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Tammie M. Kennedy

University of Nebraska at Omaha, tkennedy@unomaha.edu

Tracey Menten

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Reading, Writing, and Thinking about Disability Issues: Five Activities for the Classroom

A high school teacher and a college teacher argue that by bringing a Disability Studies perspective into discussions of traditional novels, websites, TV shows, and films, teachers can help students develop critical-thinking skills.

Disability, unseen, unacknowledged, and unexamined, is already always present in the [classroom]. It is present as students in our classes, in the language we use, the ways that we teach and tutor, even in physical spaces and institutional structures. Assumptions about disability . . . also script attitudes about its counterpart, ability.

—*Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Brenda Jo Brueggemann, with Jay Dolmage, "Rethinking Practices and Pedagogy: Disability and the Teaching of Writing"*

Nearly all secondary educators are required to take at least one special education course to become certified. However, the focus of this course is generally on how to teach Special Education (SPED) students, not how to teach *about* disability issues and culture. In fact, much attention is given to keeping Learning Disabled/Emotional Disorder/Behavioral Disorder (LD/ED/BD) students' disabilities invisible. Teachers learn how to modify lesson plans so as not to expose these disabilities as well as to increase a sense of inclusion for the SPED student. While we believe that the emphasis on privacy rights and inclusion is essential, we also argue that the (in)visibility of disability in our classrooms is problematic. As the opening quote above suggests, whether we talk about it or not, (dis)ability issues permeate our classes, our teaching, and our students' experiences in and outside of the classroom. We have found that students encounter disability issues from a variety of sources (e.g., family, friends, school policies/officials, fundraisers, doctors, TV shows, and websites). However, they tend to think about disability as an individual issue—something they "have" that can be stigmatized and/or a person who suffers from a deficit or loss who needs to be "cured," pitied, or treated dif-

ferently from "normal" people. We want to encourage teachers and students to examine and reflect on how these perceptions of disability are created, how we might engage with issues of disability more critically, and teach all students more effectively.

To enrich our understandings of (dis)ability and explore new ways to read, write, and think about perceptions of difference and abilities, we have integrated a Disability Studies perspective into our classes. That is, we have adopted a view of the world promoted in the mission statement of the Society for Disability Studies:

The Society for Disability Studies (SDS) is an international non-profit organization that promotes the study of disability in social, cultural, and political contexts. Disability Studies recognizes that disability is a key aspect of human experience, and that the study of disability has important political, social, and economic implications for society as a whole, including both disabled and nondisabled people. Through research, artistic production, teaching and activism, the Society for Disability Studies seeks to augment understanding of disability in all cultures and historical periods, to promote greater awareness of the experiences of disabled people, and to advocate for social change. (http://www.disstudies.org/about/mission/sds_mission)

Part of the social change called for in this mission statement is that disability be viewed partly as a function of society—that the physical and social barriers in society contribute to the “othering” of people with disabilities.

However, bringing disability studies into the classroom means more than just adding another identity category to be analyzed. Rather, working with disability has the potential to transform assignments, activities, discussions, and curricula to

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acknowledge better the material realities of both students and teachers. In this article, we share five practical teaching activities for introducing disability into the secondary English curriculum that also address NCTE/IRA objectives for the English language arts.¹ We have used these lessons to help students better analyze the language/rhetoric of disability, understand how dis-

ability is represented in literature, and uncover how the media (e.g., TV/movies and websites) depict people with disabilities. While teachers might focus specifically on disability issues, we have incorporated these activities into our current curriculum and teaching practices that focus on reading, writing, and discussing diversity, culture, identity, and social issues.²

Why Teach about Disability Issues?

Despite the complexities associated with disability and classroom instruction, it is important to address this issue in English and language arts classes. First, disabilities in American society and in the secondary classroom are prevalent. It is estimated that there are 38 to 52.6 million people with documented disabilities (15–20% of the population), which means that most students will have a family member or loved one who has some mental or physical impairment (Taylor 2). Furthermore, the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) have resulted in millions of students with disabilities receiving a public education, increasing the contact both teachers and nondisabled students have with disability issues (Taylor 3). In spite

of the prevalence of disability, Lewiecki-Wilson, and Brueggemann with Dolmage point out that “because the *disabled* do not form a single, visible category with a set of common, identifiable features, people with disabilities typically are not construed as a unified group” (2; italics in original). Consequently, many false assumptions and tensions related to disability infiltrate our daily practices and experiences.

Second, disabilities are too often left unnoticed, recognized only as an “inferior state and a personal misfortune” with stigma and silence surrounding those who have a disability (Thomson 6). The work of disability studies scholars over the last few decades has helped us understand that disability is not just an individual problem or deficiency. These scholars critique medical models of disability that focus on “curing” the individual so that he or she might be more normal and productive. They demonstrate how what becomes considered a disability/handicap is based more on social meanings attached to particular physical and mental impairment than actual reality (Lewiecki and Brueggemann with Dolmage 1). Thinking about how words shape these social meanings is especially important when teachers consider how “language use carries with it a culture’s discourse and assumptions about ‘normal,’ with its power to center, marginalize, or ‘other’ people, their ways of thinking, and their choices of actions in the world” (Price 56). Furthermore, disabilities scholar Brenda Jo Brueggemann et al. assert that teachers and students who study disabilities increase their awareness of the harmful connections of ability, difference, and normalcy that pervade education and society. Students who are familiar with disability issues are more likely to reject the negative stereotypes associated with disabilities and better empower themselves or others who may experience disability in some way. Therefore, it is important to understand and critically think about how various texts shape people’s perceptions of disabilities.

Teaching Activities

Below we outline several class activities and we include objectives, NCTE standards, and rationales linked to each activity. We encourage teachers to engage their students in these activities and adapt them as appropriate.

Identifying Disability Stereotypes

Objective

Characterize common stereotypes associated with disabilities through the creation and analysis of Facebook profiles.

NCTE Standard(s)

1, 4, 9, and 11 (www.ncte.org/standards)

Rationale

Help students to discover what assumptions they make about people with disabilities and to analyze how those assumptions can be both inaccurate and harmful. Students also explore how public identities are created and interpreted.

Resources

A series of pictures that represent people both with and without visible disabilities (e.g., people who use wheelchairs, people with Down syndrome, people with prosthetic limbs). Distribute one picture to each group.

Lesson

- Put students into groups of three.³
- Give each group a picture of a person from which they will create a Facebook profile that includes biographical information such as name, relationship status, profession and income level, preferred activities, groups to which he or she would belong.
- Display picture for class and ask each group to share profiles. Have each group present its profile before discussing the rationale behind how they created it.
- Once all groups have presented, discuss as a class the following: (a) why the groups selected the profile characteristics they did for their person and (b) why those choices may (or may not) be accurate, problematic, and/or stereotypical for those who based the profile on pictures of people with visible disabilities.
- Discuss how these stereotypes are similar to those based on race, gender, religion, and other differences.
- Ask students to reflect on an aha moment from the activity, especially how other “differences” are linked to disability, and share their moment with the class.

Analyzing George's Assumptions and Treatment of Lenny in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*

Objective

Illustrate how George's assumptions about Lenny and his disability affect George's treatment of Lenny.

NCTE Standard(s)

1, 2, and 9 (www.ncte.org/standards)

Rationale

Investigate how the assumptions that George makes about Lenny affect George's treatment of Lenny, and not necessarily in a positive manner. Students should examine whether or not George's treatment of Lenny ultimately leads to Lenny's death.

Resources

Of Mice and Men, flip chart paper, and markers

Lesson

- Put students into groups of three.
- Based on their reading of the novel, have students brainstorm a list of five assumptions George makes about Lenny's abilities (what he is/is not capable of doing). Have students find references in their books to support why they identified those assumptions (quotations and page numbers).
- As a class, make a list of assumptions on the board.
- Have each group select three of the assumptions from the board and analyze how each assumption affects George's actions toward (or treatment of) Lenny. Ask them to come up with two examples per assumption. Students should use their books to locate specific examples, including page numbers.
- After they have completed this task, ask each group to select one assumption and present it to the class. They should use flip chart paper and write out the specific examples to post as they present the information.
- Students should take notes on the information presented and then write an essay analyzing George's assumptions about Lenny's mental disability and how that affects his treatment of Lenny.

Additional Ideas/Tips

Teachers may also use the character May from *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd.

Examining the Effects of Disabilities on Self-Image

Objective

Examine thoughts, ideas, and attitudes toward neurodevelopment disorders, such as autism.

NCTE Standard(s)

1, 2, 6, 7, 8, and 9 (www.ncte.org/standards)

Rationale

Encourage students to expand their ideas about how autism may affect a person's life. Much of the information regarding autism portrays the disorder as one that makes it nearly impossible for a person to function fully in the world, or the person possesses superior intellectual processes that alienate him or her from others. Help to shift student perspectives by having them read about what it is like to be autistic from a highly successful, educated person with autism.

Resources

"My Brain Is a Web Browser: How People with Autism Think" by Dr. Temple Grandin (<http://www.grandin.com/inc/mind.web.browser.html>); Wordle (www.wordle.net).

Lesson

- Ask students to write one or two paragraphs about everything they know, or have heard, about autism (e.g., What is it? How are people who have autism affected by it? What are the skills and capabilities of someone with autism? How do you think people with autism feel about being autistic?).
- After they have discussed their knowledge, ask them to brainstorm where they got their information (e.g., TV, books, friends/family, school) and share their responses.
- Next, have students read Dr. Temple Grandin's article, "My Brain Is a Web Browser: How People with Autism Think." Have students reflect on Dr. Grandin's overall attitude toward autism as they read (Is her attitude

mostly positive/negative? Does she sound brilliant? Unique? Strange? Confused? How do you know? Does she make autism sound like a disability? Provide textual support for your answers.). By the end of the article, students should be able to describe and defend their response. (If your students do not have access to computers, you can complete this next step ahead of time and distribute printed copies for students.)

- Ask students to pull up Dr. Grandin's article (<http://www.grandin.com/inc/mind.web.browser.html>) and select and copy all the text—without the references.
- Have students navigate to Wordle (www.wordle.net) and select the link for "Create Your Own," and enter Grandin's article into the window. Wordle is an online tool for generating "word clouds" from text that you provide. The clouds give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text and provide a visual image for analysis.
- Have students analyze the ten most prevalent words to determine whether those words convey the same attitude they felt Dr. Grandin revealed as a person with autism. Students should write a one-paragraph response of this analysis.
- Ask students to write a paragraph in which they examine their thoughts, ideas, and attitudes toward neurodevelopment disorders, such as autism. Students should examine whether or not Dr. Grandin's attitude is what they expected and explain why or why not.

Additional Ideas/Tips

Teachers might show clips from HBO's *Temple Grandin* or ask students to read supplementary articles on autism and Grandin's work on HBO's website: <http://www.hbo.com/movies/temple-grandin/index.html#/movies/temple-grandin/detail/resources.html>.

The Rhetorical Appeal(s) of Telethons and Walk-Run for Disability X

Objective

Learn about rhetorical appeals, use them to assess websites of organizations that focus on fundraising

for disabilities, and identify how these websites might perpetuate stereotypes of disabilities.

NCTE Standard(s)

1, 6, 7, 8, and 9 (www.ncte.org/standards)

Rationale

Help students become aware of how some websites/charities perpetuate stereotypes of disability. Ask students to consider and work toward becoming more of an advocate and/or activist for disabilities. Charity events often center on some sort of cause to raise awareness and money to “fight” disabilities and diseases (e.g., multiple sclerosis). Although these events are intended to support individuals with disabilities, many people of that population feel offended because of the way the event portrays the disability. Some people with disabilities argue that these campaigns feel patronizing or miss the real-life issues involved in being a person living with a disability. In addition, because these causes are seen as “charity,” people without the disability often do not understand the complexity of the issues involved and give money instead of serving as advocates and activists. For example, the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon for the Muscular Dystrophy Association often relies on Mr. Lewis presenting a person with the disability in a way that reinforces the charity model of disability or that people with a disability are “broken” or “needy.”

Resources

Information on rhetorical appeals (*Everything's an Argument*, or *Writing Arguments*, and/or Purdue's OWL, “Using Rhetorical Strategies for Persuasion,” <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/588/04/>). Websites for Multiple Sclerosis Society, Parkinson's, St Jude's Children, American Cancer Society, and other disability causes.

Lesson

- Teach students the three classical persuasive appeals: logos, ethos, and pathos.
- Select a website that focuses on disability. Have students identify appeals to logos, ethos, and pathos and discuss their effects on the intended audience.
- Break students into pairs or small groups and have them select a “disability cause.”

- Ask students to study the websites associated with their chosen disability and/or fundraising campaign.
- Ask students to generate a list of assumptions these websites make about people with disabilities. For example:
 - Who is the primary audience for this website?
 - How much does this audience already know about the disability/disease?
 - What seems to be the audience's attitude toward the issue? Is this attitude different from that of the public or the people with the disability? Why? How?
 - What values, beliefs, or assumptions about the disability/disease would the audience share?
 - How do these various organizations appeal to others to contribute money or time?
 - Do they use mostly pathos, ethos, or logos? How effective are these appeals?
 - How are these appeals based on negative or problematic stereotypes about disabilities? Why do these appeals work to persuade people to give money or their time to these efforts?
- Discuss findings as a class, asking students to bring in one specific example to share with everyone.
- Ask students to write a one- to two-page reflective essay that they turn in with their analysis of the questions above, which focuses on what they learned about how disability organizations perpetuate stereotypes of disabilities, as well as how these websites might be revised to better address the needs of people with disabilities.

Additional Ideas/Tips

ELL learners can access the websites in their first language, as available, to analyze them.

Locating and “Talking Back” to Negative Stereotypes of Disability

Objective

Locate and analyze examples of the seven negative stereotypes that dominate television and movie representations of people with disabilities and explain how these stereotypes might be harmful.

NCTE Standard(s)

1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, and 12 (www.ncte.org/standards)

Rationale

Jack A. Nelson argues that there are seven negative stereotypes that dominate television and movie representations of people with disabilities: (1) sinister, evil, and criminal (morally culpable); (2) pitiable and pathetic; (3) unable to live a successful life; (4) a burden; (5) maladjusted; (6) better off dead; and/or (7) “supercrips” (5–9). The appearance of the “supercrip” image is often based on real-life individuals who overcome the obstacles of disability through a positive attitude and perseverance. This person is often thought to have special gifts that result from his or her disability, superior cognitive abilities, or unusual social skills (Shapiro 16). While the “supercrip” representation often demeans the more pedestrian struggles that ordinary people with disabilities face regularly, it remains one of the most prevalent images in the movies and other media (e.g., *Forrest Gump* and many human-interest stories).

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Resources

TV show/movie clips (e.g., *Glee*, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *Friday Night Lights*, *Ray*, *Scent of a Woman*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Simon Birch*)

Lesson

- Ask students to define what a stereotype is and how it affects the way we think about people who may be different from us. Teachers may share readings or websites to help generate this discussion.
- Pair students. Ask them to come up with a list of stereotypes they have seen about people with disabilities in the media, specifically citing the TV show, book, advertisement, magazine, or movie that highlighted this representation.


- Ask each student to watch a TV show or movie that features a character with a disability. You might also ask them to compare a more recent show such as *Glee* to an older show such as *South Park* or an older film such as *Rain Man* to a more current film such as *Adam* that both depict autism. They should take notes and be able to articulate answers to the following questions:
 - Does the character fulfill one of the stereotypes identified above? How?
 - Even if the character is stereotypical, how does the actor/performer disrupt or challenge this stereotype in some way by his or her performance, the script, or how the other characters are reacting to him or her?
 - Is this portrayal of a character with a disability dangerous or possibly harmful to any groups or individuals? Why or why not?
 - Has the portrayal of the character with a disability changed? How? Why?
- Ask students to write a dialogue between a nondisabled person and the character with the disability explaining how this stereotype is problematic and how the character might want the nondisabled person to think about disability issues from a different perspective.
- Students may perform their dialogues in class.

Additional Ideas/Tips

See “Physical and Mental Disability in the Movies and Television” (<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/disabilitymovies.html>) and “Top Entertainment TV Shows Featuring Disability” (<http://media-dis-n-dat.blogspot.com/2008/03/top-entertainment-tv-shows-featuring.html>).

Challenging Habits of Thinking

We hope these five activities will help teachers better formulate practical and effective ways to introduce disability studies into the secondary English classroom. By teaching about disability issues, both students and teachers gain valuable tools for critical thinking that empower them to better negotiate the complexities of difference and their impact on all the “bodies” in English classrooms. Furthermore, working with disability issues in the secondary classroom has the potential to transform assignments, activities, discussions, and curricula to better acknowledge and reflect on the realities of human

differences and our basic assumptions about normalcy and abilities. We invite teachers to examine the cultural narratives surrounding people with disabilities and to reconsider how certain habits of thinking that characterize disability as a “weakness” or something to be feared or silenced can be challenged in and out of the classroom.⁴ 

Notes

1. The *NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts* may be found at <http://www.ncte.org/standards> for more specific descriptions.

2. We approach disability issues as nondisabled, or able-bodied, persons. Our interest in disability studies stems from our relationships with close friends and family who have disabilities, as well as our interest in teaching about diversity, inequality, and difference. Disability scholars have pointed out some of the problematic issues of teaching disability studies from a nondisabled perspective. For example, Deborah Marks fears that nondisabled teachers will focus too much on people with disabilities as the “Other” (70). We agree with her concern and recognize that we must be ever vigilant of our biases. However, we also subscribe to an “all hands on deck” philosophy. It is important to build alliances across so-called differences to contribute to social movements focused on justice and social change. In our classrooms, we believe that it’s important to establish that we approach disability issues as nondisabled teachers who, as Owen Wrigley describes, have “both biases of [our] position and the privileges of [our] gaze” (vii).

3. In our experience, working in groups of three instead of pairs leads to more collaboration and productivity. If a pairing is a problem for some reason (e.g., ability, personality), the activity can stall. Adding a third person better ensures a range of opinions in brainstorming sessions.

4. We want to thank Patricia Dunn for her helpful feedback on our article. Also, a special thank you to Christina Flaherty-Colling and Nora Bacon for providing us invaluable comments and reactions as we drafted the article.

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Tammie M. Kennedy is assistant professor of English and Women’s Studies at the University of Nebraska in Omaha. She teaches courses in writing, rhetoric, film, and composition theory and pedagogy to both undergraduate and graduate students. She may be reached at tmkennedy@unomaha.edu. **Tracey Menten** has been a high school English teacher for eight years and has four years of corporate curriculum instructional design experience. She teaches at Omaha Central High School. She may be reached at tracey.menten@ops.org.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

“Persuasive Techniques in Advertising” examines *pathos* (emotion), *logos* (logic), and *ethos* (credibility/character). Students use this knowledge to analyze advertising in print, television, and Web sources. Students also explore the concepts of demographics and marketing for a specific audience. The lesson culminates in the production of an advertisement in one form of media, intended for a specific demographic. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/persuasive-techniques-advertising-1166.html>