Disabling Assumptions

This issue's column is by Amber Moore, who writes about how her students learned, through reading complementary texts and participating in classroom activities, to explore John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* and its film adaptation through a disability studies lens.

**The Fault in Our Oversights: Employing a Disabilities Studies Lens with The Fault in Our Stars**

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The first time I taught John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, a novel hailed as "a story that comes down firmly on the side of 'worth it all' no matter how soon it ends" (Stevenson 475), a student approached me to make a suggestion. She had a possible guest speaker: her father, who, like one of the main characters, has an amputated leg. She said that it might be good for the class to hear an actual disabled person's perspective to better understand the character. I tried to remain composed as the teacher dread set in. I realized that I hadn't actually engaged the class in any sort of disabilities studies perspective of the text, a perspective that examines society's perceptions of disability. I promised myself that next time, I would not only incorporate but also privilege that lens.

This seemed especially important as I came to understand that a great deal of controversy exists regarding how Green portrays individuals with disabilities in his wildly popular text. Critics have asked many questions: Why are all of his characters white? Middle class? Portrayed to have more "extraordinary" qualities to seemingly overcompensate for their disabilities? Are these characters authentic, independent, dynamic, and complex? For instance, one critic considers that Isaac, a blind character, might function primarily as "comic relief" (Smith). Similarly, another muses that "disabled characters are often seen as symbolizing the triumph of the human spirit, or the freakishness we all feel inside" (Shinn). This same critic also addresses the problematic employing of nondisabled actors to play the disabled characters in a film adaptation of the novel, a film Green was heavily involved in creating. Similar concerns about potentially reductive portrayals of disabled characters now play a central role in how I approach teaching *The Fault in Our Stars*.

**Using Complementary Texts and Activities**

Using complementary texts and activities to fill in potential gaps in Green's portrayal might be a strategy for ensuring that students have a more complex look at disability issues because these texts include voices from the disabled community. This is also an excellent opportunity to take advantage of students' interest in contemporary media and pop culture.

First, students were given a variety of quotations about disability at their work stations and asked to respond in a placemat activity where each student had a corner of a piece of poster paper...
to record their ideas and impressions. The placemat papers were traded between tables so students could consider several of the quotations from individuals such as Stephen Hawking, Morgan Freeman, and Helen Keller, who once said, “I seldom think about my limitations and they never make me sad. Perhaps there is just a touch of yearning at times; but it is vague, like a breeze among the flowers.” Students chatted while they wrote, commenting that these perspectives came from “real” individuals with disabilities, not characters.

Then, we watched a TED talk by the late Stella Young, an activist known for asserting that people with disabilities are often reduced to being perceived as a site for nondisabled people to find inspiration. She called this phenomenon “inspiration porn,” arguing that she used porn quite deliberately because she saw this cultural phenomenon as exploitative. Her powerful nine-minute talk stunned my class, who are, like me, as far as I knew, nondisabled.

The next series of complementary texts we explored was a selection of black-and-white portrait photographs by famed US photographer Diane Arbus, and was chosen because “of all photographers who have included or excluded disabled people, Diane Arbus is the most notorious” (Hevey 434). I posted a few of her photographs on our class blog, and students wrote about the controversy surrounding Arbus’s work, including if they believe that she was trying to celebrate the individuals with disabilities that she photographed or, as Young discussed in her TED talk, if this is another case of ableism wherein Arbus was exploiting her subjects for her own gain.

**Encouraging Difficult Questions, Even Ones We Can’t Answer**

Each of these complementary texts prompted many important difficult questions and impassioned reactions. In the quotations activity, students mused about how it might feel to have a disability, or more than one, as Helen Keller did. One student innocently asked how Helen Keller was even able to communicate, much less write something quotable, which created an opportunity to discuss alternative approaches to teaching and learning, such as the use of braille.

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Next, when I asked for their reactions to Young’s TED talk, Lucy said, “I feel so bad; [looking to disabled people for inspiration] is something we all do, I think.” Another frowned and asked if we could still celebrate people like Terry Fox, who lost his leg to cancer, or Rick Hansen, who is in a wheelchair. After becoming disabled, both Canadian men raised money through physically demanding charity work; Terry Fox ran across Canada with a prosthetic leg to raise money for cancer research, and Rick Hansen, a paraplegic and Paralympian, is most famous for his Man in Motion tour when he attempted to circle the world in his wheelchair for cancer research. This student went on to inquire whether it is OK when disabled people put themselves in the “exploitative place” when they do something publicly inspiring. They continued to ask great questions such as wondering whether disabled people like Young would be upset about feeling exploited while other disabled people seem to use their disability as a platform for awareness.

The Arbus photography similarly inspired questions and important intertextual work as students related their questions back to the controversy surrounding Green’s portrayal of disabled people. For instance, many questioned Arbus’s motives with her photography and whether she has the ability to capture the experiences of disabled people, as she is a nondisabled person. Students also inquired about whether it is a problem that Green, a nondisabled and privileged white male, can or should attempt to capture the experiences of a disabled person. One astute student named Taylor took a critical race theory approach and tapped into the concept of intersectionality, asking, “Wouldn’t it be a problem if John Green had written about black, trans, disabled women? How could he do that well? And, how would any of us even know if he had?” Anya wondered, “How can anyone in this room even know if he did a good job portraying disabled people, since no one in here is disabled?” In response, one gender fluid student remarked that they also identified as disabled, and that some of us have disabilities that we can’t “see.”

Overall, I was impressed with how the students communicated,
questioned, and gently challenged one another. Taking a disability studies approach to this text can certainly lead to an enhanced literacy experience for students, as it might influence students to begin to employ critical literacy practices such as combating stigma, oppression, and social inequalities. Part of this work in the literacy classroom is to identify, confront, and critique what is unjust in literature and to look for and reconsider the voices that are silenced or missing. Through critical literacy lenses such as disabilities studies, learners are able to name and rename the world, shift power dynamics, and legitimize new perspectives and experiences using literature as a vehicle.

Works Cited


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