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AUTHOR Soule, Kari P.; Shih, Joy Christina
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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on how two instructors implemented a unit in their introductory communications courses at a mid-sized Midwestern university about communication between disabled and able-bodied persons. The goals of the instructors are delineated in the paper, and the effectiveness of the unit is evaluated on several dimensions. The course material is analyzed as to what would or would not be effective when integrating this unit into future communications courses at other universities. According to the paper, both of the graduate-student instructors created this unit as a project for an upper-level communication course, Community Integration of Labeled People. In the paper, the two instructors compare their approaches to, and styles of, teaching this topic. Appendixes contain reaction questions for film clips, information for overheads, and discussion questions for an article. (Contains 23 references.) (NKA)

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Running head: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO DISABLED COMMUNICATION

Alternative Approaches to Teaching
 Communication Between Disabled and Ablebodied Persons
 Kari P. Soule and Joy Christina Shih
 Northwestern University

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K. Soule

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Abstract

Two instructors implemented a unit about communication between disabled and able-bodied persons in their introductory communications courses at a midsize Midwestern university. The goals of the instructors are delineated and the effectiveness of the unit is evaluated on several dimensions. The course material is analyzed as to what would or would not be effective when integrating this unit into future communication courses at other universities.

Alternative Approaches to Teaching Communication Between Disabled and Ablebodied Persons

With over half a million people in wheelchairs and over eight million with visual impairments (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996), these and other persons with disabilities constitute one of the largest minorities in America (Braithwaite, 1990). These individuals often face challenges and discrimination professionally, educationally and socially (Braithwaite, 1990; Dahnke, 1982; Emry & Wiseman, 1987; Glideman & Roth, 1980; Wertlieb, 1985). Often, ablebodied people are unsure how to act toward a disabled person, especially during initial interactions (Goffman, 1963). This uncertainty, in turn, could lead to problematic communication between ablebodied and disabled people (Farina, Sherman, & Allen, 1968; Thompson, 1982).

To help mitigate the potential problems that can arise in such interactions, two instructors wanted to integrate the topic of communication involving persons with and without disabilities into their introductory communication classes. Their hopes in introducing this topic was that education would help to make these communicative encounters smoother and easier for both disabled and ablebodied interactants. Moreover, since many universities offer introductory communication courses, the instructors wanted to develop a unit that could be incorporated into similar courses across the nation. Therefore, in this paper, the teaching units created by each instructor for these purposes will be discussed. Specifically, the following topics will be reviewed: a) a description of each instructor's introductory communication course; b) the background of the instructors; c) the goals the two teachers wanted to accomplish by including this topic in their courses; d) the actual implementation of the two teaching units; e) an evaluation of the units; and f) the limitations of the methods used to evaluate the units and future

directions for incorporating this topic into not only a course's curriculum, but a school's as well.

Class Description and Student Demographics

Both instructors integrated this unit into introductory communication classes they were teaching at a medium-sized Midwestern university. Each class was composed of approximately 22 to 24 undergraduates, most of whom were freshmen and sophomores. None of the students had physical disabilities, and to the instructors' knowledge, none of them possessed any mental disabilities. When the students were asked at the beginning of the unit if any of them were close to a person with a disability, many of the students responded affirmatively. In the first instructor's class (Instructor One), 50% of the students reported they had a disabled family member or friend. In the other instructor's class (Instructor Two), 55% of the students indicated that they had a disabled friend or family member.

Background of the Instructors

Instructor One became interested in this topic through the experiences of her younger brother David. A few years ago David was in a car wreck, causing him to become a paraplegic. Instructor Two became interested in communication between persons with and without disabilities through taking an upper-level communication course, Community Integration of Labeled People. Both of the instructors, who are graduate students, created this unit as a project for the aforementioned class. In this paper, the two instructors will compare their approaches to and styles of teaching this topic due to their different backgrounds.

Goals

The instructors shared several goals for their disabled/able-bodied communication units. These goals were aimed at bringing about both cognitive and behavioral changes in the students. The following is a list of these goals.

G1: Arouse awareness in ablebodied students that communication with disabled people exists and can be problematic.

Since one of the overall goals of the instructors in teaching their introductory communication courses is to help students become competent communication, communication between disabled and ablebodied people becomes important. Communication between these persons can break expectations of what communication is “typically” like. Thus, this unit introduces what could be problematic communication. The instructors’ first goal is to simply make students aware of such situations.

G2: Have ablebodied students get in touch with their preconceived notions of disabled people and transform those feelings and develop more effective ones.

This goal is aimed at inducing a cognitive change in the students. After informing them that interactions with disabled people can be problematic, the instructors intended to tap into the students’ preconceived stereotypes of the disabled. The activities and lectures used in the units were developed to alter the students’ potentially negative and ineffective thoughts of persons with disabilities and transform them into more effective ones in order to enable productive communication between the students and persons with disabilities.

Following the same rationale are goals 3 and 4:

G3: Influence ablebodied students’ future interactions with disabled people in a positive manner.

G4: Guide ablebodied students to become more competent communicators in future interactions with disabled people.

These behavioral changes would hopefully be instigated by the teaching materials and lesson plans that will be discussed later in the paper.

On the subject of teaching, the last goal is related to exactly that:

G5: Develop a disabled/ablebodied communication unit that can be exported for use in other introductory communication courses at this and other universities as well.

Implementation of the Disabled Unit

The following section describes what each instructor accomplished in her respective four hour teaching unit, hour by hour. It shows a comparison of what was common between the two teachers and what was different. It also delineates the goals that were prominent for each hour of the unit.

Hour One

Instructors One and Two

As an introduction to the unit, a clip from the movie Rain Man was shown to both classes. Instructor Two did not warn her students about the topic of the unit before showing the clip. The clip from Rain Man involved an interaction between Raymond (a person with a mental disability), Iris (an ablebodied prostitute who approached Raymond), and Charlie (Raymond's ablebodied brother). The instructors chose this clip in particular because it demonstrated problematic communication between a disabled person, Raymond, and an ablebodied person, Iris.

After the clip was shown, a questionnaire was handed out to assess the students' reactions to the video (see Appendix A). The students were informed that any and all of their responses would be kept confidential. Also, they were able to answer the questions anonymously. The purpose of this exercise will later be detailed under measurement tools in the evaluation section.

Instructor One

The specific goals for this day included: a) making students aware that communication

with disabled persons can be problematic (Goal 1); b) having students recognize stereotypes of the disabled and how they can affect their perceptions of and feelings towards them (Goal 2); and c) helping students recognize what occurs in initial interactions with the disabled and how they can make these encounters less difficult (Goals 3 and 4). In the beginning of the unit, some of the research in this area was presented to the students (see Appendix B for the overheads used). First, communication between persons with and without disabilities was discussed. The students were informed that this area of research can be viewed as intercultural communication, since disabled persons constitute a minority that is a distinct subculture from the able-bodied majority (e.g., Braithwaite, 1990; Dahnke, 1982; Emry & Wiseman, 1987; Glideman & Roth, 1980; Wertlieb, 1985). Next, the depiction of the disabled in the media was discussed, particularly how they are shown as: a) a super hero who will overcome a disability; or b) as helpless and dependent (e.g., Haller, 1997). To illustrate the former depiction, a video clip of a news segment featuring Instructor One's brother was shown. Particularly, the news segment showed David (Instructor One's brother) using a pair of braces to stand and move upright. The students and Instructor One discussed how David was portrayed, including the news anchors' amazement that David was actually going to college and one of the reporter's conviction that he was "overcoming his disability."

Instructor One also encouraged her students to ask her questions about David. Many of the students who had not had contact with disabled persons were intrigued that he could drive a car or function independently. They were also very curious about his medical condition. The instructor was open about revealing information concerning David and tried to answer their questions to the best of her ability.

Finally, Instructor One spent the last part of the hour presenting research concerning the

communication strategies of persons with disabilities during first time interactions with an ablebodied person (e.g., Braithwaite, 1987, 1990, 1991; DeLoach & Greer, 1981) and the reactions of many ablebodied persons to a disabled individual (e.g., Comer & Piliavin, 1972; Emry & Wiseman, 1987; Kleck, Ono, & Hastorf, 1966; Thompson, 1982; Thompson & Seibold, 1978) (see Appendix B for the overheads used).

Instructor Two

Instructor Two's specific goal for the first hour was to make students aware that communication with disabled people exists and can be problematic (Goal 1). During this time, the film When Billy Broke His Head . . . And Other Tales of Wonder (Golfus & Simpson, 1994) was shown. The video was about Billy, who has a head injury, and his trials and tribulations living as a disabled person. It detailed his interactions with family, friends and government institutions. The documentary film also highlighted other disabled people's stories and lives. The range of disabilities was vast in the sense that there were people in the film with mental and physical disabilities, and people who varied in the severity of their disabilities. It was an illustrative picture of persons with disabilities and how they live their lives.

Hour Two

Instructor One

In this unit Instructor One hoped to accomplish the following goals: a) have students get in touch with their preconceived notions of disabled people and transform those feelings and develop more effective ones (Goal 2); b) influence the students' future interactions with disabled people in a positive manner (Goal 3); and c) guide the students to become more competent communicators in future interactions with disabled people (Goal 4). For this lecture, the class discussed three readings concerning disabled people. Particularly, these readings included a

book chapter concerning the language used to describe disability (chapter two of Linton, 1998), and two personal stories discussing how two adults reacted and adjusted to the physical disabilities they acquired later in life (Panko Reis, 1994). Questions over these readings were given to students a few days before this discussion so that they could participate in class (see Appendix C).

During this hour, using the questions as a guide, students discussed the content of and their reactions to the readings. They spent the majority of the time talking about the Linton (1998) reading. Many of her students expressed frustration with this article because though Linton talks about the problems of using different terms to refer to disabled people, he does not say what is an acceptable label. Students indicated that they might now feel more uncertain when interacting with a disabled person because they were afraid of referring to him or her in the “wrong” way. She used this discussion as an opportunity to talk about labeling and how any time a label is assigned to a group it can be problematic. The instructor and her students discussed ways they could try to go beyond labeling, such as by not viewing disabled people as a separate group from able-bodied persons.

Instructor Two

During this hour, Instructor Two focused on achieving the following goals: a) arouse awareness in students that communication with disabled people exists and can be problematic (Goal 1); b) have students get in touch with their preconceived notions of disabled people and transform these feelings and develop more effective ones (Goal 2); c) influence the students’ future interactions with disabled people in a positive manner (Goal 3); and d) guide the students to becoming more competent communicators in future interactions with disabled people (Goal 4). She thought that all of these could be accomplished through a class discussion. Particularly,

the discussion focused on the readings (as mentioned above) and the film When Billy Broke His Head. . . And Other Tales of Wonder. The students were infinitely more interested in discussing the film they had watched. Many of them seemed affected by how powerful the video was in depicting the unfair treatment of disabled people by the government and even by their family and friends. What was also interesting was that several of the students expressed that films such as this one should be shown throughout elementary and high schools. They expressed anger that they had not been instructed about interactions with disabled people and how disabled people are treated earlier in their education.

During the last twenty minutes of this hour, Instructor Two allowed one of her students, Karen Masley, to present her views on interacting with persons with disabilities. Not only does Karen have a brother who has Down's Syndrome, she is also the head of the university's Special Olympics Games. She began her presentation by writing on the board the word "disabled," and asking the class what things they thought of when they saw that word. The class listed labels such as schizophrenia, Down's Syndrome, and multiple personality disorders. Karen used this exercise to make the point that when people think about persons with disabilities, they often if not always focus on their disabilities, labeling their incapacities and not their capabilities. She followed her introduction by showing a video clip of a documentary film that was produced about her brother. The clip fit perfectly within the unit since it depicted personal accounts people who had problematic interactions with her brother but have grown, through time and patience, to understand him. The students were completely absorbed by Karen's video. Furthermore, she spoke about her brother and her personal experiences with him. She concluded her presentation by reading a letter that a girl had written to a Down's Syndrome newsletter that talked about her problematic relationship with her sibling (who had Down's Syndrome). The

instructor thought Karen's presentation was quite powerful and had a great impact on the class. It was especially impressionable to the students since it was coming from one of their peers.

Hour Three

Instructors One and Two

The goals both instructors aimed to achieve were: a) arouse awareness in students that communication with disabled people exists and can be problematic (Goal 1); b) have students get in touch with their preconceived notions of disabled people and transform those feelings and develop more effective ones (Goal 2); c) influence the students' future interactions with disabled people in a positive manner (Goal 3); and d) guide the students to becoming more competent communicators when interacting with disabled people in the future (Goal 4). Both instructors combined their classes for a presentation by a guest speaker. The speaker, Steve Hicks, was a senior attending the same university as the students. Five years ago, Steve was in a motorcycle accident and became a paraplegic. Steve told the students how he became disabled (his personal story), described his medical condition, how independent he was, and what he could or could not do. He also talked about problems he had encountered in interactions with able-bodied persons. In addition, Steve explained that he did not want to advocate for the disabled community at this point in his life, and very much wanted to be part of the able-bodied majority. Finally, he answered students' questions.

Hour Four

Instructor One

In this last lecture, Instructor One focused on reaching Goals 1 through 4. She began the last hour of the unit by discussing Steve's presentation with her students. Her students talked about how much they liked Steve and how he broke or went against many of the stereotypes they

had of disabled people. They also discussed how they felt they could relate to Steve since he was a fellow and seemed to share similar goals with them. When she asked her students how they felt about Steve wanting to separate himself from the disabled minority, they expressed the opinion that he should be given the opportunity to choose his own path and the right to make his own choices. Lastly, her students talked about how much they enjoyed the presentation, how charismatic Steve was, and how they wished someone like him had talked to them earlier in their education, such as in elementary or high school.

Instructor One next lectured about two “tricky” circumstances that can arise in interactions involving persons with and without disabilities (see Appendix D for the overheads used in the lecture). Particularly, she discussed self-disclosure issues, such as when an able-bodied person requests personal information having to do with the body or functioning of a disabled interaction partner (e.g., Braithwaite, 1991; Thompson, 1982; Thompson & Seibold, 1978), and help, or the miscommunication that may occur when an able-bodied person gives help to a disabled individual (Braithwaite, 1987, 1990; Braithwaite & Labrecque, 1994; Buscaglia, 1983; Ladieu, Hanfmann, & Dembo, 1947; Soule & Roloff, 2000).

Instructor Two

Once again, the last hour was focused on accomplishing Goals 1 through 4. During this time, Instructor Two’s class discussed the Linton (1998) chapter and Steve Hick’s presentation. Mostly they discussed Steve’s talk. They were extremely incensed by many of the things that Steve said. Many of the students were upset that Steve made a point to extract himself from the disabled community by purposely avoiding contact with them and not advocating for them. Since over half of her students have friends or family members with disabilities, this was an extremely sensitive issue to them. They were upset that Steve could not identify himself with a

group to which he obviously belonged. Furthermore, Instructor Two's students were unhappy about how Steve does not represent the "typical" disabled person, since he has many monetary advantages and privileges. They astutely pointed out that many disabled people have to depend on the government and the system for support and this is not something that Steve has had to deal with a single day of his life. Counteracting the negative reactions to Steve Hicks, her students did say that he was a charismatic and well-spoken individual. They enjoyed his presentation, but were simply offended by some of the things he said.

She felt that this was an extremely effective and affective hour of the lesson. Her students really appeared to learn some valuable lessons about communicating with disabled people and how they are treated, because of how angry some of Steve's comments made them. So, even though they were critical of Steve Hicks, she felt that his presentation helped the class's learning process.

Instructors One and Two

A final film clip was shown to the class from the movie My Left Foot. The clip was of an interaction between Christy (a man with cerebral palsy) and five ablebodied friends dining at a restaurant. This clip was chosen because it paralleled the previous one from Rain Man in that it showed a problematic interaction involving both persons with and without disabilities.

After the clip was shown, students were asked to respond to it by answering four questions (see Appendix E). Once again, the students were instructed that they could answer the questionnaire anonymously and that their answers would be kept confidential.

Evaluation

In the following section, both of the units will be evaluated both objectively and subjectively. Particularly, the objective evaluation will describe the students' learning and

understanding of communication between persons with and without disabilities using the video clips and questionnaires described above. The subjective evaluation of the units will detail each instructor's personal evaluation of her teaching, the positive aspects of the unit, and whether she felt the goals were accomplished.

Objective Evaluation of the Students' Learning

Measurement Tool

To assess the progress of the students' learning in the disabled unit, the instructors showed two video clips: one of which they showed at the beginning of the unit, prior to any lecture or class time spent on the material; and one of which they showed at the end of the unit, after everything in the unit had been covered. The first clip was from Rain Man. The excerpt showed Raymond, a person with autism, interacting with Iris, an ablebodied prostitute. During the scene, Charlie, Raymond's ablebodied brother, entered into the conversation. They chose this clip to illustrate an example of troubled communication between an ablebodied person (Iris) and a disabled person (Raymond). After having the students watch the clip, the instructors handed out a list of questions for them to answer (see Appendix A). The questions were designed to tap into any preconceived notions of disabled people the students may have possessed. The first question, "How do you feel about or think of Raymond?" was asked to assess their feelings and/or reactions to disabled people. The next question, "How do you feel about or think of Iris?" was used to analyze students' reactions to an ablebodied person involved in such an encounter. The third question, which asked students what they thought caused the break down in communication, was aimed at finding out whether or not they blame disabled people for problems in interactions, or if they realize that ablebodied people also need to adapt their communication behaviors. Finally, the last question, which asked the students if they

would have done anything differently to help the communication process, was geared toward the same goal. This question was used to determine whether blame and/or responsibility would be placed on the disabled person to communicate more effectively, or if the students were aware that able-bodied persons also need to communicate more productively.

After conducting the unit on communication between able-bodied and disabled people, the instructors showed another movie excerpt in attempts to determine whether or not their students' views of and reactions to communication with disabled people had changed. The final clip that they had the students watch was from My Left Foot. The interaction in the movie was between Christy, a man with cerebral palsy, and several of his friends at a restaurant. This clip also demonstrated problematic communication between a disabled person (Christy) and able-bodied people (his friends at the dinner table). Once again, the instructors handed out a list of questions (see Appendix E). These questions paralleled the ones asked about Rain Man because they were designed to examine whether or not there was a change in the students' reactions and/or attitudes toward and communication with disabled people..

Student Responses

Question One. This question examined the students' thoughts and reactions to Raymond and then to Christy. Some students did have positive reactions toward Raymond even before the unit was introduced. The instructors hypothesized that this is because many of these students have or had family members or close friends who are disabled (recall that at least 50% of both classes had a family member or close friend with a disability). However, despite certain positive reactions, many students were extremely ignorant with regards to disabled people. The following are some examples of what the students wrote about Raymond: "He doesn't appear to be intelligent." "I pity him because of his disability. I wish he were normal." "I feel sorry for

him and his disability because he can't interact with the world like everyone else can." "By repeating himself he can annoy people." "He's probably not dumb when things are actually explained." "He's weird or dumb or crazy." "I feel bad for him because he is obviously different." "He wants to be 'normal' even if he doesn't know he is 'different.'" "He's retarded."

When asked about their thoughts and feelings regarding Christy, the students appeared to show some improvement in their ability to relate to disabled people. The following are some examples of what they wrote: "He is a very good person and is just trying to express his affection." "Due to this (cerebral palsy), when he does communicate feelings people may not take him seriously because they forget that he's just as capable as everyone else mentally." "I feel bad that Christy was looked upon as so different. I think he was being nice in what he was saying, but the people could only focus on how he was saying it." "He can't control the way he is and it seems hard for people to understand him. They seem uncomfortable and impatient when he was speaking."

However, both instructors did have a few students who did not change their perceptions of disabled people. For example, one student wrote the following about Christy: "I would think that he was mentally slow, took too long to give his answer. Slightly disgusted by his fidgeting and odd gestures. Truth must be told." Another student wrote, "Honestly, if I was in that situation, I would be afraid of him."

Question two. The next question asked the students who or what they felt caused the break down in communication between Raymond and Iris. It was clear that the students still had a lot of progress to make because they saw Raymond as the sole cause of the problem in the interaction. Examples of some of the students' responses include: "Raymond apparently is incapable of 'normal' communication, especially interaction. He couldn't respond intelligently

to her (Iris's) questions or carry on a conversation." "He (Raymond) couldn't engage in casual conversation." "Raymond repeats himself and does not carry on with the flow of conversation." "Raymond's repetition and failure to elaborate when Iris wanted more information." "Raymond's inability to communicate."

After the unit the same question was posed to the students regarding Christy in My Left Foot. Their answers reflected progress in their thinking of communication with disabled people. The following are some examples of their comments: "Something happened that was different and unusual and people did not know how to react to the situation." "Christy's unclear speech and jerky movements added to the problem, but the other people at the table made no effort to help make the communication better and thus increased the problem." "I think the problem was caused because Christy and Eileen had no idea what the others' plans were. Christy didn't know about their marriage and Eileen didn't know about Christy's feelings for her--so everyone was caught unaware, making it difficult to communicate true feelings."

Questions three and four. The final set of questions queried whether the students felt that they could have done anything differently in the interaction in order to help the problematic communication. When they were asked this question at the beginning of the unit about Raymond in Rain Man, many of them thought they could have helped the interaction by being an interpreter or by explaining to Iris that Raymond was disabled. Clearly, this solution will not help integrate disabled people into the ablebodied majority. Examples of their comments are as follows: "I guess I would have explained to Iris that Raymond was a savant." "I would have told Iris about his disability/idiosyncrasy." "The two needed a kind of liaison to decipher and transmit their messages to the same level of understanding." "They needed a translator." "I would have explained Raymond's situation to Iris, so that she would not be put off by his

seemingly strange response.”

After the unit, the students’ responses to the same question, but about Christy, showed that they had made progress in their views of communication with disabled people. Many of their comments talked about how the circumstances surrounding the interaction were problematic and did not cite Christy, the man with the disability, as the source of the problem. Furthermore, some of them thought that the other people at the dinner table, the ones without disabilities, could have made the interaction smoother. The following are some examples of the students’ reactions: “The other people could have made Christy feel like his communication was appreciated rather than just stare at him.” “The people next to him didn’t have to act so awkward.” “If people in the restaurant didn’t stop and stare, maybe if they were exposed to people with disabilities more, they wouldn’t have had such a hard time dealing with him or his presence in the restaurant.” “Everyone could have looked/at least acted like they were comfortable.” “She (Eileen) could have broken the news in a low pressure environment.” “The interaction could have taken place in private, where feelings could be discussed.” “The celebration could’ve taken place in a more private setting--where all involved would’ve been in a more comfortable atmosphere.”

Overall change in the students. Upon comparing the students’ answers to the questions regarding the clips from Rain Man and My Left Foot, the instructors felt that the majority of the students made some sort of progress in better understanding the nature of communication with disabled people. Though many of them began the unit expressing their thoughts about how the disabled person was the cause of any problematic communication, at the end of the unit the students were able to see how the circumstances surrounding an interaction and ablebodied people could have contributed to the troublesome encounters.

Subjective Evaluation of the Teaching and the Units

The instructors will now turn to their personal, subjective evaluations of the units. Specifically, each instructor will discuss (in first person): a) her personal evaluation of her teaching; b) the positive aspects of the unit; and c) whether the goals set out at the beginning of this essay were accomplished.

Instructor One

Evaluation of the teaching. Because of my experiences with persons with disabilities (i.e., my brother), I have a lot of passion for this topic. I am also familiar with the published research concerning communication between persons with and without disabilities, so I felt comfortable lecturing on this topic. The students seemed to enjoy hearing my perspective, my enthusiasm for the subject, and the personal stories I told about my brother for illustrative purposes. However, though I believe that my experiences and perspective added to the unit, I think they were problematic as well. Though I explained to students at the beginning of the unit that nothing they said would be considered “wrong” and that I wanted them to express their true opinions, they seemed hesitant to express anything other than what I taught them or an opinion I had expressed. I felt that the students were afraid, due to my background, to make any criticisms of the research or to openly discuss their feelings about persons with disabilities.

Positive aspects of the unit. The most powerful part of my unit was Steve Hick’s presentation. Though I do my best to give an overall picture of interactions involving persons with and without disabilities, I cannot fully understand or explain the perspective of a disabled person. Steve was able to give this perspective. I feel that having any disabled speaker, not just Steve, is an important part of teaching this topic. It is one thing to lecture and talk about communicating with a disabled person, and another to actually have this opportunity. Another

part of the unit that went well was the discussion of the Linton (1998) chapter. Students seemed to grasp how the language they use to describe a person with disability can affect their behavior toward and emotions regarding him or her. Moreover, students took a critical approach to this reading, allowing them to think for themselves and see some of the implications behind labeling disabled people and viewing disability as a pathology. Lastly, the students appeared to enjoy the stories I told about my brother and the video clip of him on the news. Both increased my credibility and assisted in illustrating the points I was trying to make.

Accomplishment of the goals. Many of the goals that I set out to accomplish through this unit were accomplished. First, I felt that students did become aware that communication with disabled people exists and can be problematic through the interest they showed in this topic and their discussion of these interactions in class. Moreover, I believe that my students were somewhat able to get in touch with their feelings about persons with disabilities. Though some of their emotions may have remained negative, other students appeared to be able to develop more positive ones. Steve's presentation was particularly effective in this regard in that students could see how easy-going and enjoyable he was to be around, and how he didn't fit the stereotype of the dependent and bitter disabled person. Moreover, one of my students revealed how the unit had inspired her to join Natural Ties, a not-for-profit organization whose purpose is to create friendships between persons with and without disabilities. She excitedly revealed that the organization had set up a meeting for her to meet a potential disabled friend in a few weeks. However, because my students were so hesitant to express their true feelings regarding disabled persons in front of me, I am not completely confident that all of my students were able to truly get in touch with their preconceived notions.

Other goals I hoped to accomplish in this unit were to have students become more

competent communicators when interacting with a disabled person, and to make these encounters smoother and easier for both disabled and able-bodied interactants. In order to accomplish this goal, I talked to my students about how they should try to focus on a disabled interaction partner as a person, not a disabled person. My students seemed to respond well to this directive, but I feel that these interactions are not this simplistic and that only through actual encounters with disabled people can there be a true change in their behavior. However, an analysis of students' responses to the film clips showed that the majority of my students progressed from blaming disabled persons for communication breakdowns to realizing that able-bodied persons or the circumstances surrounding an encounter can also be responsible for negative outcomes.

Finally, with regards to the last goal, I believe that this paper can help other instructors integrate this topic into their classes. The overheads I have attached as appendices could provide a basis for developing lectures. In addition, other instructors can easily incorporate the same or similar audiovisual materials into their units.

Instructor Two

Evaluation of the teaching. As I mentioned before, I did not tell my students that we would be discussing communication with disabled people as a unit in the class. I merely told them that there would be a change in the syllabus and the topic would be a surprise. After introducing the unit, many of my students showed great interest in the topic. Several of them came up to me after class and expressed that they had never had a class that taught this subject before. One particular student, Karen Masley, was so excited about the topic that she volunteered to show a video clip of her brother. I corresponded with Karen closely throughout the unit to get her feedback as to what she thought went well and what she thought could be

improved. She was extremely positive throughout the lesson and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to talk about her brother and to have a chance to listen to what I had to say about communication between ablebodied and disabled people

I think that my more objective take on the topic (since I do not have a close family member with a disability) yielded both negative and positive effects. I do not think the students saw anything negative in my teaching, but I was nervous about teaching such a sensitive topic without having a great amount of personal investment in it. Very often, I feel that having more personal experiences in something gives a person more “right” to talk about it. Thus, I was not always comfortable teaching the unit. However, I believe that my students were not afraid to express their true opinions to me since I do not have a personal connection with the material.

Positive aspects of the unit. I think there were three highlights in this unit. First of all, the students enjoyed the film, When Billy Broke His Head. . . And Other Tales of Wonder. They could not stop discussing it. Many of them were incited to a point of anger by the injustices and inequalities that disabled people had to suffer, and expressed that they had no idea about these things before viewing the film.

They were also thoroughly engrossed by Karen Masley’s presentation. Like I said before, it made a huge impact on the class to have one of their peers share a personal story about her sibling. Not only did they see her as an equal, but they also ended up respecting what she had to say because of her experiences with disabled people.

The last aspect of the unit that I think worked extremely well was having Steve Hicks speak to the class. His speech about his attitudes toward life as a disabled person and his views on being a part of the disabled community caused a great uproar in my class. Though they did not agree with many things he said, I think that their reaction only demonstrated how much my

students cared about the topic and were becoming sensitive to disabled people. They expressed how Steve is privileged and we cannot assume that other disabled people have these same privileges; and therefore, there are still great advances that need to be made. Also, they did not agree with or respect how he wanted to extract himself from the disabled community. They felt that as charismatic as Steve is, he really needed to do what he could to help others who were less fortunate than he. All of these reactions showed me that my students took a lot away from the unit and potentially developed behavioral changes.

Accomplishment of the goals. I think that each and every single one of the goals was accomplished, just to varying degrees. The amount of interaction and discussion that was stimulated in each class period illustrated that my students realized that communication with disabled people exists and can be problematic. Furthermore, several students expressed how they would have liked such a class or unit in their grade school, junior high and high school. This kind of awareness and concern, when compared to their prior ignorance of this subject, demonstrates how they have comprehended what a big problem not knowing about communication with disabled people is.

Another goal was to have the students get in touch with their preconceived notions of disabled people and to develop more effective ones. Although I do not claim that every single one of the students developed more effective feelings toward people with disabilities, the kinds of comments and interactions that occurred in class showed that many of them did harbor stereotypical reactions toward disabled people at the beginning of the unit. However, I think that Karen Masley's presentation about her brother made a huge impact on the students and made a breakthrough in reaching many of them because they saw her as a peer who was just like them.

In regards to instigating possible behavioral changes in the students and making them

more competent communicators, it would appear from their reactions to Christy in My Left Foot (as discussed above) that these goals were accomplished. My students seemed to understand after the unit that problematic communication with disabled people should not be blamed on the disabled person. Rather, troubled communication could be due to the circumstances surrounding the conversation or the unwillingness of able-bodied people to better understand a disabled interaction partner. Furthermore, as the discussions in the classroom progressed, I made sure that certain things were brought to light, including emphasizing that we need to focus on disabled people's capabilities when communicating with them, and not focus on their disabilities. Many of the students were extremely excited by this notion and wanted to discuss the prospect further. However, to get a better judgment of whether or not these goals were attained, we should look at specific interactions that our students have with disabled people. Since this is not feasible, I would say that examining their reactions to My Left Foot is an acceptable way of interpreting whether or not the goal was accomplished.

Finally, I think the unit was successful in developing lesson plans, activities, readings and videos that could easily be used in other introductory communication courses. Many of the teaching materials and techniques were quite effective.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations of the Unit Evaluation

The limitations of the units' evaluations center around the method of using movie clips to measure cognitive and behavioral change in the students. First of all, the two clips are different, they show different disabilities and even possibly show different extremities of disability. This could have affected the students' responses to the two clips. Furthermore, the fact that students were measured both before and after the unit could have desensitized their reactions to disabled

persons. Moreover, the before and after methodology employed could have prompted the students to answer the second set of questions in accordance with what they thought the instructors wanted.

Future Directions

As mentioned earlier, the instructors hope that the units they created, or ones similar in nature, will be integrated into other introductory communication courses. However, spending four hours on this topic may not be enough to institute change regarding communication between persons with and without disabilities. Specifically, though this unit raises awareness in students, it may not be enough to instigate true change in their thoughts and behaviors regarding persons with disabilities. Creating this unit as an introduction, followed by a more in-depth upper level course which deals exclusively with communication between persons with and without disabilities may bring about more lasting change in students. Moreover, after completing this upper-level course students could then have an opportunity to work as an intern with a disabled advocacy group. Therefore, this unit could be one part of a larger course sequence created for the express purpose of making interactions between persons with and without disabilities less problematic. An upper-level course and internship program similar to those described above are available to students at the university where both instructors teach. It is both of their hopes that a similar progressive model could be exported to other educational institutions.

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Appendix A

Reaction Questions to the Clip from Rain Man

1. How do you feel about or think of Raymond?
2. (Disregarding her profession) How do you feel about or think of Iris?
3. Clearly, there was a break down in communication in the scene. What do you think caused the break down?
4. If you had been a part of the interaction, what would you have done differently to help the communication process?

Appendix B

Instructor One's Overheads for Hour One

Intercultural Perspective

The disabled are a minority often separated from the ablebodied majority that forms a distinct subculture. This subculture was formed because of:

1. Stereotypes

- Sickly and sub-human
- Dependent and in need of help
- Easily offended and highly sensitive about their disability

2. Misconceptions that exaggerate the limitations of a disability

- Disabled persons are often viewed as being unable to function in a “normal” world, or not having any place outside of an institution.
- Disability is viewed as a pathology, not a characteristic that a person happens to have.

3. Prejudice and discrimination

- Job, educational, and social

4. Many disabled people can be singled out since they have a “discriminating mark.”

Communication Strategies of Persons With Disabilities

Impression management-work to control how ablebodied persons view them.

- Want to be seen as persons first, not disabled persons. Take the focus off the disability.

This type of impression management usually happens most in first time or initial encounters with ablebodied persons.

Disabled persons can accomplish this goal by:

1. Self-disclosing self-descriptive information, or even emotional information.
2. Showing how similar they are to an ablebodied person.

Ablebodied Persons' Reactions to Individuals With Disabilities

- Ablebodied persons are faced with two conflicting social norms.
 1. To treat persons with disabilities kindly and carefully.
 2. To treat persons with disabilities just like anyone else.

- These conflicting norms result in uncertainty on the part of an ablebodied individual. This uncertainty is communicated to a disabled interaction partner by an ablebodied person:
 1. Becoming more inhibited and nervous.
 2. Distorting their opinions to what they stereotypically think a disabled person wants to hear.
 3. Sending less nonverbal cues altogether.

Appendix C

Discussion Questions for the Linton Article

1. What are some of the terms used to describe disabled people that were discussed in this article? What do these terms mean?
2. How has assigning medical meaning to a disability affected the way society views and reacts to disabled people?
3. What does the phrase “overcoming a disability” imply?
4. How has the stereotypical language used to describe the disabled reflected your own feelings toward persons with disabilities (be honest)?
5. What is the link between stereotypes of the disabled and the descriptions we apply to them (such as describing someone as confined to a wheelchair)?
6. Why would persons with disabilities want to “control” or “own” the labels that are applied to them?
7. How can the language that is used to describe persons with disabilities affect able-bodied persons’ feelings toward them?
8. How can this language affect the behavior of persons without disabilities toward those with them?
9. After reading this article, do you think you will behave toward disabled people differently than you have in the past, and how? Would you make any changes in how you communicate with disabled people?

Appendix D

Instructor One's Overheads for Hour Four

Tricky circumstances in ablebodied/disabled interactions

1. Self-disclosure

- Ablebodied people are often curious about a disability and may ask questions having to do with a disabled person's body or day-to-day functioning that they would not normally ask a person without a disability.
- Research has found that this can increase the comfort of an ablebodied person with a disabled interaction partner, but not their liking for him or her.
- These requests can cause a disabled person to feel embarrassed or remind him or her that the disability is not "normal."

2. Help (two types)

A. Solicited versus unsolicited help

Does a disabled person request the assistance? Or does an ablebodied person infer that a disabled individual needs assistance?

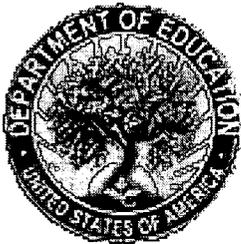
B. Necessary versus unnecessary help

- **Necessary:** A disabled person could not have performed the task in question without aid.
 - **Unnecessary:** A disabled person did not help to perform the task
-
- **Unsolicited, unnecessary help can be the most problematic.** It can communicate to a disabled person that they are helpless, incompetent and unable.

Appendix E

Reaction Questions to the Clip from My Left Foot

1. How do you feel about or think of Christy?
2. How do you feel about or think of the woman sitting next to Christy? The people at this table? The other people in the restaurant?
3. Clearly, this communicative interaction was problematic. What caused that problem?
4. Could anything have been done to make this interaction less problematic?



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Organization/Address: Northwestern University Basement of Harris Hall, Room 12 1881 Sheridan Road Evanston, IL 60208	Telephone: (847) 467-6368	Fax:
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