

Re-Seeing (Dis)Ability: Ten Suggestions

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Many English teachers feel underprepared to teach students with disabilities. While teachers may want to do whatever they can to make all their students successful, some may feel that they don't have as much time as they would like to prepare high-quality differentiated instruction, to fully accommodate every student, or even to know what accommodations will work best, even if they are working closely with a special education teacher. In addition, many teachers may not have been exposed, in their teacher preparation programs or in their lives, to perspectives on disability that would help them challenge the limiting perceptions of disability still so pervasive in our society. In recent years, however, a number of developments have evolved to the point where it is possible to rethink disability. The theme of this special issue of *English Journal*, "Re-Seeing (Dis)Ability," invites us all to learn more, to include more people, to change our perspectives, to pose different questions, and to understand more about all students' abilities.

First, new technologies have made it more possible for all students to have better access to, and means of interacting with, texts and other materials in English language arts: audio texts, speech recognition technologies, sophisticated graphic organizers, etc. Some may wonder if using these tools or accommodations might lower expectations. In fact, it's the opposite. These tools challenge us. They raise our expectations. These tools discourage teachers from *not* expecting as much from, say, a student whose eyes cannot read print. These tools also invite students *too* comfortable with working in their

preferred comfort zone—say, conventional reading and writing—to venture into other modalities, where they will have insights they would not have had in routine, print-based realms.

Second, the relatively new, interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies challenges us to think about disability as socially constructed: that many barriers encountered by people with disabilities are not the "fault" of their disability per se, but are rather a result of the ways they're treated in society. Disability Studies activists urge us to radically change the way we think about "disability," about what it means to be "normal," and who gets to define those terms.

In English classes today, traditional practices might be creating unnecessary educational barriers for students with disabilities and at the same time limiting learning for all students. Thanks to the Americans with Disability Act of 1990 (ADA), ramps, curb cuts, and wide doorways have enhanced physical access for people with disabilities. These changes to the built environment have also created more access for people who use baby strollers, roller blades, moving-day dollies, and suitcases-on-wheels. So what was intended as an accommodation for a few turned out to be a benefit for all. Similarly, altering the way we teach to better accommodate students with disabilities will enhance the learning of all students. Designing our classes and our pedagogies to be more inclusive might reduce the stigma some students feel by asking for special accommodations at the same time it increases learning opportunities for all. What follows are some actions we might take to re-see disability and ability.

Ten Actions We Can Take to Make Our Classes More Welcoming to Students with Disabilities and More Instructive and Challenging for All

1. Take advantage of new technologies.

Today, many technologies that used to be expensive or hard to find and use are now relatively inexpensive, widely available, and easy to use. We now have a variety of technologies students can use, in addition to conventional word processing, to create different compositions: audio, video, film, websites, wikis, blogs, and so on. Students can access, manipulate, and compose text in many ways—visually, auditorially, even kinesthetically—opening many opportunities for teaching.

In their informative *English Journal* article, “Learning to Write: Technology for Students with Disabilities in Secondary Inclusive Classrooms,” Patricia M. Barbetta and Linda A. Spears-Bunton summarize the best of these new tools and technologies that make learning more accessible for students with disabilities and, I would argue, for all students. For example, turning conventional text into digitalized text can enable students to adjust print size and background color, making it easier for some people to read. Digitalization also allows the reader or writer to highlight key words or images, or to activate a tool in Microsoft Word called AutoSummarize, which helps foreground main ideas in a text. They also explain text-to-speech technology (TTS), which converts written text to speech. For students who can hear but cannot see, this technology makes written text accessible. TTS could also help many other students access information through both eyes and ears, giving them more options for reading and more opportunities to develop listening skills. TTS also reads back words as students type, helping them find the right words and syntax. Barbetta and Spears-Bunton also describe word prediction technology, which can help all writers stay focused on fluency and content—and not get distracted by poor typing skills or bad spelling. There are also sophisticated graphic organizers, such as those put out by Inspiration Software, Inc., which help students “make graphic connections between and among their ideas—writers can see what their thinking looks like as it develops” (89).

The most exciting of these now widely available technologies is speech/voice recognition, a tool that could change the lives of many writers, with or without disabilities. These programs translate spoken words into typed text: users simply dictate into a microphone, and their words appear on the computer screen. Voice-recognition technology can be a life-altering resource for so many of us, yet it is one of the most underused tools in English classes today. Students with disabilities that cause handwriting, word-processing, or spelling problems might find that being able to *speak* their ideas mitigates many of their difficulties. Those of us who have or develop physical problems with our fingers, hands, wrists, or arms (broken limbs, carpal tunnel syndrome, or arthritis) could continue to “write” with our voices. Or, writers may simply want to see what happens to fluency and thought development when they speak their ideas and let the program word-process them. Where possible, English classes should take far more advantage of speech/voice-recognition technologies, which may increase the fluency and confidence of all writers, and the spelling, even the coherence, in their writing.

In this issue, Kathleen D. De Mers discusses these and other technological advances that help all people. One such tool is the new, easy-to-use open and closed captioning feature on YouTube, which not only increases accessibility for more users on the Web. It now also provides, to imaginative teachers, a promising vehicle for students to work in creative, rhetorically effective ways with images, sound, *and* written language.

2. Consider the perspective of the Society for Disability Studies (SDS).

The new, interdisciplinary field of Disability Studies shows us how many disabling aspects of a person’s experience are constructed by society—by unnecessary barriers. If we can become more aware of these barriers and remove them, it would help us

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rethink disability in ways that would benefit everyone. Conventional ways of looking at disability focus on “fixing” people with disabilities, trying to make them “fit” more seamlessly into what is seen as “normal” society. This view is called “the medical model” of disability. Scholars in Disability Studies argue, however, that society itself contributes to the disabling of individuals by creating unnecessary barriers, both physical and social; this view is called “the social model” of disability. As the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) points out in its mission statement, “disability is a key aspect of human experience” (<http://www.disstudies.org/about/mission>). SDS says there should be “greater awareness of the experiences of disabled people,” and SDS members “advocate for social change.”

Consider, for example, a person in a wheelchair who cannot get into a building because there is no ramp, and she encounters a set of stairs. Yes, this person has a disability that causes her to use a wheelchair. But what really keeps her from participating more fully in society is a physical barrier that has been built by someone else: the stairs. It’s

not that architects set out to deliberately bar people in wheelchairs. But much of what was (and sometimes still is) designed in our society privileges the so-called able-bodied: people who can climb stairs, see computer screens, hear directions, and so on. The ADA removed some of those barriers, but many other obstacles remain. Right now the courts must settle disagreements about whether or not an accommodation a person asks for to more fully participate is “reasonable.” If accessibility were more a part of our cultural consciousness, if inclusiveness were something we didn’t always have to be reminded about, if disability were seen as a part of “normal” life, our buildings and classrooms would not need so much expensive retrofitting and people wouldn’t need to have to ask to *not* be excluded. Buildings would be more usable by more people from the beginning, which is the main idea behind Universal Design (see suggestion #7). In the same way stairs are a constructed barrier to buildings, there are constructed educational barriers in our classrooms and in our pedagogies. We can, and should, address those barriers, too.



Exclusionary pedagogies, like stairways, can create unnecessary barriers. © iStockphoto.com/Boguslaw Mazur



Multimodal pedagogies, like wide doorways, can help all students succeed. © iStockphoto.com/Boguslaw Mazur

Several contributors to this special issue of *English Journal* include classroom activities and specific questions informed by a Disability Studies perspective. Tammie M. Kennedy and Tracey Menten describe five activities designed to help students think critically about assumptions made about people with disabilities, activities that also support many NCTE standards. And Daniel L. Preston, in his examination of the popular animated film *Finding Nemo*, includes a copious list of questions teachers can pose, which help students notice when and where characters are treated differently because of a disability or perceived disability.

3. Use literary and other texts as a springboard for informed discussions of disability and ableism.

Ableism occurs when society is organized to accommodate only the needs of its “able-bodied” citizens, leading to discrimination against citizens with disabilities. While English teachers are perhaps used to posing critical questions about a novel’s or short story’s representation of gender, race, or class, we may be less used to questioning how characters with disabilities are depicted in literature. In the same way we would not allow outdated or discriminatory attitudes about women or people of color to stand unchallenged, we should not allow harmful statements or implicit assumptions about people with disabilities—whether in classic or contemporary literature—to go unchallenged.

Where possible, we should use stories that include characters with disabilities, but without the text succumbing to conventional stereotypes: that the disability somehow symbolizes evil, that the person is helpless, that the person is only to be pitied, etc. Even in less obvious stereotyping, however, we should keep in mind Amy Vidali, Margaret Price, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson’s warning against what they call a typical “enlightenment narrative,” in which a person with a disability functions primarily as an “educational device” for others, cementing “assumptions about ‘disabled’ and ‘non-disabled’ as rigid categories.” Rather than opening up questions about definitions of “disability” and “normalcy,” such narratives can reinforce “us/them” categories.

If it’s not possible to avoid a text with a stereotypical depiction of a person with a disability, we can pose questions that will invite students to

recognize and challenge those stereotypes. One of the accomplishments of early feminism was teaching students to become what Judith Fetterley calls “resisting readers.” That is, even texts with harmful gender stereotypes could be used to challenge those stereotypes by helping readers first see and then resist them. We can help students become resisting readers of potentially harmful views of disability. In *Stoner and Spaz*, an excellent young adult (YA) novel by Ron Koertge (and winner of the 2003 PEN Center USA Literary Award for Children’s Literature), the first-person narrator, Ben Bancroft, who has cerebral palsy, makes a derogatory remark about himself in the first paragraphs of the novel. In buying a single movie ticket, he asks the woman in the booth: “Since it’s Monster Week, do I get a discount?” (1). The novel itself helps us resist 16-year-old Ben Bancroft’s destructive view of himself, but by posing different questions to students, we can help them further explore the reasons Ben is made to feel he is a “monster.” By asking questions about the language used in novels to describe people with disabilities, even how the characters with disabilities describe themselves, we can help students think critically about how those perceived as different are treated in our society.

For a collection of stories that might spark such productive discussions, see *Owning It: Stories about Teens with Disabilities*, a ten-story edited collection by Don Gallo, which includes a story by Ron Koertge. And in his “Off the Shelves” column in this *EJ* issue, Mark Letcher reviews nine different novels about characters who have symptoms of autism spectrum disorders.

For examples of how we might begin discussions of how disability is portrayed in texts, see, also in this issue, Joellen Maples, Katrina Arndt, and Julia M. White’s resistant reading of *The Mighty*, the film adaptation of the popular YA novel *Freak the Mighty*. Also in this issue, Tonya Merritt discusses how her new experiences with disability made her see previously unseen and harmful assumptions about disability in the short story “The Scarlet Ibis,” published in 1960. In addition, after disclosing her personal experiences with her son’s disability, Merritt learned that the character one of her students most identified with in *To Kill a Mockingbird* was Boo Radley because of the way that character was treated.

There are also several articles in *Disability Studies Quarterly* (*DSQ*), an online, open-access journal published by SDS (<http://www.disstudies.org/>), that list specific questions teachers can pose about literary texts. In their thought-provoking article “Questioning Representations of Disability in Adolescent Literature: Reader Response Meets Disability Studies,” Valerie Struthers Walker, Tara Mileski, Dana Greaves, and Lisa Patterson pose questions designed to get students thinking critically about how characters with disabilities are depicted in selected adolescent or children’s literature—and what those depictions tell us about our society. In her section of the jointly written essay, Walker uses the following questions to get students “to attend to the ways in which their understanding of literature and the world changes as they read, write and discuss their interpretations of literature.” Her first question can generate a sophisticated reader response:

Asking critical questions about how characters with disabilities are described in literature pushes students further, helping them develop more sophisticated inference skills as well as more enlightened views of disability.

“How do our own experiences and beliefs shape the meanings we make of representations of disability in texts?” Her second question can spark engaging research projects: “How can we draw on outside resources to help us read these texts, and our readings of these texts in new ways?” For the novel *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, by Gennifer Choldenko (one of the books reviewed in Letcher’s column

in this issue of *EJ*), Mileski poses the following question about Moose, the young male protagonist, and his sister Natalie, who seems to have symptoms of autism: “How does the way that Moose understands Natalie’s ‘difference’ change throughout the text?” This is a higher-order question that goes beyond plot summary and character identification to inference and analysis. In discussing a YA mystery novel, *From Charlie’s Point of View* by Richard Scrimger, Patterson asks her students about the main character, Charlie, who is blind and must solve a bank robbery case: “Scrimger includes scenes throughout the book in which Charlie is compared to (or, in some cases, contrasted with) ‘everyone else.’ How does this position readers to think about blindness and disability?” Patterson refers to Simi

Linton’s highly influential work in Disability Studies, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. She revisits Linton’s questions regarding who gets to define normalcy, and she ends the essay with these questions: “Who is privileged when we label someone ‘normal’? How is the text structured to raise this type of question?” In another essay in the same volume of *DSQ*, Caroline Leach and Stuart Murray examine representations of disability and gender in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and its film adaptation. As Murray points out, “The novel is excellent for beginning to think about the ways in which disability can be portrayed and discussed in relation to other social forms and processes.”

Questions such as these from *English Journal*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, or from some of the resources listed in #9, below, may be combined with more traditional questions regarding plot, theme, characterization, etc. Asking critical questions about how characters with disabilities are described in literature pushes students further, however, helping them develop more sophisticated inference skills as well as more enlightened views of disability.

4. Broaden definitions of “reading.”

Nicole E. Green, who is blind in one eye and has limited eyesight in the other, used to listen to audio books in school. As she explains in her essay in this special issue, she often had to convince her teachers that hearing these novels was, indeed, reading them. If “reading” is defined narrowly as literally moving one’s eyes across a text, then students who need to use their ears to read and students who can comprehend much better by hearing a text will continue to have to defend the modality that works best for them. But if reading is more broadly defined as paying close attention to content and interacting deeply with a text, then students who need audio texts could simply use them without stigma.

What if *all* students could access novels, short stories, textbooks, and other materials through both print *and* audio? With more texts available digitally and therefore able to be read aloud by increasingly sophisticated automated text readers, audio texts no longer present the expensive challenge they once did. Students who learn much better by listening than they do by reading might be spared having to prove this to their teachers. If everyone had access to such materials, there might be less resent-

ment by other students who may see audio texts as an unfair advantage not available to them. Furthermore, students who think they learn better through eyes-on-page reading might welcome the chance to multitask: to listen to their assigned readings through their iPod as they walk or ride the bus to school. They might find that doing so is an effective way to review material they've read off the page, to store it better in their brain, or to develop their listening skills. Since much writing in English language arts is in response to literary or other texts, how students access those readings—how often and how easily they can access them—is important.

We should, obviously, continue to teach students to develop their reading of print texts, if they are physically able to do so. I'm not suggesting that audio texts take the place of printed ones. However, audio texts can increase all students' interaction with the poems, stories, and novels we want them to read, and any exposure to books increases students' vocabulary and background knowledge, enabling them to comprehend increasingly complex material. And listening is also one of the English language arts.

There is an art to producing an artistic and high-quality audio text, as anyone knows who has listened to both well-read and poorly read audio texts from a local library. In fact, having students *produce* an audio text of a short story, novel, or poem is a challenging, collaborative assignment that requires deep knowledge of the text, finely tuned listening and speaking skills, technological knowledge, and the ability to work well with other members of the production team—all necessary skills in the 21st century and a great way to tap into different students' talents and to help them develop new ones.

In this issue, English educators Meadow Sherrill Graham and Sheila Benson describe how they had their preservice teachers interpret multimodal texts: TV shows, episode transcripts, and interviews with actors or directors. They also had them design lessons using multimodalities, so that their future students might escape print-bound assignments, so intellectually limiting for some students, with or without disabilities.

5. Broaden definitions of "writing."

New technologies have broadened our definitions of literacy and provided new ways of thinking about what our students can produce: videos, audio files,

websites, and so on. Now that these new media have raised our collective consciousness about the role speaking, listening, and visual representation can play in a finished product, we are in a better position to rethink what role they might play in what Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee argue are underused canons, or categories, of ancient rhetoric: the first, *invention*, and the second, *arrangement*. Invention, of which modern "prewriting" is a part, was for the ancient rhetoricians a vast and detailed set of strategies for generating, reflecting on, and further developing ideas. Arrangement, of which modern print outlines and graphic organizers are a part, was for the ancients highly dependent on each rhetorical situation, including complex analyses of time and place—*kairos*—as well as whether the argument was to be presented to a friendly or hostile audience.

Not only are invention and arrangement still given short shrift in many of today's writing classes. Crowley and Hawhee argue further that there is the concomitant problem of overemphasis on the fifth canon of rhetoric: *delivery*. Too many of us still stress the correctness of the finished product to the exclusion of invention, arrangement, and style (the third canon of ancient rhetoric). Indeed, to judge by the complaints about other people's grammar that appear every day in newspapers, blogs, and podcasts, the general public seems to think that writing is all about, and only about, the correctness of a finished product. In these grammar rants (which Ken Lindblom and I are currently analyzing in a book, *Grammar Rants*, to be published by Boynton/Cook), the ranters frequently claim to be the last souls on earth who defend literacy. However, they never demand that schools teach more invention strategies, those higher-order intellectual tasks that ancient rhetoricians taught their students about finding and arranging the available means of persuasion best suited for each rhetorical situation. Rather, these defenders of literacy are content to rail about grammar or spelling.

It goes without saying that well-edited, meticulously proofread prose is something all writers should know how to produce. But real writers know that copyediting and proofreading are the last of many steps. If attempted too soon, they can interrupt fluency and interfere with higher-order generating and organizing thought processes. And real writers get to choose how they generate those ideas.

Some prefer longhand, others a beloved old typewriter, others word processing, others a storyboard, and still others use dictation or a voice/speech-recognition program.

If we want all students to be better writers, why can't we offer them the full range of composing choices that are available? Innovative approaches to generating and arranging are particularly important to students with language-related learning disabilities (LD), as is the opportunity to create multimodal products. For these students, the traditional academic reliance on writing is especially

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harmful during invention, because hand-writing or word-processing may not work for them (the way it might for their teachers) as an effective invention strategy. As Charles Lowe has argued, the "free-speaking" made possible by voice-recognition technology

might provide a more effective composing tool for some students. For others, ideas might be arriving too fast for keyboarding to capture, or students may lose their train of thought as they search for cumbersome words. Another promising heuristic is the visually active storyboard, long a staple of screenwriters. For some people, the representation possible through a visual mode provides a wider idea path than does the paragraph. These multiple modalities are similar to what Paulo Freire called "multiple channels of communication" (50), used in his famous literacy programs in Brazil.

For those of us who read *English Journal* and other resources to discover 21st-century technologies that we can add to those we already use, it may be easy to forget that many students are still taught writing primarily through 20th- and even 19th-century tools. At some schools, students are not even allowed to word process their work anymore. They are taken off computers and made to write their essays in cursive. Why? Because the essays on standardized exams must be handwritten, officials worry that students used to writing on computers will not do well when asked to hand-write on paper. So some students are not even allowed the speed and ease of revising and editing that a simple keyboard provides. We can make "writing" more accessible by expanding both what

it means to learn to write (including more invention and arranging strategies) and the means through which students can generate and organize their ideas (using writing, sketching, and voice-recognition technology).

6. Use a wider variety of assessments.

Timed tests may be evaluating how quickly students can take a test rather than how much content the students know or how well they can analyze material or think critically. For most aspects of English language arts, speed is not the main objective. Many of us cherish leisurely reads or the chance to reread something. Writing in the real world proceeds at a different pace for everyone, and all real writers have at least some chance to revise their work. And since "more time on tests" is a frequent accommodation for those with learning disabilities in English classes, why not reevaluate the need to make all students except those with labels rush through? Give all students the time they need to do their best work.

Similarly, written tests may be evaluating how well a student writes rather than how much content the student knows, or how well he or she can synthesize or analyze material. Sometimes the purpose of the assessment is to measure writing ability, in which case a written test is required. But if the test is intended to measure knowledge of Shakespeare, or literary genres and elements, or critical thinking, or organizational knowledge, or reading comprehension, inference, or interpretation, there are other ways to find out what students know and can do. Yes, writing is a part of English language arts. But so are speaking, listening, and composing nonprint texts.

If some students' language-related disabilities mostly involve print, the exams they take may be assessing their processing of written test questions and their mastery of word processing or even hand-writing, rather than what they know. For them, an oral exam might provide a more accurate measure of their content knowledge and higher-order analyzing abilities. For other students, the unfair advantage of always being able to use their preferred modality—writing—in testing situations may have the disadvantage of impeding their intellectual growth. *Too* comfortable, perhaps, with the *means* by which their knowledge is measured, they are de-

nied the challenge that working with ideas through different modalities could offer.

If more assessments were a mix of writing, speaking, and listening, we would need fewer special accommodations, more students could be tested using a modality in which they shine, and more students would be challenged to develop their skills in areas in which they need more practice (writing and speaking and listening). By rethinking the circumstances in which we ask all students to function, we might be able to create more humane conditions for test taking for everyone, at the same time we reduce the stigma of having to ask for special accommodations. Multiple assessments *raise* expectations. As Cynthia Messer points out in her article in this issue: “Having a variety of assessments will not undermine our high standards but rather provide more accurate ways for all students to show that they have accomplished these high goals” (40).

7. Bring the Principles of Universal Design into teaching.

Ron Mace, an educator, designer, and architect who founded The Center for Universal Design, defines Universal Design as “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/about_ud/about_ud.htm). To give just one example: if a shower stall is designed from the beginning with wide doorways, grab bars, a recessed bench or fold-down seat, versatile shower sprays, etc., more people can bathe safely without having to retrofit everything if they injure themselves or develop disabilities as they age.

While the Principles of Universal Design apply mostly to the physical world of architecture and product design, its underlying philosophy can be, and already has been, applied to education and learning. See the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST; <http://www.cast.org/about/index.html>), founded in 1984, for ideas regarding classroom products and practices, curriculum development, etc. They list, as does The National Center for Universal Design for Learning (<http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines>), important guidelines that can be applied successfully in all disciplines, and they provide many examples of how

these guidelines translate to the classroom. The main points, however, are that we need to present material in more than just one mode, that students should have more than just one way to learn material, to interact with it, and to be assessed on it.

In English classes, we typically ask students to read texts, engage with those texts in some way, and then write about them. There are many tools we can choose from, both high and low tech, to help stimulate the higher-order thinking we want students to do. There are sophisticated Web 2.0 tools: Audacity for voice responses, graphic-novel generating sites, film-making sites, Google Docs, wikis, and so on. In this *EJ* issue, Cheryl Gomes and James Bucky Carter discuss how students with reading difficulties became highly engaged in an authentic writing project: an interactive blog with Gene Luen Yang, author of the prize-winning graphic novel *American Born Chinese*. The blog and the novel both helped build community in this class, giving students insights on identity and the importance of being themselves. There are also simple low-tech tools we’ve had for years, which we can use in more imaginative ways once we think past what Cynthia L. Selfe calls “alphabetic-only composing” (616). Almost any activity that requires active participation from students will involve more than one modality: class debates, collaborative projects and presentations, electronic peer commentary through discussion board forums, and oral peer-response sessions. Students can also provide digitally recorded audio feedback to their classmates’ drafts—once they’ve had some training in doing so. (See, for example, Julie Reynolds and Vikki Russell’s research at Duke University for research results regarding that audio feedback.)

Here are some other examples (which I explain in more detail in Chapter 3 of my book, *Talking, Sketching Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing*). In my classes, all students must

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make a two-minute response to class readings on my office voicemail, and it can't simply be prepared ahead of time and read off the page. I must hear them thinking through their ideas, discovering connections and gaining insights *as they speak*. This is a welcome, stimulating experience for some students and a terrifying one for others—often some of the best writers. Some students send me MP3 files with their voiced responses, while others can barely manage the telephone technology. The point is, through such multimodal experiences, students' talents are both demonstrated and developed, remixed in ways that provide welcome opportunities to some and needed challenges to others.

Another way to have students engage with complex ideas is through visual representation. Most teachers are familiar with graphic organizers to help students organize their ideas. But having students actually sketch, graph, draw, or otherwise visually represent complex ideas they're reading about forces them to grapple with those ideas in challenging new ways. Here's how it works: After I've given an introduction to the assignment and distributed directions, each student comes to class with an individual sketch or drawing. Then I put them in groups of three or four, where they explain their sketch to one another and decide which representation they'll use as a group, or they may come up with a new one collaboratively. For example, graduate students in my Composition Theory class must create visual representations of material introduced in our readings. They must somehow juxtapose at least two abstract concepts important to composition or rhetorical theory. They might sketch traditional representative theories of language versus more postmodern views of how language shapes knowledge. They might show Freire's praxis of critical consciousness compared to banking-model approaches. They must then present their work to the class orally and also write a short explanation of it.

The preparation work students do in these small groups is critical because as they are deciding which sketch to use, they are talking through important concepts in the course. In a typical class of 25–30 students, logistics prevent every student from participating often in a lively discussion. In these groups of three or four, however, every student must verbalize these concepts, must listen to others explain their representation, and then, with the group, must finalize what they'll present to the class: who will actually

come up with the sketch, who will write about it, who will talk about it in front of the class. I let them decide. This multimodal assignment both uses and develops different students' talents. It gets everyone engaged in important course content, and the most stimulating presentations help everyone understand something more thoroughly.

To grapple with these concepts, students may use stick figures, charts, graphs, geometric shapes, pipe cleaners, or differently shaped pretzels. Some use talk-show formats, videos, or even interpretive dance. I do not assess students on their artistic talents, but rather on the insight their representation offers and the extent to which it stimulates discussion. For these visual representations, it may be initially tempting for students to dash off simplistic drawings of course content. However, generating some shared criteria before they begin will prevent that. Before this project is due, we take a few minutes of class time to generate together possible criteria for assessing it, and I rough out a simple rubric they can consult as they put the finishing touches on their project. When students must identify, juxtapose, and visually represent abstract concepts in a way that will generate lively discussion, they *do* produce insight-producing creations, sometimes coming up with an original metaphor, which is, after all, often a concrete representation of an abstract concept. What's more, their minds work in different ways than when they write. Visual representation is a wild and wonderful invention strategy. For some, it taps into visual talents that are rarely exercised in English classes; for others, it is an astonishing discovery about what their brains can do when they wake up the neurons in both hemispheres.

8. Become more aware of how language shapes our perception of reality.

As Linton demonstrates in her important work in Disability Studies, language reveals much about perceptions of disability in our society. One way to help students become more conscious of word connotation and hidden assumptions in both literary and nonfiction texts is to help them examine how language functions to both shape and reflect a certain view of the world. Here is the headline and lead sentence I found in an Associated Press story on the front page of *The Pantagraph* (Bloomington/Normal, IL):

Court sets limit on disability law

Washington, D.C.—In a victory for employers, the Supreme Court made it more difficult for workers to demand special treatment when they suffer partial physical disabilities such as carpal tunnel syndrome. (January 9, 2002)

When I discuss the above authentic news lead with students, I put it next to a hypothetical lead that I wrote, changing just a few of the words:

Court sets limit on disability law

Washington, D.C.—In a loss for partially disabled workers, the Supreme Court made it more difficult for workers to ask for accommodations when they suffer partial physical disabilities such as carpal tunnel syndrome.

Without telling them which one is the real lead (the first one), I simply tell them that one is real and one is made up. I ask them about how each sentence frames the court decision differently (“In a victory for employers” versus “In a loss for partially disabled workers”). I ask about the different connotations of “demand” and “ask.” I ask about the difference between “accommodations” and “special treatment.” I ask what most Americans think of people who “demand special treatment.” Most of the time I can simply ask, “How are these two leads different?”—and students find the differences. They see immediately the power of word connotation and hidden assumptions—even in so-called impartial writing, such as front-page news stories—and how powerful language can be in shaping our views of business, employers, and employees with disabilities. Students can do similar analyses of other texts: novels and short stories (discussed above), poetry, drama, news stories, letters to editors, public service announcements about disabilities, fundraising flyers, accounts of athletes with disabilities, and other nonfiction texts. What people say to or about people with disabilities can also be harmful. In this issue, Meredith Stewart describes how strangers’ well-intentioned words concerning her physical disability can cause unintended pain.

9. Take advantage of the many disability-related resources available.

In addition to the resources named so far in this essay, here are just a few of many more, each one of which is itself a source of further resources:

Lewiecki-Wilson, Cynthia, and Brenda Jo Brueggemann, with Jay Dolmage. *Disability and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Sourcebook*. Boston: Bedford, 2008. Print.

This is a wonderful collection of current thinking about disability: how disability intersects with teacher training, what it’s like to be a teacher with a disability, resources for teachers, how to analyze language regarding disability, and activities to use with students. It also has an extensive bibliography.

Daniels, Harvey. “Are Literature Circles on Your IEP?” *Voices from the Middle* 12.4 (2005): 54–55. Print.

As Daniels argues in this essay, students with IEPs should not be denied the opportunities offered by literature circles. They, too, should be able to experience the authentic, book group–like discussion afforded their peers without IEPs: the guided choice of which novel to read, which role in the group they’d like to fulfill, and which ideas they’d like to explore in structured, higher-order discussions.

Disability Studies Quarterly: The First Journal in the Field of Disability Studies.

This scholarly journal is now open-access and available in html online at <http://dsq-sds.org/issue/archive>. While many of the articles are of interest primarily to scholars in Disability Studies, teachers interested in learning more about this interdisciplinary field will find this journal helpful. And, as mentioned above, the Vol. 28, No. 4 (2008) special issue, “Disability Studies in the Undergraduate Classroom,” has a number of practical suggestions for using this theory in the teaching of English.

English Journal 84.8 (1995). (Special Issue on Multiple Intelligences)

Now 15 years old, this special issue of *English Journal* on multiple intelligence is full of good ideas for teaching English using multimodal approaches. Howard Gardner, author of the groundbreaking 1983 book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, wrote the lead article. Peter Smagorinsky, in “Multiple Intelligences in the English Class: An Overview,” shows how Gardner’s theories can be applied in English language arts. And Bruce Pirie, in his excellent article, “Meaning through Motion: Kinesthetic English,” shows how to use movement to teach literary works such as William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*.

Science Magazine.

This may seem like an odd resource for teachers of English. But we who ask our students to do so much reading and writing and thinking need to know more about what happens when people think—what brain research might be relevant to what we do. Much scientific research on language-related learning disabilities is controversial (see Chapter 1 in my book, *Learning Re-Abled*, for an account of that controversy), and much is outside what many may consider the boundaries of English. The social construction of disability has been clearly demonstrated through extensive research and scholarship in Disability Studies. At the same time, we must also follow neurological research on possible causes for language-based learning disabilities. Neuroscientists are themselves currently embroiled in a dramatic debate over test results on possible causes, and as English teachers, we need to follow these studies, even with their conflicting results, perhaps because of them. (For a quick overview of these studies, see editorials, book reviews, and letters to *Science Magazine* [Gabrieli; Meltzoff; Seidenberg; Skoyles and Skottun; Stern].)

Renino, Christopher. “‘Who’s There?’: Shakespeare and the Dragon of Autism.” *English Journal* 99.1 (2009): 50–55. Print.

A father and teacher tells us about how his son and his son’s friend, both on the autism spectrum, become inspired by Shakespeare’s plays and collaborate on their own original script. Although these two boys cannot yet speak, their sense of humor and rich intellectual lives are documented through use of keyboards and letter boards.

Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy 7.1 (2002).

This journal, also available online for free, has a special issue on disability: “Disability: Demonstrated by and Mediated through Technology.” The articles in this issue give practical suggestions on teaching and also provide links to further resources. It is available at <http://endora.wide.msu.edu/7.1/index.html>.

Schwarz, Patrick. *From Disability to Possibility: The Power of Inclusive Classrooms*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2006. Print.

This is one of the best books I’ve ever used in my methods class for preservice English teachers. Both inspiring and practical, this short book improves the way English teachers think of inclusion.

AHEAD: Association on Higher Education And Disability (<http://www.ahead.org/>)

This is an invaluable site, with many links to articles, publications, discussion lists, videos and DVDs, special interest groups, and conferences. Comprehensive and easy to navigate, this site has information and resources for everyone regarding disability: technology, suggested films for discussion, career planning, and much more. This is their vision: “AHEAD envisions educational and societal environments that value disability and embody equality of opportunity.”

10. Ask students how they learn best, and keep expectations high.

If any of this seems overwhelming right now, simply ask students how they learn best, or ask their parents. By the time they’re in middle school or high school, many students with disabilities know much about what they need, specifically, to succeed. Parents, too, can be a rich source of information. In this issue, Carolyn Ariella Sofia writes about what she learned about her teaching during the year she taught her son at home. He taught her how to tap into students’ talents to help them learn what they find challenging. Elizabeth Park Reid relates how one teacher saw her daughter’s potential as a writer and nourished it, keeping expectations high. Also in this issue, Robyn Seglem and Melissa VanZant, an English teacher and a special education teacher, respectively, write about how they teamed up to have their students experience the true meaning of “least restrictive environment” (LRE). LRE is the federal requirement that students with disabilities receive their education, to the fullest extent possible, in the same classes with students who do not have disabilities. Using Socratic circles, a reading day, and a wiki, these two teachers found “ways to further every student’s learning without watering down the curriculum” (46).


This Special Issue

As described throughout this “*EJ* in Focus” piece, the articles in this special issue are a mix of voices: teachers with disabilities, parents and teachers of children with disabilities, and selected passages written by students with disabilities. I am aware of James I. Charlton’s admonition in his book *Nothing*

About Us Without Us about the danger of people without disabilities writing about people with disabilities. For too long, people with disabilities have been advocated for and written about, often without their perspectives. It is also important, however, that family members and teachers discuss what they have learned in their experiences, and to document and process the role disability plays in all our lives.

I am a former teacher of high school English. I've taught writing at a two-year college, a four-year liberal arts college, a Midwestern university, and now at a large East Coast university, where in addition to teaching composition and rhetoric, I help prepare preservice middle school and high school English teachers. I am not, currently, a person with a disability. I am, as they say, a TAB (Temporarily Able Bodied). However, if I live as long as I would like to, I may well acquire one or more disabilities, and quite frankly, if or when I do, I'd like our society to be a good deal more inclusive than it currently is, with many more accommodations already in place, with Principles of Universal Design having already convinced architects to routinely build ramps, elevators, wider doorways, grab bars, and so on. If my sight fails but I want to take a college course somewhere, I hope there is more than a printed text available, and I hope I won't have to convince the instructor that listening to an audio text is, indeed, reading. If my hearing fails, I hope he or she does more than lecture. If I have arthritis in my fingers, I hope no one will tell me that using voice-recognition technology isn't really writing.

What are some other problems with mainstream society's current view of disability? It can limit human potential, which is devastating to an individual. It also does permanent, invisible harm to society, which does not benefit from the intellectual insights, scientific discoveries, or even the taxable income of all its citizens. When we limit the inclusion of some of our students, we limit the potential of our entire society. Designing more physically, intellectually, and pedagogically inclusive English classes will help individuals reach their full potential, and society will benefit from the contributions of people formerly excluded.

I am deeply grateful to Ken Lindblom, editor of *English Journal*, for inviting me to guest edit this special issue on disability. It's been a privilege to learn so much from the contributors. 

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