

# Alternative Activity to the Social Construction of Disability — “What If”

## *Changing Perspectives on Disability (60 minutes)*

**Key concepts:** disabling environment; social construction of disability

The purpose of this activity is to provide participants with an opportunity to consider the impact that the environment has on living with a disability. We believe that this activity helps participants begin to address the fear of becoming disabled, a fear that is one of the roots of ableism. The “What if ...” activity also provides an opportunity for participants to consider their assumptions about such an experience. By participating in this experiential activity before listening to the panel of people with disabilities, participants will be better prepared to hear about the panel members’ experiences because they will understand that having a disability means more than having limitations.

The following is a script for the facilitator to use in presenting this activity:

The purpose of this activity is to look at the daily routines of our lives and our strengths and limitations in those situations. First, we’ll spend some time thinking about our daily routines and writing in our journals. For this activity, use your journal to write down responses to questions and make note of information to share with another person. Next, we’ll spend some time sharing what you have written in pairs. Then we’ll do more thinking and writing, and share again with the same person. Finally, we’ll discuss our answers to the questions in the whole group. As with the other activities in this class, you are not required to share anything that you do not wish to share.

## First Set of Questions

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(Post these questions on newsprint or the chalkboard so that participants can refer to them easily.)

Think of what you did last night. Make sure that you are able to discuss in detail the activity you choose (for example, cooked dinner, talked on the phone, went to an event, watched TV, read a book, went to bed, listened to music). Make sure you select an activity for which you can imagine specific tasks that you had to perform. For example, if you select the activity of cooking dinner you would imagine yourself in the kitchen and the specific steps you had to perform to cook dinner, such as get a pot from the shelf, turn on the stove or stand at the kitchen counter. Think like a scriptwriter as you recall the activities and note the details of the activities (e.g., I stood on tiptoe to reach the ginger on the top shelf over the stove).

- What did you do last night?
- Where were you?
- How did you get there?
- What activities were you performing?
- What about the environment made your activity easy (e.g., electric can opener or electric door at the grocery store) or difficult (e.g., had to bang the jar on the counter to loosen the lid or car door frozen shut)?

Spend 5 minutes thinking and writing about these questions.

After 5 minutes, instruct the participants:

Now spend about 8 minutes with one other person, sharing what you thought of and wrote. Each of you spend four minutes giving a brief description of what you did last night, what activities you performed, and what the strengths and limitations of the environments.

After the 8 minutes are up, instruct the participants:

Now it is time for more thinking and writing. Select a disability from this list of disabilities.

(Post a list of specific disabilities: paraplegic, quadriplegic, blind, deaf, depression, learning disabilities that limit ability to process information or refer participants to Appendix 14B for different kinds and examples of disabilities.)

If you have a disability, choose a disability that you do not have. Spend a few minutes writing down **your understanding** of the characteristics of that disability. It is understood that you do not have all the information you need about the disability, but what you already know will be sufficient for this activity.

Now, think about what you did last night and the activities you described before. Spend 5 minutes thinking and writing about how you believe having the disability would require you to adjust the environment. Do not resort to having people do everything for you, but think about what supports you need to function independently or interdependently. What support/accommodations or equipment do you need to function independently or interdependently? Answer the same set of questions you wrote about before in describing the new role.

After the 5 minutes are up, instruct the participants:

Rejoin the same partner and spend 15 minutes discussing how the environment would affect your daily activity imagining that you have that particular disability. How do you feel about the environment when you think about having a disability? Discuss your thoughts about this with your partner.

Gather everyone back together as a whole group for a discussion (about 25 to 30 minutes). Use the following questions to guide the discussion:

- What activity did you select?
- Which disability did you choose?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the environment?
- Imagining that you have a disability, what changes to the environment would you need to be able to meet your daily needs? Environmental changes include support from other people as well as from gadgets and accessibility features.
- How did you feel about the environment once you imagined having a disability?
- How could your feelings about the environment impact your attitudes toward people with disabilities?
- Thinking about intersections, in your new disability role, how would you be further impacted by your gender, class, race, and ethnicity? Consider access to resources, such as health care, education, and employment. Since society often socially constructs disability as lack of sexuality (sometimes even gender), how would that impact GLBT disabled people?

Conclude the exercise with comments such as the following:

The purpose of this activity is to point out that all people with disabilities and those who don't currently have any disabilities have many daily activities that we perform in our lives. In each of these daily activities, we have strengths and limitations. Having a disability does not mean only loss or limitations; it means having a different set of strengths and limitations. Acquiring a disability doesn't just mean loss; it means adjusting to a new set of strengths and limitations. It also means discovering your own and others' creativity. We will talk more later in the class about what it would be like to have a disability over a long period of time. The members of the panel presentation we will hear have had their disabilities for different lengths of time and participate in a variety of activities in their day-to-day lives. Think about what activities they engage in and what accommodations they might need as you listen to their presentations.

### **Facilitation Issues**

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Some participants may miss the point and focus on tragedy, loss, or limitation when they think about having a disability. Ask them what sort of technology and/or personal help would assist them to accomplish the tasks they are focusing on. Remind them that most disabled people do not see their lives in terms of loss. Instead they see having a disability as just another interesting way to be alive. Adjusting to a new disability will include a grieving process, but people get on with their lives and find new and interesting ways to live them. Also, in order to help redirect the focus on the environment and how disability is constructed or deconstructed by the environment, explain during processing that disability is socially constructed, and is assigned meaning by society beyond the accommodation needs of an impairment. For example, a person in a wheelchair is not "disabled" before coming upon a flight of stairs. The attitudes that insist on stairs without accessible alternatives are what disables the person. Explain that the difficulties we encountered in figuring out

environmental supports are a result of the social construction resulting in our isolation from information that should be available to all. Another result is people with difficulty asking for help or accepting it due to internalized messages of being less than whole when in need and assuming that getting help is burdensome by definition. Universal design goes a long way toward making an environment enabling for all people.

- What are your insights from this activity?
- How has your understanding of disability changed?
- Are there unanswered questions?

**Journal Period (5 minutes)**

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