Fighting Disability Stereotypes with Comics: "I Cannot See You, But I Know You Are Staring at Me"

BY **CAITLIN OSTROW SEIDLER**

In spring 2010, I invited sixth-grade students to examine stereotypes about people living with disabilities and then challenge these generalized perceptions through the creation of comic strips. I chose exploring disability stereotypes because I have long had a personal interest in the work of artists with disabilities. I wanted to share with students the methods that many of these artists have used to respond to common depictions of the disability community in the media. Those depictions include movie villains, posters warning of the consequences of drunk driving, and charity donation cans with accompanying text expressing a sentiment similar to "Your pennies will cure the world of people like me" (R. Lehrer, podcast, April 27, 2006).

The *dizABLED* comic strip by John and Claire Lytle questions stereotypical views of the disability community in a clear, accessible, and humorous way. After viewing and discussing several of these comic strips, students created their own original ones. My objective for this lesson was for students to go beyond simply conveying that stereotyping is wrong through their artwork to also consider the notion that people living with disabilities do not necessarily want to "emulate the norm" (Campbell, 2008, p. 156); rather, they have full and rewarding lives they could not imagine living any other way.

Existing Disability Awareness Curricula

Among existing approaches to teaching students about disability, one of the most commonly employed methods to promote disability awareness is simulation exercises. During these activities, students wear blindfolds, sit in wheelchairs, or put cotton balls in their ears to pretend to have a disability for a short period. Many disability activists are opposed to the use of these exercises for several reasons. First, temporarily simulating a disability is not an accurate way to replicate

Figure 1. *dizABLED* comic strip character, Leeder O. Men. Used with permission of John Lytle. Students viewed and discussed this strip before creating their own.

the experience of being disabled. Johnson (2006) explains, "People simulate paraplegia by trying to use a clunky junker 'airport-type' wheelchair... but without the stronger shoulder muscles which someone who's really a paraplegic has built up" (p. 19). Further, these exercises focus only on the limitations of the body, excluding any consideration of the environmental causes of disablement. Hahn (1993) points out that "the fundamental restrictions of a disability may be located in the surroundings that people encounter rather than within the disabled individual" (p. 37). In other words, a person who uses a wheelchair is not only disabled by paralysis, she is disabled by a multistory building that contains stairs but no elevator; a student is not only disabled by vision loss, he is disabled by a publisher's failure to provide textbook content in alternate accessible formats.

Blaser (2003) and Griffin, Peters, and Smith (2007) propose alternative "simulation" exercises that call attention to the presence of discrimination and externally disabling factors rather than the limitations of a physical disability itself. Students could take a tour of their favorite stores, restaurants, and other public places and note whether the entrances and aisles are accessible to a person who uses a wheelchair, or they could ban themselves from using public restrooms without accessible stalls over a period of several days (Blaser, 2003).

The Affirmative Model

In addition to calling students' attention to the ways products, services, and the built environment are disabling, I also wanted to address people's emotional responses to the thought of living with a disability. Many people who do not have a disability believe being disabled is an inferior and pitiable state that is "potentially curable through treatment" (Blandy, 1994, p. 180). The affirmative model of disability, a concept of disability that affirms a "positive identity of being impaired" (Swain & French, 2000, p. 578), is necessary to prove that living with a disability is not a tragic and negative aspect of people's lives that they dream of "curing" so they can be "normal." Instead, people who espouse the affirmative model view disability as an integral and positive aspect of their identities that they do not wish to change.

Disability Artists

Common approaches that art teachers use to bring disability into the classroom can be as problematic as simulation exercises. There have been many artists with disabilities throughout history, but as Eisenhauer (2007) warns, the practice of teaching students about "*disabled people doing art*... places an emphasis upon the representation of difference through a curriculum of admiration and appreciation in which individual artists are admired for their ability to create work similar to other able-bodied artists" (p. 9). This approach affirms the perception of people with disabilities as limited in their activities, as well as the notion that artists with disabilities aspire to be like "normal" artists. Eisenhauer contrasts this approach with "the discourse of the *disability artist*" (p. 9), whose artwork is "a personal and critical examination of the cultural inscription of their bodies as disabled people" (p. 10). In essence, there are many artists with disabilities; a subgroup is disability artists, who address disability in their work. Disability artists advance the affirmative model by directly questioning the sympathetic attitudes and assumptions about normalcy that inform prevailing attitudes toward disability. Of course, artists with disabilities who are not explicitly aligned with this movement may be included in the art curriculum in general, but disability artists are most appropriate and useful for a focused, critical examination of attitudes toward disability.

After brainstorming and discussing several disability stereotypes with my sixth-grade students, we examined artwork by Riva Lehrer, whose *Circle Stories* series of portraits depicts artists with disabilities with whom Lehrer collaborated to

Art educators who build a curriculum around disability artwork have a rich resource of artists to incorporate into their classes' exploration of perceptions of disability. Many contemporary artists can be found on the following websites:

- Access Living: Disability Arts and Culture Program: **www.accessliving.org/index.php?tray=topic_RespectSub&tid=top624&cid=9**
- Disability Arts Online: **http://disabilityartsonline.org/**
- Disabled Artists on ArtPromote: **www.artpromote.com/disabled.shtml**

determine the nature of the imagery; David Hevey, a photographer whose portraits for the series *Striking Poses* show people with disabilities in the midst of joyful experiences; Jon Wos, whose self-portraits explore the complex role of Osteogenesis Imperfecta in his life and sense of identity, differing from the entirely tragic or entirely heroic depictions of people with disabilities that are so common in visual culture; and E. Brooke Lanier, whose text-based paintings look like eye charts doctors show patients to assess their vision, but contain messages such as "I cannot see you but I know you are staring at me". For my students, these works of art served as powerful examples of some ways artists fight back against the stereotypes we had discussed before viewing the images.

After we studied these pieces of disability artwork, the sixth-graders critiqued some political cartoons and comic strips that challenged disability stereotypes in a similar way. I was aware that the topic of disability might make some students uncomfortable, so I hoped the artists' use of humor would put these students at ease. Smith and Sapon-Shevin (2008–2009) advocate the use of humor in empowering the disability community in their workshops and speaking engagements, during which they utilize jokes to "raise awareness and help participants become more discerning about what's 'funny' and what's 'oppressive,' and more skilled in learning what to do when confronted by offensive or problematic humor and language" (para. 6). Comics artists whose work I shared included Dave Lupton ("Crippen"), whose political cartoons respond to disability issues in the news, and John and Claire Lytle, whose *dizABLED* comic strip features a charismatic character named Leeder O. Men who uses a wheelchair (Figure 1). The characters with disabilities in Lupton's cartoons and the *dizABLED* strips clearly and humorously dispel stereotypes through their interactions with people who believe them.

Many students' comments indicated that their ideas about disability, stereotypes, and the power of art had changed as a result of their participation.

The Project

Before sharing disability artists' work with students, we discussed the following questions: What stereotypes had they heard about people living with disabilities? Why did they think these stereotypes existed? Did they have stories about any friends or family members who had encountered these stereotypes before? This discussion was followed by our exploration of disability artwork, including comics, and then students began planning their own comic strips responding to disability stereotypes of their choice. I encouraged them to choose stereotypes that may have affected them or someone they knew. They used a worksheet to generate some initial ideas and thumbnail their narratives. (Thumbnailing is a process comic artists use to develop the basic plot and layout of their comics before drawing their final drafts.) Then I showed students some figure-drawing techniques, which they used to develop drawings of the characters they would use in their comics. After completing the character development exercise, students penciled their comics, which consisted of two to three panels, and inked them with black Sharpies. Throughout the penciling and inking process, we discussed changing the point of view from panel to panel, as well as stippling, hatching, and cross-hatching. The entire project took seven class periods.

Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

Several students with cognitive or learning disabilities were in the participating sixth-grade classes. I wanted to make sure that these students were comfortable discussing the topic of disability with their peers, and that they could fully participate in the comics project.

To promote an atmosphere of security and openness in the art room, several collaborating teachers suggested keeping the focus of the discussions throughout the project on specific physical disabilities that were not represented in the classroom. If I asked students to discuss stereotypes about people who used wheelchairs, people with impaired vision, or other populations with disabilities not present in either sixth-grade art class I taught, students with cognitive or learning disabilities would be less likely to feel that a spotlight was on them. Further, all students in each class might feel more comfortable candidly discussing stereotypes they had heard about specific disabilities if no one living with those disabilities was in the classroom.

To make the project accessible to students who had disabilities affecting their small motor skills, I increased the dimensions of the paper all students used for panels of their comic strips from 4 by 6 inches to 8 by 10 inches. Students also had the option to type the text inside their characters' quote bubbles rather than writing the words by hand.

One student with significant cognitive disabilities was absent on the day students completed the worksheet to plan their ideas. When she was back in class later that week, I chatted with her before class to fill her in on what we had been doing while she was sick. In the course of our conversation, I asked her the questions that were on the worksheet, and she answered me orally. The idea she came up with was quite clever: In the first panel of her comic, a girl says to another girl in a wheelchair, "You can't walk, haha!" In the second panel, the character in the wheelchair responds, "Well, you can't ZOOM!"

Most students were enthusiastic about fighting disability stereotypes in their comics, but one student in particular, whom I'll call Michael, was resistant to challenging stereotypes about disability. A student with various special needs himself, Michael repeatedly asked me if he could confirm rather than disprove disability stereotypes in his comic, and he also wanted to call one of his characters "Wheelchair Joe." I tried to reason with Michael on both points. He was wearing a red sweatshirt on one day when he was particularly vocal about his opposition to the project, so I asked him, "How would you feel if people called you 'Red Sweatshirt Michael' all the time? Isn't there more to who you are than just your red sweatshirt?" Eventually, Michael agreed to call his character simply "Joe" and to challenge the stereotype that people who use wheelchairs can't participate in marathons through his comic strip.

Recommendations to Teachers

Art educators who wish to incorporate disability awareness in their curriculum may want to consider the following.

- **If students do not seem to have a depth of background knowledge** about the disability community from which to draw, it may be necessary to share news clippings, excerpts from movies and television shows, and other media to show a wide range of examples of stereotypical views of people living with disabilities. Ragged Edge Online (www.raggededgemagazine.com/) is a useful starting point to find these examples.
- **If teachers have a personal connection to a member (or members) of the disability community**, telling students a bit about this relationship may promote students' feelings of security and willingness to share stories about people with disabilities in their own lives.
- **If disabilities affect participating students**, I encourage teachers to make adaptations that will enable these students to fully participate in the discussion and artmaking activities. My experience with the student who came up with her own idea when I asked her the questions on the worksheet out loud taught me that teachers can make many activities accessible to their students simply by being open-minded about ways to adapt the process to a student's unique needs. Special education teachers can be consulted for adaptation strategies for specific students.

Conclusion

Based on my sixth-grade art students' creative and powerful comics, insightful discussions, and general enthusiasm for this project, I encourage other art educators interested in promoting disability awareness to incorporate disability artwork in their curricula. The students' artwork not only challenged stereotypes relating to the disability community's abilities, but also reflected students' understanding of disability within the affirmative model. The majority of students' comics rejected the notion that people with disabilities wish to be "normal" or strongly desire to change their physical state; instead, they affirmed the positive life experiences of people living with disabilities.

Students completed a written reflection about the project after their comics were finished. Many students' comments indicated that their ideas about disability, stereotypes, and the power of art had changed as a result of their participation. As one sixth-grader wrote, "Drawing the background and characters and being able to use it to make fun of a stereotype was really cool."

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