



TOPIC OF THE MONTH: DISABILITY LANGUAGE AND ADVOCACY

Prepared by Kate Dale and Natalie Kearns

What is Disability?

As defined the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes that "disability is an evolving concept and that disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."

According to the [World Health Organization](#), disability has three dimensions:

1. **Impairment** in a person's body structure or function, or mental functioning; examples of impairments include loss of a limb, loss of vision or memory loss.
2. **Activity limitation**, such as difficulty seeing, hearing, walking, or problem solving.
3. **Participation restrictions** in normal daily activities, such as working, engaging in social and recreational activities, and obtaining health care and preventive services.

People with disabilities are the largest minority group (2 in 10 adults) that any person can join at any time. Some key challenges for people with disabilities are perception by the public, depiction in the media, and treatment from healthcare professionals. There are many distinct communities within the disabled population, each with their own cultural points of view. What one group may prefer is not broadly applicable to all.

Language and Identity

Different terms have been used for people with disabilities at different times and places. [Language practices fall in and out of favor](#). A movement emerged in recent years to use "Person First" as opposed to "Identity First" language. Using "person with disability" rather than "disabled person" is intended to encourage us to "see the person first not the disability".

However, many among the disabled reject this, as it tends to "focus on disability in an ungainly new way". Most now [affirm the use of the word disabled](#), and consider their identity a source of pride, advocacy and joy. The words "handicapped" and "afflicted" are generally not used, and euphemistic words like "special needs", "challenged" or "differently abled" are considered by most to be stigmatizing.

The Dangers of “Inspiration Porn”

[“Inspiration porn”](#) is a term coined by the late disabled activist Stella Young. It refers to images of visibly disabled individuals doing everyday tasks, usually captioned with phrases such as “what’s your excuse”. They tend to be perpetuated by and directed toward the abled. The porn comparison points out that this objectifies these individuals and suggests they are there to inspire, and not inherently valuable for their own ideas and achievements.

Many of these images assume incompetence (i.e. wheelchair users playing basketball-remarkable!) where competence should be assumed.

THEATRE IN ACTION:

For years portrayals of disabled characters by abled actors were common, such as Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* and Daniel Day-Lewis in *My Left Foot*. More recently [disabled actors have begun a push for more equitable casting of such roles](#), similar to the representation being sought by trans actors. We are also beginning to see disabled actors in roles where their disability is not intrinsic to the story, perhaps an even more significant step toward inclusion.

SEE/LISTEN MORE:

[The Heumann Perspective](#) – A podcast hosted by Judy Heumann, an internationally recognized bad-ass disability activist, in conversation with disabled changemakers and their allies.

Instagrams to follow:

[@Nina_Tame](#)

[@Wheelchair_Rapunzel](#)

[@theheumanperspective](#)

[Actor Mat Fraser on disabled performers \(YouTube video\)](#) – an introduction to actor Mat Fraser's curated series “Crip Tales,” a collection of short films all written, directed and performed by people with disabilities. More information on the project and Mat's work is also [available here](#)

[“Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution”](#) - Documentary on Netflix – a documentary tracing the origins of the Americans with Disabilities Act back to a group of campers at a youth summer camp for disabled kids.

IT'S YOUR TURN:

Are there physical or social barriers you erect or perpetuate? How can you make your theatre, city or world more accessible or welcoming? When your theatre chooses to produce a play with a disabled character, what kind of steps can they take to cast the role with an actor who

brings an authentic experience to the character? [This article](#) covers some ways theatres can become radically inclusive.

Thank you for reading this month's newsletter! Please stay tuned for newsletters curated by the members of the A/O resources sub-committee! We plan on covering a wide variety of topics but if there's something you want to see covered, please reach out! As we continue these newsletters, you can always refer back to our [Google doc "Main Listing" found here](#). This document will continuously be updated with each newsletter so that you can have a singular place to go when you need a new podcast to listen to or you want to refer back to the recommended books, etc.