

Developing Awareness vs. Similarity Awareness

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A disability “simulation” is a strategy employed to promote awareness. But this method frequently results in negative, unintended outcomes. Participants may don a pair of glasses smeared with lotion to simulate low vision; wear a blindfold to simulate blindness; use a wheelchair; and so forth.

It’s not unusual, however, for the person using the wheelchair to giggle while trying to pop a wheelie; rise up and lift the chair over an obstacle; or perform some other feat that’s totally foreign to many people who use wheelchairs. And how can one accurately simulate having to roam city blocks looking for a curb cut; having to restrict your intake of fluids (even when you’re extremely thirsty) because you don’t know when you’ll find an accessible building with an accessible toilet?

A child wearing a blindfold waves her arms back and forth, feeling for obstacles. Then she and her classmates laugh uproariously when she trips over the leg of a chair. She can’t wait to rip the blindfold off and let someone else make a fool of himself! How can this exercise demonstrate the skill blind people have in maneuvering around barriers, the ways in which they use their hearing to enable them to move with ease and safety, or their other talents and abilities?

Instead of promoting an understanding of what it’s really like to have a disability, simulations frequently perpetuate negative reactions (“Wow! I’m glad I’m not like that!”) which reflect pity, sadness, superiority, and/or even greater misunderstanding...

There is *no method* that can truly teach others “what it’s like to have a disability,” anymore than one can be taught what it’s like to be of a different ethnicity, religion, or gender. More importantly, however, is that traditional “awareness” presentations usually focus on the disability conditions, and therefore, the *differences* between people with and without disabilities. And herein lies the fundamental danger: *society is all too aware of these differences!* It’s upon these differences that the monuments of pity, isolation, and segregation have been erected. We don’t need to teach others about disabilities or differences; it’s the *similarities* between people with and without disabilities that need to be promoted!

When is a “similarity awareness” presentation beneficial? In general, when a person with a disability first enters a typical, natural environment in which she doesn’t know anyone (regular ed classroom, community activity, new job, and so forth).

What would such a presentation look like? Unlike traditional – and generalized – disability awareness presentations, a similarity awareness presentation is designed for a specific audience with a specific outcome in mind.

Ask yourself: what outcome do I want? What changes do I want to see? How do I want people to think and act differently as a result of my presentation? What do I want people to know? *Think outcomes!*

Let's look at some examples. Michelle is entering kindergarten and her mom, Carole, wants Michelle's classmates to know her daughter is more *like them* than different. She also wants to replace pity and discomfort with respect and positive attitudes. On the first day of school, and with the teacher's support, Carole and Michelle give an informal talk to the assembled kindergartners. Carole begins by asking a series of questions: how many of the children like McDonald's, who has a pet, and so forth, to illustrate the similarities shared by Michelle and her classmates. Differences are then explored: some kids have brown hair and some have blonde, but they all share similarities, too.

Next, Carole explains why Michelle needs mobility and communication devices, in ways that promote respect and dignity for her daughter. "Michelle was born with cerebral palsy. That means her legs and her mouth work differently. But with her wheelchair and 'talker,' she goes where she wants and talks like everyone else!" Then Michelle demonstrates her assistive technology devices and lets her classmates try them out. This helps demystify these "strange things."

Steve, a 14-year-old with ADHD, isn't so sure he *wants* all the other kids in his regular ed classes at the high school to know he carries a label, and he wants no part of a similarity awareness presentation! How embarrassing! At the same time, however, Steve, his parents, and teachers have agreed it would be helpful if Steve's classmates understood more about the extra assistance Steve will be getting in the classroom, including his modified curriculum which includes more activity-based lessons.

They've designed a plan to address this issue, which will also include Steve's similarities and strengths. During several homeroom periods, the teacher will lead the class in an activity in which *each student* will describe his own talents and gifts, *as well as needs*. The similarities and differences that coexist among the thirty students will be explored. When it's his turn, Steve will let everyone know about his skill on the basketball court, his vast collection of music CDs, and his interest in rock climbing. Next, he'll educate his classmates about how he learns best, and will share information about his curriculum modifications and other issues. In the process, he'll let his classmates know he may be calling on them for assistance throughout the year, adding that he'll be happy to reciprocate by providing "technical assistance" in the areas of basketball and rock climbing!

Luisa, a 29-year-old who is beginning her first job in the community, wants her coworkers to know several things about her, including: (1) she doesn't want to be pitied and (2) she can hear just fine and people don't need to speak to her in voices that are extra loud or extra slow. She's tired of people assuming she can't hear or think simply because her speech is different from others! Before proceeding, Luisa talked to her supervisor (Bob) to enlist his support.

On Luisa's first day on the job, Bob called a department meeting and introduced Luisa to her coworkers. He then turned the meeting over to Luisa. She told everyone how happy she was with her new position ("glad to be part of the team"), and shared a little information about herself which others could relate to: "I love to eat out – Mexican food is my favorite – and I go to First Methodist church." These and other common characteristics demonstrated the similarities between Luisa and her coworkers.

Then she got down to business: "You can tell that I talk a little differently than you. That's just the way I am. But as you get to know me, you'll be able to understand my speech better. I want you to know it's okay to ask me to repeat myself if you don't understand me. I'd rather you do that than pretend you know what I said. Okay? Also, I can hear and think just fine, so even though I speak

slowly, *you* don't need to. And you don't need to raise your voice, either. I hear just fine! Does anyone have any questions?

These are just three examples of the many ways we can educate others about people with disabilities in ways that reveal similarities, promote dignity and respect, and result in positive outcomes for all. In addition to presentations and activities that are focused on a specific person in a specific environment, you may also be interested in doing a generic similarity awareness presentation. If so, recruit a panel of children and adults with disabilities – real people, not puppets – who can bring real-life experiences, real successes, real assets, and real similarities to audiences.

When the need or opportunity for a similarity awareness presentation arises, rethink what's really important and carefully consider the outcomes you want to achieve. In addition, remember these important tips: (1) the person with the disability should participate in the presentation to the greatest extent possible and (2) focus on similarities, remembering that a person with a disability is more like people without disabilities than different)! And finally, to ensure we move beyond negative, stereotypical images, we must show more respect and use People First Language. (Visit www.disabilityisnatural.com for the latest version of the People First Language article.) We have the power to influence positive and powerful changes in societal perceptions about disability. We can do it!