

Digital Media Education and Advocacy: Addressing Attitudes Toward Disability on College Campuses

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Abstract

As digital information becomes the preferred mode of communication, media applications have become an emerging context to address attitudes toward disability. This practice brief details digital media as one method to critically frame ableism on college campuses, promoting a more inclusive campus environment. Coordinated by the disability service office, faculty affiliated with a campus-wide disability collaborative used a Disability Studies framework to design a general education course that critiqued the social construction of disability in the media. Following the course, interviews with eight students illustrated the relevance of the curriculum as it sponsored emergent awareness and understanding of ableism. In particular, it became evident that exposure to first-person narratives of disability via social media were fundamental. Implications address how colleges and universities can use emergent digital media applications as a method to promote an undergraduate culture that is more welcoming to disability.

Keywords: *Attitudes, disability, digital media, postsecondary education*

Ableism is a form of social prejudice against people with disabilities, defined as the perceived inferiority of people with disabilities and preference for able-bodiedness (Davis, 2006). Attitudes toward disability have improved since the 1970's disability rights movement (Loewen & Pollard, 2010); however, students with disabilities continue to experience marginalization and social isolation (Baker, Boland, & Nowik, 2012; Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005). In recent years, Disability Studies has become a framework to promote an undergraduate culture that is more welcoming to disability (Agarwal, Moya, Yasui, & Seymour, 2015; Gabel, 2010; Kroeger, 2010). Disability Studies is an academic field of inquiry that "places disability in a political, social, and cultural context, that theorizes and historicizes deafness or blindness or disability in similarly com-

plex ways to the way race, class, and gender have been theorized" (Davis, 2006, p. xvi). As digital information becomes the preferred mode of communication, digital media applications can offer a critical location for situating disability in ways that promote an inclusive campus climate.

Over the last decade, the development of Web 2.0 applications (also known as "social media") has led to social networking, defined as the "phenomenon through which Internet users build virtual communities based on common interests, activities, and established friendships" (Chapin & Byrne, 2013, p. 11). Digital media, in the form of on-line newspapers, YouTube videos, and blogs and forums, are replacing traditional forms of information literacy in libraries and books (Buckingham, 2013; Carr & Porfilio, 2009). Offering a limitless supply of first-person narratives about

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disability, the emergence of popular social media tools, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and wikis has led to a surplus of individuals using digital technologies and social media as platforms for media authorship (Brandt, 2009). Today, digital media has become a preferred interface to “organize disability-rights actions, let others know about disability related news, promote events, or just find like-minded disability rights advocates” (Haller, 2010, p. 5).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing potential of emerging digital media on college campuses, there is limited information on how colleges and universities can apply this technology to address attitudes toward disability. Building upon decades of research, Shannon, Tansey, and Schoen (2009) noted how the stigma of disability can limit social interactions between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers, potentially lowering students with disabilities view of self and self-efficacy—key factors in college retention and subsequent graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); addressing negative attitudes may increase the academic and social integration of students with disabilities. With this in mind, this practice brief describes using digital media as an innovative “catalyst for defining strategies that educators wishing to incorporate disability studies into their campus community life, inside and outside of the classroom, might adopt” (Fox, 2010, p. 40).

With new generations of students growing up as digital natives, YouTube series and blogs are increasingly integral to addressing disability as a social justice issue (Hartley, Johnson, & Tarvydas, 2015), hopefully bridging the gap between information, knowledge, and the social construction of disability (Gabel, 2010). To be sure, digital media is a critical context to confront social justice inequities impeding students with disabilities, serving as a powerful way to mobilize supporters, foster dialogue with a wide audience, and draw attention to social justice issues that may otherwise go unnoticed on campuses (Haller, 2012). This practice brief will introduce curriculum, present students’ perceptions of ableism in digital media, and consider implications for using digital media as an avenue to address attitudes toward disability in college.

Description of the Project

Coordinated by the Disability Service Office, faculty affiliated with a campus-wide disability collaborative used a Disability Studies framework to design a general education course that critiqued the

social construction of disability in the media. The course had not been taught in several years, and with the support of the director and two staff members of the Disability Service Office, the first author redesigned the curriculum to include social media. Specifically, the course content critiqued news stories and Hollywood films with respect to the social positioning of people with disabilities (Reinhardt, Pennycott, & Fellinghauer, 2014). While news stories and films are a common form of critical media literacy, a unique aspect of the course was that social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, Skype, YouTube, and blogs, exposed students to first-person perspectives of people with disabilities with respect to contemporary disability-related political and cultural issues (Gabel, 2010; Rembis, 2010). Contrasting the voices and experiences of people with disabilities as an important point of comparison to dominant news stories and mainstream films, reflective writing and critical thinking were used to foster a model of review and meta-analysis to discern patterns and generate new ways of thinking (Gutiérrez, 2008). To make the learning more concrete, the course analyzed various media examples and asked students in the course to analyze positive and negative messages they receive about disability from a social model perspective.

Following the course, interviews were conducted with eight students to explore the impact of the course on understandings of ableism. After obtaining IRB approval, procedures involved asking participants an identical set of questions in a semi-structured format (Strauss & Corbin, 2015) in the following order: (1) How would you describe your thinking about disability during the course? (2) In what ways has your understanding of disability changed since the course? (3) What role did the course play in your understanding of the social construction of disability? While questions were asked in a similar manner, the format of the interview structure remained sufficiently open and flexible to permit participants to expand upon their responses. Scheduled approximately one month after the semester, the interviews lasted about an hour.

Participants

Taught by the first author in fall 2012, the course had an enrollment of roughly 80 students, and an announcement about follow-up interviews was made to the entire class on the last day of the semester. Of these, eight students agreed to be interviewed once the semester was over, and they approximated the total enrollment in terms of gender, disability, academic year, and academic major. The participants included seven female, and one male student. Further, three students self-disclosed a disability. Finally, students

ranged from sophomore to senior, with majors from special education and speech pathology, to architecture, computer science, and English.

Procedures

Data were analyzed using discourse analysis from a constructivist paradigm (Blommaert, 2005). In analyzing the data, the researchers followed an iterative process of data coding. First, initial passes through the data employed structural coding (Saldaña, 2013), applying content-based categories to data segments, which identified data related to three facets of the course curriculum: examining language use, identifying discourses of pity, and recognizing ableism. During subsequent passes of the data, codes were triangulated across different interviews to confirm validity during the coding process (Maxwell, 2013). Triangulation assisted in the cohesive progression of coding, and ensured the data were examined and re-examined from varying perspectives. Following the initial development of structural codes, a second cycle of coding was completed to examine connections across data segments as well as differences. Structural codes were further analyzed into categorical codes, leading to representative codes of the participants' experiences (Saldaña, 2013). Categories were continually verified by moving between emic and etic perspectives, which helped to ground the data analysis within the course context, including specific course assignments (Strauss & Corbin, 2015).

Results and Discussion

From the outset, the course was designed to be an opportunity for students to think critically about ableism through the representation of disability in mainstream media. In the interviews with participants, it became evident that exposure to social media combined with critical thinking in and outside of the course was fundamental (See Table 1 for excerpts of the interview data). Specifically, the interview data illustrated the relevance of the curriculum as it fostered awareness and understanding of ableism, as discussed in the following paragraphs.

Theme #1: First-Person Narratives

Data revealed the significance of incorporating social media produced by individuals with disabilities themselves. In fact, the interviews revealed that social media produced from the point of view of persons with disabilities offered great potential for resisting simplistic representations of disability often found in mainstream media. First-person narratives of disability

will continue to flourish in social media and may provide increasingly diverse personal narratives, exposing students to multiple and shifting identities, including how the experience of disability may differ for men and women, middle-class white and non-dominant minority communities.

Theme #2: Function of Language and Representation

All of the participating students described how critical thinking developed through repeated opportunities to analyze language and images in media, assisting them to identify stereotypes and recognize ableism more complexly. Further, participants were able to articulate a conceptual link between representations that merged into a discourse of disability as deviance. During the interviews, participants introduced media examples from outside of the course, illustrating the ability to generate the type of thinking that occurred in the class on their own. Moving beyond language alone, students were critical of the social positioning of characters with disabilities, including when disability was used as a metaphor for deviance.

Theme #3: Pathos, Pity, and Charity

In terms of what changed most during the course, participants described experiences that formed a theme centered on the social implications of pathos, pity, and charity. In this way, participants' interviews revealed an awareness of an epistemology of disability whereby "embedded assumptions, concepts, and powerful images" reinforce messages of disability as pitiful and tragic (Goggin & Newell, 2003, p. 24). At the least, participants recognized the ways in which a charity ethic functions in dominant cultural narratives about disability. Whether entering healthcare professions or simply interacting with persons with disabilities as family members, peers, neighbors, co-workers, and romantic partners, participants became critical about pity narratives that involved "saving" people and curing disability as something inherently tragic.

Theme #4: Forming a Concept of Ableism

Ultimately, the interview data revealed that the course helped participants to conceptualize ableism and the false dichotomies between "us and them," which dehumanize people with disabilities. Specifically, the class promoted the ability to view disability as a difference, rather than as a social concept inherently associated with marginalization. Participants were able to move past societal meta-narratives and internalized notions of ableism that suggest there is something wrong with people with disabilities and they are not acceptable as they are.

Implications and Future Directions

Moving forward, additional work is needed to fully realize the potential of digital media applications as a tool for education and advocacy. College campuses are more diverse than ever before, with an estimated 11% of undergraduate students reporting some type of disability (as cited in Agarwal et al., 2015). Yet, there is no guarantee that interactions between students with and without disabilities will be positive and respectful (Baker et al., 2012; Dowrick, et al., 2005). As such, addressing attitudes to disability on college campuses continues to be a key priority of disability service offices (Kroeger, 2010). This practice brief argues that digital media provides a context to contest ableism and the associated epistemological assumptions that position individuals with disabilities as inferior to individuals without disabilities (Davis, 2006).

Since 2012, the course described in the present article has been offered each subsequent year with increasing enrollments as high as 175 students per semester. As a result of the interview data, the content of the course has continued to evolve, with an increasing emphasis on first-person narratives of individuals with disabilities and their families via social media. In addition, the course content has expanded to involve more individuals with disabilities as guest speakers who discuss media depictions of their particular disability. The course content now examines disability themes across particular genres, such as Disney films, comic books and superheroes, and online role playing games. Finally, students have the option to locate new digital media applications or to create their own digital media products. One year a group of students developed a YouTube video to end the use of the “R” word on college campuses. Tables 2 and 3 represent examples of digital media artifacts that students in the course have identified over the last four years, sometimes emailing the course instructor a year or two after having completed the course. Consistent with the interview data, it would appear that the course capitalizes on students preferred mode of communication (i.e. digital) as a means to understand ableism.

While the present project focused on a semester long course, there are likely shorter interventions, such as educational campaigns and lecture series, which could be integrated with a blog or other digital media products with similar effect. Importantly, the results of the present project included some narratives from students with disabilities who described the benefits for their own sense of self. Indeed, it is possible that media literacy and positive images of disability may assist students with disabilities to respond in successful

and creative ways to disability concerns (Murray, Lombardi, & Kosty, 2014). On college campuses, social media is ever present, and colleges and universities can use Twitter feeds, informational blogs, and YouTube channels that address disability concerns (Gabel, 2010; Rembis, 2010). With an emphasis on critical media literacy, colleges and universities can offer a general education course such as the one described in the present study to empower students with disabilities via digital media applications, highlighting first-person voices and narratives of students with disabilities who have successfully navigated the college environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). While there would still be a need for courses on critical media literacy, positive representations of disability have the potential to counter the negative images in social media often found in the dominant cultural discourse. In the future, subsequent quantitative and qualitative research on similar projects may be able to index specific digital media artifacts that effectively counter ableist attitudes and behaviors on college campuses, including internalized feelings of ableism among students with disabilities.

Conclusion

The present study explored media representations as an avenue to contest ableism and the associated epistemological assumptions. With respect to postsecondary education, the results suggest that individualized, first-person narratives were most beneficial to understand the ways in which ableism is constructed and enacted through media. With this in mind, general education courses can promote social media applications as a means to empower students with disabilities by circulating their first-person perspectives within the undergraduate culture.

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Table 1

*Examples of the Interview Themes***Theme #1: First-person narratives**

For me the best thing is the actual accounts from people, when people with disabilities actually talk about it themselves. I guess that is what makes you think about it the most—just the personal experience . . . it definitely contributed to the class to have people with disabilities in the class because they were part of the discussion, and it made it a lot more interesting.

I liked hearing difference in point of view and different life experiences . . . because what happens when someone is rich and has a disability is very different than somebody who has a disability when they're poor. And that's just one factor. Essentially a diverse point of view throughout the course was neat. . . I found that it was really applicable to what I want to do, work with patients that have diabetic foot ulcers. It's interesting because a lot of what a doctor tries to do is the opposite of the culture of disability: You're ok how you are. A lot of what a doctor does is try to fix you, so a big part of that helped me understand that I need to look at what the patients' goals are, rather than what my goals are for the patient—that it's from their perspective and not from mine. I'm a caregiver; I'm not them. So it was stepping back from that role of, "I'm going to save the world."

I think it's important to have people who are college aged to talk about themselves and what it honestly means to be a disabled person at college and what it means to go through the daily routine. I distinctly remember this girl. It was interesting because she had never had a conversation [with a person with a disability], and I was the first person who she was talking to. I think it's funny because it was kind of what we harped on in class, was so true, like, they don't know what to say or what to do. So I think it was really helpful for a lot of kids, especially being 18 or 19 year old kids, being able to ask me kind of hard questions that seemed kind of taboo.

Theme #2: Function of language and representation

I'm more aware of language. Before this class, I guess I always thought that disability was from the person. I never really thought much about how interaction with society makes them more or less disabled. There are still movies today that address issues, or at least ones where disability has a part, and you may not think about it in a certain way until you start thinking about it critically: instead of just being like, "Oh here's the way this person in a wheelchair is being treated," now you're like, "oh now they're being treated differently by certain people but not by others."

The [the movie] Rudolph, the Red-nosed Reindeer cartoon, I had seen that cartoon a hundred times when I was younger, at least ten. You figure every year it came on. I started watching again and I thought this has a lot to do with disabilities. It's right there. It's all about difference.

I had watched [the movie] Gattaca since I was young. And watching it through the filter of this class was fascinating because I just I saw it differently. Even though Jude Law's character is in a wheelchair, he's not the main character. He's part of the impetus for being able to move into the world of perfect people. And then the power of words, like language, like artifacts, like the media portrayal of things, it's not a matter of offending. It's more a matter of moving language away from using disability and more towards explaining or understanding or meeting disability where it is or where it will be looking ahead. Because when we use an impairment or disability as an archetype or an effect in a TV program or in a book, it's still using them.

Theme #3: Pathos, pity, and charity

I remember when I was little and we went to this restaurant and there was this teenager, or a little older, and he had some kind of disability to where I thought it was a disability . . . and he would just rock in his seat, like he had a helmet on, and they were escorting him everywhere. And you know when I was little, I was scared I didn't want to go over there because I was totally scared . . . It [the course] opened my perspective.

It kind of makes you understand that things are kind of idealized and they're not really truthful a lot of times. Before the class I thought I was more of the sympathetic, you need to be nice to them and you need to give them special treatment, not like extreme. But after the class, you don't even really think about it. I noticed a lot more things that people say about people with disabilities or how they act, and a lot of people are like that. They're like you can't say anything or you have to be really nice and you need to make sure you give them special treatment. But now I think that's kind of ridiculous.

I've always accepted people, but when it came to being paralyzed or anything like that, I used to think I'd be more of a burden. But I'd never give my opinion on that. [The course] really gave light to me that maybe living with a disability really isn't that bad. I have a free conscience I guess.

Theme #4: Forming a Concept of Ableism

My view of disability has changed a whole lot. I've never thought of myself as an ableist before, but then I started thinking about it. I never realized the "us and them" ideas that I had before. I've always tried to fight that in my normal daily life and I realized I didn't try to fight that with disabled people before because again the media always made it seem like, oh these people aren't going to want to talk to me and they'll be jealous of me because I'm able bodied and just stuff like that. The way to approach a person with a disability, especially someone that might need a hand, how to approach them properly, without insulting them, or stepping on their toes—that was a big thing for me.

The thing that really surprised me about the whole experience of being in that class was how I guess close to home it hit. I know that I say that and it's kind of obvious. But at the same time there were so many students in that class who know people who have family members who have disabilities who have friends, and obviously see me and other girls and other guys on campus that have disabilities. It was kind of definitely days where it's heavy. It's heavy to be talking about it, and it obviously affected me differently than your average person who doesn't have to go through the things that I and many other people that have disabilities have to go through. So, there were definitely days where I thought this is hard. But I enjoyed it nevertheless. It was fun. It's an important topic to discuss, too, because it's taboo not to talk about it. Just to let it be what it is.

If someone with a disability takes this class, it gives you a lot more views on the different ways people have handled different things. And a lot more likely to look ahead to what you're going to do and to see where you might have issues. That part I liked. I think in general it's nice to know, it's nice to get that experience . . . because we all live in our own little bubbles sometimes and we don't really know. I actually think this would be a great class for anybody. Something hit me in that class, I don't know what. But it gave me better experience. I don't know how to say it; it was a good experience.

Table 2

YouTube Examples

Examples	Websites
Stella Young—"I'm not your inspiration"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8K9Gg164Bsw
Maysoon Zayid—"I got 99 problems..."	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buRLc2eWGPQ
Maggie Little—"Intro to bioethics"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-h0qnGKYjPY
Richie Parker—"Drive"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRi4zCiclRY
Heath White—"Perfect"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LkElaCHQJE
Amanda Baggs—"In my own language"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JnylM1hI2jc
Teal Sherer—"My gimp life"	https://www.youtube.com/user/MyGimpyLife
Zach Anner- "Baby steps"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWI_J3-2Nzg
Dillian Barmarche—"Dillian's voice"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oMN2PeFama0
Samir Madden—"Differences"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRy7cnePYq0
Jessica Cox—"Jessica Cox"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FkMH4cVZx4k
Pro Infirmis—"Because who is perfect?"	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8umFV69fNg

Table 3

Blog Examples

Examples	Websites
It's My Life	http://sazzyactivist.blogspot.com/
Life Is Short And So Am I	http://courtney-simross.blogspot.com/
The Perks of Being Disabled	http://theperksofbeingdisabled.tumblr.com/
The Gimp Parade	http://thegimpparade.blogspot.com/
Hyperbole and a Half	http://hyperboleandahalf.blogspot.com/
Rolling Around in My Head	http://davehingsburger.blogspot.com/
Adventures of Wheelchair Boy	http://theadventuresofwheelchairboy.blogspot.com/
Blind Girls See	http://www.blindgirlssee.com/
Autistic Hoya	http://www.autistichoya.com/p/about.html
Yes, that too	http://yesthattoo.blogspot.com/
Deafinitely Girly	http://www.deafinitelygirly.com/
Disabled & Living in the Real World	http://disabledandlivingintherealworld.blogspot.com/