

A classical philosophical/theoretical basis for reversing negative or maladaptive trends in disabled humor and for fostering person-accepting reactions towards individuals with disabilities

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Abstract: *This essay is orientated towards educators. It addresses the need to respond more with person-accepting reactions rather than with humor-disguised, disability-focused reactions to persons with disabilities. This essay draws attention to the use of disability humor, especially by persons with disabilities, to promote inclusiveness and person-accepting reactions toward persons with disabilities.*

This essay puts forward the philosophical perspectives of Plato and Descartes concerning the nature of the human person to provide a viable theoretical basis for person-accepting reactions to persons with disabilities. Plato and Descartes are selected because they not only provide us with their theories of human nature, but they also specifically, though briefly, address laughter and humor in the context of misfortune, including disabilities.

The final part of the essay addresses some suggestions for classroom applications as to how educators might try to shape the use of humor to promote inclusiveness and person-accepting reactions toward persons with disabilities in the classroom.

Key words: *disability, humor, philosophical perspectives, inclusion, classroom implications*

1 Introduction: The issue

According to Cassell (1985), “disabled humor” is “humor in which the butt or object of the humor is a disabling condition or a person with a disability” (p.59). For example,

Q. Why was Helen Keller's leg wet?

A. Her dog was blind too.

(<http://www.jokes4us.com/celebrityjokes/helenkellerjokes.html>)

Q. Why did the moron throw the butter out the window?

A. Because he wanted to see a butterfly.

(http://www.anvari.org/shortjoke/Miscellaneous_Jokes/28094_q-why-did-the-moron-throw-the-butter-out-the-window.html)

Disabled humor includes sick jokes such as the Helen Keller and little moron jokes noted above, as well as any kind of humor used in our everyday interactions that provoke humor-disguised or disability-focused responses. Cassell (1985), in discussing disabled humor in his article titled, "Disabled Humor: Origin and Impact," concludes with the urgent plea that individuals in responding to disabilities in others need to respond more with person-accepting reactions rather than with humor-disguised, disability-focused reactions. Cassell acknowledges that "[a]t times, disabled humor appears to serve coping functions..." (p. 59). But, he continues, disabled humor "is almost always a disparaging form of communication since humor responses disguise the real message" (p. 59).

Apparently person-accepting reactions that facilitate coping with disabilities are not nearly as evident or common as disability-focused reactions that disparage. Baum (1998) argues, "From a historical perspective, people with disabilities have been a source of amusement to able-bodied people. This has ranged from individuals who were used as court jesters, exhibits of curiosity in carnivals and side-shows, to cartoon characters who have various disabilities" (p. 2). Bogdan (1998), who studied the cultural phenomenon of freak shows in America, provides a list of human oddities considered to be popular entertainment in the past century, including, but not limited to, dwarfs, rare monsters, giants, Siamese twins and bearded ladies. In freak shows, the physical appearance of these individuals was enhanced through nonverbal means, such as gestures, costumes and accessories, with the intent that these factors would help to pique an audience's voyeuristic interest in and laughter at those who were "less-able." Fry (1963) notes that cartoons have been popular for many years, and they almost always motivate humor-disguised and disability-focused reactions that ridicule those with disabilities. Equally, Weinberg and Santana (1978) speak of comic books as "champions of the disabled stereotype" (p. 327). Shakespeare (1999) too affirms that "...within performances on stage or film, there is a particular relish of the disabled figure of fun, a shared enjoyment of the peculiar pleasure of laughing

at the abnormal...Much of the repertoire of traditional comedy focuses on flawed performance or deformed physique, from Quasimodo jokes onwards" (p. 3).

Unfortunately, these disability-focused reactions that disparage and invite amusement at the expense of persons with disability continue in more contemporary times and the present day. Connor and Bejoian (2006) have recently argued that our culture continues to maintain a pervasive stereotype; "Disability can never be a good thing. Within contemporary society, disability—unlike race, gender, sexual orientation, or age—is still somewhat of a free-for-all; a repository of bad associations and images; and a concept that people routinely look down on, devalue, and ridicule" (p. 52). Accordingly, Reid, Stoughton, and Smith (2007) who examined 'stand-up' comedians in the United States note that the majority of them still perpetuate negative and disparaging attitudes towards individuals with disabilities in their comedy routines, contributing to the gap between those with and without disabilities. They state, "... jokes and comedy routines, nearly always performed by the able-bodied, turned on negative images of the disabled...Mainstream comedians' demeaning jokes enable them to separate from difficult feelings by perpetuating an Us-Them mindset" (p. 630). Connor and Bejoian (2006) ask, "With the overwhelming negative connotations of disability, how can people ever see disability as a natural part of human diversity, merely another bodily attribute, and one that we can frame in positive terms?" (p. 52). In other words, how can we foster and "socially ingrain" person-accepting reactions to disabilities and persons with disabilities including through the use of humor?

2 Help from persons with disabilities

Perhaps there are any number of ways to foster and "socially ingrain" person-accepting reactions to disabilities and persons with disabilities. But these "any number of ways" are beyond the scope of this essay. One of these "any number of ways" might be a philosophical/theoretical basis for reversing negative or maladaptive trends in disabled humor and for fostering person-accepting reactions. A philosophical/theoretical basis would involve "socially ingraining" and fostering the perception of persons with disabilities as belonging to the same group (e.g., to the same community, to the same kind) as everyone else and not as persons relegated to some sub-group or to some other kind to which derisive and disparaging reactions are the norm. Both persons with disabilities and philosophers can promote such a basis.

It is not uncommon for persons with disabilities to acknowledge that their conditions have humorous, at least laughable, qualities. People with disabilities find something hilarious even with severe disabilities and many do so without becoming self-deprecating. For instance,

...a quadruple amputee, shared the story of how each year he must reapply for his handicapped parking placard. He related how he goes to the motor vehicle office and, after showing them he hasn't 'grown any arms or legs,' asks 'Could you...give me 18 months, maybe two years? I don't feel any growth coming on yet' (Kemp, 1999 cited in Hall, 2002 p. 146).

The anonymous owner of the website, "Multiple Sclerosis Sucks," despite or perhaps because of the serious nature of his condition, calls for the use of humor in the lives of those with MS and those around them. He states, "An alarmingly large fraction of the MS literature that I've read has been serious, sensible, and sanctimonious, and therefore runs the risk of being turgid, tedious, and trite. This website is one man's attempt to change that. I think it is important that MS sufferers and their caregivers maintain a sense of humor" (<http://multiplesclerosissucks.com>). Similarly, Robert Slayton (2011) in his blog, *Having a Sense of Humor About Disability*, remarks "believe it or not, the disabled do have a sense of humor. We can enjoy a joke, even one aimed at ourselves" (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-slayton/disability-humor_b_845059.html). These persons with disabilities are insisting that humor can be a fitting, effective, and laudable response to excessive seriousness and ill humor which tend toward ridicule, insult, and name calling. The kind of humor persons with disabilities champion is viewed as fitting, effective, and laudable perhaps because it does not necessarily cause or produce psychological/emotional pain or harm.

For many persons with disabilities, disability humor has come to be considered part and parcel of what some regard or recognize as a disability culture (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2012). Persons with disabilities regularly make humorous comments and jokes, not only in private but in public, about their disabilities. "If you tell me that I shouldn't make disability jokes in public, you're telling me that it's not ok for me to be who and what I am as a person with a disability. You are trying to stuff me back in the closet that we (people with disabilities) fought so hard to get out of" (<http://accessibility.net.nz/blog/disability-humour-is-part-of-disability-culture/> June 1st, 2011)

Morreall (1983) is sympathetic to this view of humor. In speaking about persons with disabilities, he observes,

When the person with a sense of humor laughs in the face of his own failure, he is showing that his perspective transcends the particular situation he's in, and that he does not have an egocentric, overly precious view of his own endeavors. ... It is because he feels good about himself at a fundamental level that this or that setback is not threatening to him (p. 106).

“... by focusing on the humorous aspects of the disability, the person [with a disability or disabilities] is stating that ‘I accept it as no more serious than your own personal frailties, so accept me as being like you’” (Cassell, 1985, p. 62), that is, as belonging to or as being of the same kind. In this case, the same group or the same kind to which the person with disability belongs is the group or the kind to which everyone else belongs, namely, the group or the kind of those with personal frailties. Making use of Haller’s and Ralph’s (2003) analogy to cartoon characters, humor generated by the person with a disability embodies the characteristics of a humor of equality, in which the character with a disability is equal in status and humor to all the other characters. Moran (2003) argues for such an inclusive view of humor, “Having a disability does not mean humor must always function differently.” While Shakespeare (1999) suggests that individuals with disability by laughing at themselves become a member of the social mainstream; “Rather than being the ‘Other’, about whom jokes are made, the disabled person establishes themselves as part of the group, and their impairment enters that stock of topics which are permissible for humorous interaction between friends” (p. 6).

Why might we find it quite proper to accept humor or laughter that focuses on one’s own disability or disabilities or frailties? As previously noted, perhaps it is because some persons with disability or disabilities manifest the ability not to take themselves seriously and not to see themselves as well as others as less than ideal; such ability is typically regarded as a source of virtuous modesty and even compassion. While Aristotle (1941), in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, views jokes as “a kind of abuse” (4.8), he does not give a comprehensive condemnation of humor; jokes should ideally be told without producing pain (*Poetics*, 1941, 449a). Aristotle seems to have anticipated the point Cassell (1985) makes, “... humor is not just humorous. There is almost always some underlying message being carried in the humor response” (p. 62). Since humor can be a vehicle of ridicule, contempt, malevolence, and cruel exploitation, it must be used prudently. Jacobson (1997) echoes this claim writing,

In hostility and aggression is our beginning. Comedy cannot hope to change that. But by making a play of our incorrigible combativeness, it propitiates it, harmonizes us with it. And more than that, reminds us of our inexhaustible capacity to evade the burden of sympathy and the compulsion to suffer (p. 137).

“Making a play of our incorrigible combativeness” relieves us from an excessive seriousness that inclines us to hastily use humor contemptuously, malevolently, cruelly, as well as to ridicule.

3 Help from Plato and Descartes

Above we noted persons with disabilities using humor to establish themselves as belonging to the same group as everyone else. Philosophers too can make a contribution to such an effort by providing a philosophical/theoretical basis for “socially ingraining” and fostering the perception of persons with disabilities as belonging to the same group (e.g., to the same community, to the same kind) as everyone else. Two philosophers, namely, Plato and Rene Descartes, one from the ancient period and the other from the early modern period, will suffice to provide such a basis. We select Plato and Descartes because they not only speak of disabilities, but also humor in the context of disabilities. While contemporary philosophers discuss social, political and ethical issues related to disabilities or theories concerning the nature of humor, omitted are discussions of humor related to disabilities (Baird, Rosenbaum, & Toombs, 2009).

In an excellent article about Plato and the psychology of humor, Shelley (2003) makes the following observation about Plato’s take on comedy and humor: the malicious, aggressive, scornful, and derisive aspects of humor “...can be insalubrious not only for the person being laughed at ... but also for the person doing the laughing, since he or she may come to prefer ridicule over reflection even when dealing with matters of utmost significance” (p. 352). It is no secret that Plato gives a negative evaluation of comedy and is very critical of the malicious, aggressive, scornful, and derisive aspects of humor (e.g., feeling amused about a person who is being derided or a person who is being publicly ridiculed). “...a person’s sense of humor conditions the health of his soul, and vice versa” (Shelley, 2003, p. 364). However, Shelley argues that for Plato humor is acceptable, even virtuous, when it is opposed to excess, namely, an excess of seriousness (Shelley, 2003, pp. 353, 363) as well as uncontrolled and debilitating laughter, i.e., laughter indulged in for its own sake (Shelley, 2003, pp. 354–355). Humor is salutary in moderation and when exercised moderately such reflective use of humor stands against hasty misuse of humor.

If the moderate exercise of humor requires reflection, we can find in Plato (trans. 1982, 11b–c) a philosophical basis for “socially ingraining” person-accepting reactions to disabilities and to persons with disabilities by noting his claim in the *Philebus* that thought, intelligence, memory, right opinion, and true reasoning are better and more valuable than pleasure for all beings that can participate in them. Nothing in the world is more valuable than to participate in thought, intelligence, memory, right opinion, and true reasoning. For Plato (trans. 1982, 19c–d), the faculty of reason as well as knowledge, understanding, skill, and everything that is of the same kind to these are the best possessions of humankind; these are *defining* of the human.

However, do these defining features apply to persons with disabilities? If they do, then persons with disabilities belong to the same kind as everyone else (i.e., persons

without disabilities) possessing these features. Persons whose disabilities are not cognitive related (e.g., deafness, blindness, missing a limb), would be of the same kind of animate being, namely, human, by virtue of their cognitive faculties and capacities to exercise those faculties. But, what about those who cannot participate in thought, intelligence, memory, right opinion, and true reasoning because their cognitive faculties are disabled? Here we should not casually overlook the following distinction: i) the possession of a certain kind of nature and ii) the inability, due to disability, to exercise the faculties belonging to that nature including one's cognitive faculties. For example, Plato (trans. 1982, 36e) at times makes reference to the "insane" and the "deranged" (The use of the terms "insane" and "deranged" merely reflect the language of Plato and his cultural milieu). Those with cognitive disabilities may find it challenging and difficult to engage in thought, memory, right opinion, or true reasoning in the same way(s) as those without cognitive disabilities engage in these. Yet, they possess a certain kind of nature with various faculties, including the cognitive faculty that, according to Plato, makes humans what we are and distinct from other realities, including other animals. Yet, those with cognitive disabilities are unable to exercise their cognitive faculties in the same way(s) those without cognitive disabilities are enabled to exercise their cognitive faculties.

The distinction between possessing a certain kind of nature with cognitive faculties and the inability to exercise cognitive faculties enables us to perceive those with such disabilities as bearers of that certain kind of nature with those faculties though certain cognitive disabilities impair the full exercise of those faculties. As bearers of a certain kind of nature with these faculties, though these faculties may be disabled, persons with cognitive disabilities belong to the animate beings with such a nature and its faculties; they are the same kind as everyone else.

Like Plato, for Descartes (trans. 2010–2015, 5, 23) humans, unlike animals, are endowed with minds, that is, rational souls. Therefore, unlike animals, humans can use language and feel sensations like hunger, thirst, and pain. This mind, that is, this rational soul is the *defining* feature of humans. A person with disabilities, cognitive or non-cognitive, by virtue of his or her endowment with a mind belongs to the same kind as everyone else of that kind, namely, those with minds at least potentially capable of language usage as well as capable of feeling of sensation.

Even if one were to argue that Descartes does not really succeed in distinguishing humans from animals since animals are capable of feeling sensations (though Descartes thought otherwise) and some animals may even be capable of rudimentary language usage, nevertheless, Descartes could point to other activities of the human mind (e.g., true reasoning about mathematics, right opinion formation about moral conduct) not as readily attributable to animals. But even if one were to take an approach according to which humans are not of a different kind from other animals, as implied by some Darwinian approaches (Darwin, 2007; Velasquez, 2011, pp. 60–66),

Descartes' perspective concerning persons can still provide a philosophical basis for "socially ingraining" person-accepting reactions to disabilities and to persons with disabilities.

Descartes (trans. 1985) observes that we find ourselves laughing when we unexpectedly perceive "some small evil in a person whom we consider to deserve it..." (article 178). In *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes understands evil as that which is harmful to one (article 56); a misfortune. This laughter of ridicule or derision is a mixture of joy and hatred: hatred for the misfortune, but joy at seeing the misfortune in one whom we perceive as deserving of the misfortune.

For Descartes, though, this misfortune must be insignificant (i. e., a small or inconsequential, trivial misfortune) for we cannot believe that anyone is deserving of a great misfortune unless one is malicious or one harbors a great deal of hatred toward the person afflicted with the misfortune. Here, Descartes makes a distinction between debasing and degrading laughter directed at insignificant (i. e., inconsequential, trivial) misfortune and debasing and degrading laughter directed at a great misfortune. For Descartes, while debasing and degrading forms of laughter directed at more significant misfortune (e. g., severe disabilities) is condemnable, debasing and degrading forms of laughter directed at insignificant misfortunes (e. g., minor disabilities) do not seem subject to condemnation.

It seems that for Descartes (trans. 1985) we cannot help but (i. e., we are destined to) ridicule or deride those in whom we perceive some small misfortune and whom we consider to be deserving of the misfortune. This ridicule or derision is just a *result* of a certain kind of perception we have (article 178). In fact, Descartes acknowledges that "we may even find it hard not to laugh" (article 181) when another person mocks vice (i. e., bad behaviors), presumably that person's own vice(s) or someone else's vice(s), in order to make the vice(s) appear ridiculous. Since vices (i. e., bad behaviors), like the evils (i. e., misfortunes) Descartes speaks of, are harmful (both to the one engaged in bad behavior as well as those to whom the bad behavior is directed (article 184), it does not seem unjustifiable to bring Article 181 of *The Passions of the Soul* into this discussion. Descartes even claims that such laughter is proper, at least not improper (i. e., not bad mannered). Why? Is it because we find it hard not to laugh at such mockery? Perhaps! But, that could be just a manifestation of a disposition to ridicule or deride persons with the harmful condition. On the other hand, such laughter, for Descartes, may not be improper particularly in circumstances in which: i) the laughter is in response to someone else making a bad behavior (i. e., a vice) appear ridiculous (article 181), ii) the laughter is not directed at the bad behavior (article 180), and iii) the one laughing harbors no hatred for persons engaged in the bad behavior (article 180). Descartes' claim about the propriety of laughing in certain circumstances in which a harmful condition (e. g. a misfortune or bad behavior) is

present is consistent with those persons with disabilities who acknowledge that their conditions have humorous aspects.

As we have sought to illustrate, persons with disabilities and some philosophical perspectives, like those of Plato and Descartes, can assist both persons with disabilities and those without disabilities in understanding and perceiving what is definitive of persons with disabilities. From a philosophical perspective, Plato and Descartes can enable both those with disabilities and those without disabilities to understand that the limits and boundaries that are the product of disabilities do not define persons with disability (Smith & Sapon-Shevin, 2008–2009). The negative or maladaptive perspectives toward disabilities and persons with disabilities emerge from a failure to recognize that which makes persons with disabilities members of the same kind to which all persons belong, namely, animate beings who are defined by their rational faculties and capacities. Hence, persons with disabilities are equal in status and humor to all others.

Given such a person-accepting basis like we find in Plato and Descartes for perceiving persons with disabilities, humor directed at conditions of disability need not be considered inconsistent with persons who find that their disabling conditions have humorous aspects. This is possible because the humor is not directed at the person with disability, but rather at the humorous qualities of the disabling condition, a condition which is not definitive of who the person with disability is.

4 Person-accepting humor

Even when humor is directed at a condition of disability, particularly by persons with disabilities, humor can be utilized to acknowledge that conditions of disability can have at least laughable qualities, to transcend the disabling condition, to cope with the disability, to enhance cohesion, as well as to promote a sense of identity with a group (i. e., a kind). This is person-accepting humor that stands in contrast to humor that disparages or ridicules thereby alienating a disabling condition or a person with a disability. Martin (2007) argues, “Although humor can be used to reinforce status differences between people, it can also be a way of enhancing cohesion and a sense of group identity” (p. 122). Humor can be used to highlight defining features (e. g., cognitive faculties and functions), though such features may be impaired due to disabilities, that enable us to recognize those with disabilities as belonging to the same kind rather than using humor to highlight disabilities (i. e., differences). Witkin (1999) postulates, “Humor reinforces group identity and fosters a sense of cohesion. These qualities are illustrated in humor by people with disabilities” (p. 103). Smith and Sapon-Shevin (2008–2009) concur that humor concerning disability can be “a valuable resource to help people rethink assumptions and to create community”

(p. 11). Most recent research arrives at the same conclusion. “Humor can be inclusive and create cohesion between group members or it can be used coercively to divide people” (Dunbar, Banas, Rodrigues, Liu, & Abra, 2012, p. 472).

5 Educational implications

In the U.S.A. the recent report of The National Center for Education Statistics (*The Conditions of Education*, 2010) concludes that there has been an increase from 32 percent to 57 percent in the number of classrooms including students with diverse disabilities in 2007–08 compared to 1989–90. As school communities welcome a greater number of students with disabilities into their classrooms efforts to prepare both teachers and students for inclusiveness in all its forms takes on a new priority. This trend is reflected across the world. According to the *World Report on Disability* (2011), it is estimated that there are between 93 million and 150 million children worldwide who are impacted by disabilities. The report emphasizes that “Ensuring that children with disabilities receive good quality education in an inclusive environment should be a priority of all countries” (*World Report on Disability*, 2011, p. 205).

A philosophical/theoretical basis involving “socially ingraining” and fostering the perception of persons with disabilities as belonging to the same group (e. g., to the same community, to the same kind) as everyone else, and not as persons relegated to some sub-group or to some other kind to which derisive and disparaging reactions are the norm, can be particularly supportive of inclusive classroom learning communities. Such learning communities are characterized by a “sense of belonging, of collective concern for each individual” (Noddings, 1996, pp. 266–267), as well as “positive interpersonal relationships, preparation for integration, participation in shared routines, school wide community spirit, and the highest levels of acceptance and expectations for all students” (Berry, 2006, p. 491). Humor can serve an important function in promoting inclusive classroom learning communities. Educators can play a critical role in modeling inclusive or exclusive humor through a variety of classroom activities. In the next section of the paper we discuss examples of such classroom activities.

6 Specific classroom applications

One way to socially ingrain a different view of humor use in the context of disability is to invite into the classroom stand-up comedians who have disabilities. Following a classroom performance of their comedy routines a focused and direct discussion would ensue as to how comedians with disabilities address their disabilities in their comedy routines. Local comedy clubs may provide teachers with a list of talented

comedians with disability who are available to be invited into the classrooms in the students' local communities. Alternatively, teachers may find the following website, <http://www.damonbrooks.com/speakers>, a rich resource for disability stand-up comedians and motivational speakers. Just one example of such comedians is Josh Blue who has Cerebral Palsy. As his website informs us, "Josh continues to break down stereotypes of people with disabilities one laugh at a time" (<http://www.damonbrooks.com/speakers/josh-Blue.html>).

However, before inviting stand-up comedians who have disabilities into the classroom, it is imperative that teachers prepare their students for such interactions and conversations. This preparation is crucial since students may not have enough social background experiences and/or knowledge about engaging in dialogue on sensitive issues and topics such as disability, stereotyping, prejudice, and disability humor. Derman-Sparks's and Olsen Edwards's (2010) publication titled *Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* will serve as an excellent guide for teachers to begin actively engaging their students in thinking about disability as well as how to identify a stereotype, prejudice, offensive humor and bias about people who are different from themselves. This publication can also teach them how to actively speak up for what is right and how to resist stereotyping and negative humor.

Another way to socially ingrain a different view concerning humor use in the context of disability is to engage students in viewing episodes from TV comedy shows such as *South Park* (SouthParkStudios.com) that feature characters with disabilities. Such shows can be critiqued for how they portray disability, stereotyping of persons with disabilities, and disability humor. *South Park* is an anti-politically correct Comedy Central show that includes two characters with disabilities: Timmy, who uses a wheelchair and has mental retardation, and Jimmy, who is a stand-up comedian and uses crutches. The strength of the show is that its humor is directed at all characters in the show and not only characters with disabilities. Haller and Ralph (2003) consider such application of humor as both "normalizing" because the characters with disabilities are represented like all the characters and as "equalizing" because the disabled characters are "equal in status and humor to all the other characters." As a result, such an approach to humor represents a more integrative approach rather than a disability-focused approach to disability. Haller (2010) explains,

When comedies have disabled characters of equal status with all other characters in the show, it sends a message to viewers that having a disability does not mean someone cannot have a full, interesting and exciting life. The disabled characters are fully participating members of their communities. Disabled people in TV comedies can illustrate disability humor at its best-everyone can laugh at our shared experiences, and having a disability is depicted as just another feature about human beings." (p. 171)

Almost every episode of *South Park* is available to watch for free on the show's official website, SouthParkStudios.com.

Similarly, films may provide teachers with opportunities for a systematic and critical examination of the portrayals of disability and humor, and would be important additions to school libraries and classroom media collections. Connor and Bejoian (2006) recommend a modern classic film, *Finding Nemo* (2003), which depicts an adventurous young clownfish, Nemo, with a "gimpy" fin (p. 55). This film can serve as a valuable resource for teachers enabling them to open their students' minds to a more balanced and authentic representation of disability in the media and mass culture. "The film includes many allusions to Nemo's fin; it does not portray this fin as either a tragedy or a disability, but rather something that just *is*" (p. 55). In addition, the film can serve as a powerful spring board for discussions about the humorous side of disability, the role of humor in the characterization of Nemo and humor's overall function in the film.

Maples, Arndt, and White (2010) encourage teachers to give a critical reading of the film, *The Mighty* (1998). In this movie, a disability is the main, if not the only, focus of characterization of the main character. As a result it can be utilized in the classroom to help students critique and challenge the stereotypical representation of disability in the media. "Interrogating this film may allow students to deeply explore the representations of disability in the film" (Maples, Arndt, & White, 2010, p. 81). Inherent in this characterization is the issue of teasing and making fun of a person with a disability as undesirable or the issue of forcing the character into the roles of the "comic misadventurer" and "sweet innocent," that is, the one who "cannot possibly expect to get a girlfriend, so he will be the class clown" (p. 80).

For young adults, teachers may incorporate disability-themed videos, in which the performance artists use comedy as a tool to socially critique, entertain, and to educate the audience about their experiences with disability. One example of such a disability performing artist is Terry Galloway (Gilbert, 2006). "Galloway performs her marginality, constructing and contesting the differences that mark her as a deaf woman with a history of mental illness. And by performing this material humorously, she empowers herself and her audience, aptly illustrating humor's dual function as both entertainment and cultural critique" (Gilbert, 2006, p. 1). More specifically, in her comic vignettes, *Just the Funny Bits* (1995), Galloway narrates a dynamic autobiographical portrayal of her life full of fears, social isolation (especially during her adolescence years), and discloses the unbearable weight of living with the physical limitations imposed by the nature of her disabilities. But at the same time, she delivers a critique of the patronizing attitudes, medically oriented rather than person centered health care practices, and the social mainstream stereotyping of disability and political correctness.

Following a positive psychology approach, Groden, Kantor, Woodard, and Lipsitt (2011) advocate teaching and cultivating humor skills among individuals with autism and their peers in the classroom. They argue, “An inability to understand humor among individuals with autism can increase frustration and stress, and may even lead them to become victimized by humor that is beyond their capacity to comprehend” (p. 40). Within this context, teachers can play a crucial role in fostering and modeling positive and appropriate humor that can be beneficial for persons with autism and at the same time shared by their peers without disabilities. Such humor can encourage the development of positive social interactions among students with developmental disabilities and their age appropriate peers and may help them to deal with adversity. In chapters such as “Nurturing Humor in Individuals with Autism,” “Application of Humor in the Home and Classroom,” and “Activities That Promote Humor” the authors provide teachers with specific and evidence-based strategies as well as humorous classroom activities for cultivating humor that promote positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities and foster perceptions of persons with disabilities as belonging to the same group. Each of these strategies and classroom activities has been “field tested at the Groden Center over the years with hundreds of children and adults with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder]” (p. 13). Given the fact that there are more children being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder today than ever before (1 out of every 88 children have some form of ASD based on the most recent report of the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, 2012) and that mismatching an autistic child’s humor style with her/his cognitive, emotional, and developmental humor level may result in the autistic child being an easy target for offensive humor. Teaching about positive humor may be first steps in promoting person-accepting reactions rather than humor-disguised, disability-focused reactions to persons with disabilities.

Regardless of what films or other media teachers will choose to use in the classroom to actively and collectively examine disability as well as humor representations and their impact on shaping attitudes towards persons with disabilities, they may find useful Safran’s (2000) guide for *Evaluating Film Representation of Disability* and Smith’s and Sapon-Shevin’s (2008–2009) tool for *Questioning Disability Humor*. Either of these tools may be used for previewing a film for its content appropriateness and/or providing frameworks for students for viewing and critiquing representations of disability and humor in both traditional and digital text.

In summary, we trust that as a result of engaging students in different ways of exploring disability and humor representations in the classroom, teachers will foster perceptions of persons with disabilities as belonging to the same group (e. g., to the same community, to the same kind) as everyone else, and not as persons relegated to some sub-group or to some other kind to which derisive and disparaging reactions are the norm, as well as reverse negative or maladaptive trends in disabled humor

and replace those with inclusive humor applications that accept and celebrate those with disabilities in the classroom. Embracing a philosophical/theoretical basis as discussed in this essay can assist in fostering person-accepting reactions rather than humor-disguised, disability-focused reactions to persons with disabilities.

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