

*Introduction to*  
*Disability Culture*

*Teaching All Students,  
Reaching All Learners*

[\*http://www.ist.hawaii.edu\*](http://www.ist.hawaii.edu)

*Society for Disability Studies*  
*Annual Conference*

*June 2009*

Steven E. Brown, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Center on Disability Studies  
University of Hawai'i at Manoa  
Honolulu, HI  
Email: [sebrown@hawaii.edu](mailto:sebrown@hawaii.edu)

# Welcome to the World of Disability Culture

## A Magical Mystery Tour

“The magical mystery tour  
is waiting to take you away,  
Waiting to take you away.”  
(Lennon, McCartney)

# “The Fishing is Free” by Jane Field

The fishing is free with your disability  
You don't need a license like the rest.  
Movies are half the price, well isn't that nice?  
And the parking spots are nothing but the best.

Don't you wish that you were disabled?  
Disabled is the better way to be.  
With crutches, canes and braces, and wheelchairs to run races  
Don't you wish that you were just like me?

# “The Fishing is Free” (continued)

With Wheel-Trans to get about, it's a wonder we go out

It's so much fun to try to book a ride.

You phone 4 days ahead and if you're lucky so it's said  
You might get there, but if you don't, don't be surprised.

Don't you wish that you were disabled?

Disabled is the better way to be.

Some chairs are motorized and high-tech computerized

Don't you wish that you were just like me?

# “The Fishing is Free” (continued)

The deaf have got sign language,  
the blind have got their dogs  
Their loyal trusted guides are at their sides.  
Well everyone has their vices, but we've got our devices  
Don't you envy us our privileged lives?

Don't you wish that you were disabled?  
Disabled is the better way to be.  
When we go out it's really neat,  
we're always sure we'll get a seat  
Oh, don't you wish that you were just like me?

# “The Fishing is Free” (continued)

No one knows just what to call us  
which label should befall us,  
And they're some dandy terms from which to choose.  
My favourite's "wheel-chair bound" cause it has a  
bondage sound.  
It's fun to guess what term they're going to use.  
Don't you wish that you were disabled?  
Disabled is the better way to be.  
There are special entrances in stores, they let us in  
through the back doors  
Oh, don't you wish that you were just like me?

# “The Fishing is Free” (continued)

I tell you we've got all the breaks,  
'cause we've got what it takes  
I haven't even mentioned income tax.  
There are credits and reductions to give us tax deductions  
When April comes I guess we can relax.

Don't you wish you wish that you were disabled?  
Disabled is the better way to be.  
With all these benefits and perks that's  
how the system works  
Oh, don't you wish that you were just like me?

# “The Fishing is Free” (continued)

The fishing is free with your disability  
And you don't need a licence like the rest.  
Movies are half the price, well isn't that nice?  
And the parking spots are nothing but the best!

# TELL YOUR STORY

Steven E. Brown

©Institute on Disability Culture, 1995, All Rights Reserved

[http://web.mac.com/disculture/Tell Your Story/The Poem.html](http://web.mac.com/disculture/Tell_Your_Story/The_Poem.html)

*Tell your story*

*Tell your story*

It may bump from the page

like words of Braille

sizzling in tales of blazing glory;

it may glisten in the sunshine like the holy grail,

so tell me a tale, even if it's gory,

I'm yearning to hear *you*

Tell *your* story.

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

Have you heard  
‘bout the man  
in the motorized chair?  
Found no ramp at the  
movie theater  
did he despair?  
No,  
just let them dudes lift him in there.  
Came back a few days later  
after somethin’ greater  
brought with him a crew  
people in chairs just grew and grew,  
said they knew  
they’d be part of the view;

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

no problem getting in,  
just lift and push and  
move those hunks of tin.

The chairs, they weighed a-plenty,  
The ushers stressed and  
strained and got somewhat benty.  
Seeing the movie was not the goal  
chargin' the stage was the whole  
they paid for getting' in  
but that theater knew it sinned.

People in chairs sealed their own personal stamp  
on that theater's shimmering new wheelchair ramp.

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

Tell your story  
Tell your story  
It may enrapture the floating air  
like ASL singing its flair  
it might even glisten like the holy grail,  
but no one will set their sail  
toward your tale,  
even if it's hunky-dory,  
unless you tell your story  
Tell *your* story.

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

Once I knew a lady  
got caught in a picket line  
changed her whole design:  
came back to her hometown  
mission bound.

Told a hospital it was ailing  
cause it was failing to see  
good health bound in the key of  
phone lines hooked up with a TDD.\*

Said she'd seek cooperation or  
she'd be mighty angry  
might even round up folks and  
stoke fires of insurgency,

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

gather signatures and seek publicity.  
You know that hospital saw the light  
put an end to the no TDD blight.

Last time I saw that lady  
she was waving a sign  
telling a TV station  
she sure did mind  
no news she could see  
so why should she  
listen to what they wanted her to be.

Now she knows how to stick it  
with a picket and her  
pockets have been lined with Advocacy.

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

Tell your story  
Tell your tale  
You will find you touch  
with the sureness of a crutch  
a framework for your dwelling,  
a story needing telling,  
steaming like a sunburnt trail  
glistening like the holy grail.  
Who will know what you entail  
unless you risk the path to glory  
tell your story  
Tell *your* story.

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

Does he want another cup of coffee?  
I heard the waitress ask about the man.  
How did I know his plan?  
Just cause he couldn't see  
didn't mean his brain rested in incompetency.  
The stories he has told  
brisk and bold  
I've shared with more than a few  
over a cup of coffee or a tall, cold brew.

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

The lessons are in the telling  
they provide a framework and a dwelling.  
We all have so many stories to bear  
Cry, laugh, sing, and despair;  
how will our children learn and compare  
if we're too timid to dare  
to raise the flare  
share that we care.

Tell your story  
Sing your tale  
Tell *our* story  
Shout *our* glory!

## TELL YOUR STORY (continued)

Tell our story

Tell our story

It may not bring fame

It may have no glory, but

cut through someone's life like a ray of sunshine

break away barriers like a layer of turpentine,

tell your story

Tell your tale

We're not as elusive as that holy grail.

# Steve's Definition

People with disabilities have forged a group identity. We share a common history of oppression and a common bond of resilience. We generate art, music, literature, and other expressions of our lives and our culture, infused from our experience of disability. Most importantly, we are proud of ourselves as people with disabilities. We claim our disabilities with pride as part of our identity. We are who we are: we are people with disabilities.

(Brown, *Movie Stars and Sensuous Scars*, pp. 80-81)

# *What is Disability Culture (US Perspectives)?*

Most people who are disabled do not have parents who are disabled.

That means we are different than other cultures who learn their culture from their parents, we have to learn it from each other.

Not all people agree people with disabilities have a culture, but there are thousands of disability rights groups, books and materials that explain we do.

Naomi Ortiz, Project Director

Kids as Self Advocates: “What is Disability Culture?”

<http://www.fvkasa.org/resources/files/history-culture.html>

# *What is Disability Culture (US Perspectives)? (continued)*

Disability Pride is an integral part of movement building, and a direct challenge to systemic ableism and stigmatizing definitions of disability. It is a militant act of self-definition, a purposive valuing of that which is socially devalued, and an attempt to untangle ourselves from the complex matrix of negative beliefs, attitudes, and feelings that grow from the dominant group's assumption that there is something inherently wrong with our disabilities and identity.

Sarah Triano, *Encyclopedia of Disability* (2005)

<http://www.disabledandproud.com/power.htm>

# *What is Disability Culture (Global Perspectives)*

Culture is about the life styles of population groups, whether large or small, national, or local, or even international. It cannot be imposed on us by leading disabled individuals from the top down, any more than it could, or can, be imposed upon us by occupational therapists, art therapists, or any other therapists that are forced upon us in the future. It must arise out of the spontaneous desire of disabled people to share our feelings, experiences and desires, our loves and hates, our pleasures as well as our sufferings, amongst ourselves. In other words, we have to make the choice that we want to identify ourselves as disabled people.

Vic Finkelstein, DAIL (Disability Arts in London)

<http://www.independentliving.org/docs3/finkelstein87a.html>

# *What is Disability Culture* *(Global Perspectives-continued)*

Osamu Nagase, Professor, Graduate School of Economics,  
University of Tokyo, translates:

Asaka, a disabled activist in Japan, who had been exposed to Aoi Shiba, responds; "My disability is my identity" and "I, not only myself I think, don't really care whether I have a disability or not, in my next life, if there is no social disadvantage and if there is no discrimination".

# *What is Disability Culture* *(Global Perspectives-continued)*

Heng-hao Chang, who wrote his dissertation about the disability rights movement in Taiwan, asserts in a later article:

To a large extent, people do not realize that disability is everywhere. I have become more aware of the veil of disability around myself in the process of taking disability studies seminars and doing research on the disability rights movement in Taiwan. The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of how society defines the “normal” and treats the “different.” (Chang, 2007, p. 10)

“Disability Is My Culture”

Rachel Scoggins  
Tucson, AZ

# *Is Disability Culture Diverse?*

Examples of Diverse Videos:

Axis Dance Company: Waypoint:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FK2WEAkpfn&feature=channel>

Josh Blue: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMSrpZi\\_6WM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMSrpZi_6WM)

Jesper Odelberg/Boys on Wheels:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wg1NfoBxzHo>

AccessSurf Hawaii (October 2007):

[http://www.freedomhi.com/video/video\\_access\\_surf.html](http://www.freedomhi.com/video/video_access_surf.html)

# Identifying Disability Culture

When entering “disability culture”

| Google |                | Yahoo   |
|--------|----------------|---------|
| 43,700 | April 9, 2008  | 280,000 |
| 59,400 | June 23, 2008  | 347,000 |
| 64,600 | Sept. 5, 2008  | 429,000 |
| 54,100 | Oct. 29, 2008  | 286,000 |
| 49,300 | March 21, 2009 | 384,000 |

# Using Disability Culture

How might knowing about or having examples of disability culture be useful?

1. Explain why people with disabilities think our culture is important.
2. Use examples to demonstrate disability rights, history, talents and resources.

# Assistive Technology Boogie by Jeff Moyer

[http://www.inclusive.com/AT\\_boogie/at30.swf](http://www.inclusive.com/AT_boogie/at30.swf)

# Future Research Directions

- \*Further identify and publicize examples of disability culture in non-English speaking countries.
- \* Research how distinctions between various languages/dialects influence disability culture in diverse geographical areas.
- \*Investigate if disability culture does, or should, advance disability rights and advocacy issues.
- \*Describe how disability culture is communicated from one person, or one group, to another?

# References

- Brown, S. E. (2003). *Movie stars and sensuous scars: Essays on the journey from disability shame to disability pride*. New York: People with Disabilities Press.
- Brown, S. E. (1994). "Tell your story." *Pain, plain and fancy rappings—Poetry from the disability culture*. Las Cruces, NM: Institute on Disability Culture. Available at:[http://web.mac.com/disculture/SiteExamples\\_of\\_our\\_Disability\\_Culture.html](http://web.mac.com/disculture/SiteExamples_of_our_Disability_Culture.html)
- Chang, H. (2007). Seeing through the veil: Auto-ethnographic reflections on disabilities. *The Review of Disability Studies: An International Journal*, 2 (4), 10.
- Field, J. (1994). "The Fishing is Free." Available from Jane at 18 Concorde Place, Apt. 517 Toronto, Ontario M3C 3T9 Canada email: [jane.and.hil@sympatico.ca](mailto:jane.and.hil@sympatico.ca)  
CD's are US \$15, including postage.
- Finkelstein, V. (1992). Disabled people and our culture Development. *DAIL (Disability Art in London) magazine Anthology: The first five years*. London: DAIL Magazine, 3-6.
- Lennon, J. and McCartney, P. (1967). "Magical Mystery Tour." Available at many online music site.
- Moyer, J. Music from the Heart. <http://www.jeffmoyer.com>
- Nagase, O. (Dec. 1995). Difference, equality and disabled people: Disability rights and disability culture. Partial fulfillment of MA in Politics of Alternative Development Strategies at the Institute of Social Studies, the Hague, the Netherlands, quotes on pp. 80, 94.
- Triano, S. (2006). Disability Pride. *Encyclopedia of disability*. Ed. Gary Albrecht. Vol. 1. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 476-77.

# More on Disability Culture

Institute on Disability Culture:

<http://web.mac.com/disculture>

Steve Brown: [sebrown@hawaii.edu](mailto:sebrown@hawaii.edu)