider themselves as disabled or different? Does that change according to context? Older students can explore an aspect of history, such as the rejection of disabled people at Ellis Island, the growth of deaf culture, or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (originally P.L. 94-142) that legally provided a *right* to education for children with disabilities.

17. Analysis of cartoons.

From short-sighted Mr. Magoo to inarticulate Elmer Fudd, from developmentally delayed Dopey the Dwarf to stuttering Porky Pig, whether in animal form or human, disability is usually portrayed as something to be ridiculed. Students can discuss and critique the connection between disability and comedy and how laughing at others because of their difference is essentially discriminatory in nature and can have hurtful consequences. With older students, contemporary television shows such as South Park are ripe for scrutiny as everything and everybody is ridiculed with equitable zeal. However, the characters of Timmy and "handicapable" Jimmy thwart easy analysis, and offer multiple opportunities to discuss the complexities of disability both in and out of school (Reid-Hresko & Reid, 2005).

18. Disability rights movement as part of social studies.

Inspired by the demands of African-Americans, women, and gays for equality in all aspects of society, the Disability Rights Movement has been instrumental in organizing political power from a grass roots level. Changes in access to transportation, education, employment, community integration, health care, housing, and technology have greatly improved the lives of many people with disabilities. At the forefront of these changes were disabled activists who staged protests, sit-ins, and argued vociferously to speak for themselves and be heard. Students can contemplate in what ways the disability rights movement is similar to and different from other movements. What have been the breadth and limitations of this movement?

19. Alternatives to disability-related simulations.

"Disability Awareness Days," while well intended, are at best misleading, and at worst, inappropriately perceived as "fun" activities for people without disabilities. To understand what it is like to have a disability, ask students *not to go to* places that are inaccessible. Ask people who have disabilities how they use accommodations and modifications. Look at devices such as different types of light switches, door handles, showers, cars, etc. that focus on how ordinary people with disabilities maneuver throughout their day. Discuss the concept of universal design, the creation of buildings from their very inception to accommodate people with all different types of needs.

20. Use disability studies as a resource.

Over the last twenty-five years, there has been a growth in disability studies as an interdisciplinary field. Recently, there has been a surge in interest in disability studies and education (Gabel, 2005). Disability studies places the voices of people with disabilities at the

center of theory, research, and practice. Thus, perspectives of disability are richer, positive, and far more diverse than is often found in representations within professional literature and the media at large. Ideas from disability studies have been used to reframe disability as part of the natural human experience in the work of several teacher-educators (Connor, 2004; Gabel, 2004; Ferguson, 2001; Ware, 2001).

While we recognize that much of what we have suggested are valuable ideas, we would also like to call attention to the intersectional nature of disability. By that, we mean the experience of disability does not stand alone in a vacuum, but rather intersects with other markers of identity including, but not limited to gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and age. It is clear from our discussion that the overwhelming majority of examples tend toward middle-class, European-American males. Indeed we agree with Bell (2006) who has critiqued disability studies for not sufficiently acknowledging the intersectional experiences of people with disabilities. In addition, we believe all of us in this field should strive toward furthering such approaches, thereby enabling us to enrich our understanding the phenomenon of disability.

In closing, these twenty options are classroom-based strategies that continue to actively work against disability as a negative phenomenon. Instead, they serve to challenge stereotypes that cast individuals with disabilities as one-dimensional characters in restrictive roles, either super-passive or superhuman, pitiable, stigmatized, and perpetual objects of charity. By using these strategies, longstanding depictions of people with disabilities are challenged, reframed, and replaced by understandings of disability as simply part of human diversity.

David J. Connor is an Associate Professor in the Learning Disabilities Masters Degree Program at Hunter College, City University of New York. He has recently co-authored a book with Beth Ferri, *Reading Resistance: Discourses of Exclusion in the Desegregation and Inclusion Debates* (Peter Lang) and is working on another book titled "Urban Narratives: Life at the Intersections of Learning Disability, Race and Social Class," featuring first person narratives of life at the intersections of learning disability, race, and social class. His research interests include learning disabilities and inclusive education.

Dr. Lynne Bejoian is an Associate Professor in the Inclusive Education and Disability Studies Masters Degree Programs at Teachers College, Columbia University. She has recently co-edited an issue of *Equity & Excellence in Education*, called "Narrating Disability: Pedagogical Imperatives" (June 2006). Her research interests include spirituality and disability, disability in the media, and inclusive education.

<div align="center">References</div>

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