

JALT Conference, Shizuoka 2018 Feminist Disability Poetics in EFL

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This paper is based on two presentations I gave at the 2018 national JALT conference in Shizuoka in November, 2018. I would like to express my thanks to the conference organizers and the persons who attended my presentations and shared ideas with me.

Six poems

In my session “Feminist Disability Poetics and the EFL Classroom,” I read aloud six poems, inviting the audience to comment, and to give their input regarding how to use the poems with students. The first poem was by Emily Dickinson. It can be found online (for example at https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Pain_—_has_an_Element_of_Blank_—)

Pain — has an Element of Blank —
It cannot recollect
When it begun — or if there were
A time when it was not —

It has no Future — but itself —
Its Infinite realms contain
Its Past — enlightened to perceive
New Periods — of Pain.

Was Dickinson referring to pain of the body or mind? So many of her other poems depict psychic pain, crises of consciousness. In this poem pain appears to be endless. This is a reality for many chronic pain sufferers who may be people with “invisible” or “sometimes visible” disabilities. Students could discuss times they experienced physical or psychic pain or both and how it made them feel. If they have only experienced fleeting pain they might imagine experiencing it all the time or day in and day out. They could also write their own poems about pain.

“Ornithology” by American poet Jennifer Bartlett, who has cerebral palsy (Barlett, 2007, p. 29) begins:

Being disabled is not what you think
Limitation exists only within the context of others
as the only language the body knows
is that which it tells itself.
Movement appears painful from a distance
when rather it is just the body reiterating itself.

Her poem suggests that the reality of living with a disability may be different from the image of living with a disability. This theme could be a discussion, research or writing theme for students.

Ona Gritz is also an American poet with cerebral palsy. Her poem “We are Everywhere” ends:

Right now, a woman with auburn hair
and a gypsy skirt waits for the light
in a motorized chair. The walk sign
flashes green and, magnetized, I follow,
willing her to notice I’m kin (n.p.)

In the earlier part of the poem (omitted for copyright reasons) the speaker notes other people on the street with visible disabilities. The last line suggests the speaker feels a kinship with others who have disabilities. This poem may invite the reader to think about the notions of kinship and identity and how they might function for people with disabilities in their own communities as well as for themselves.

Although titled “We are Everywhere” persons with visible disabilities are not to be found everywhere in Japan. Due to employment discrimination for example, persons with visible disabilities tend to be absent from workplaces. One idea is for students to visualize a place such as inside a supermarket and insert the missing persons with disabilities into the scene such as a woman in a wheelchair operating the cash register or a boy with Down syndrome stocking the shelves. Another place could be inside a classroom where persons with disabilities are mainstreamed into the class versus the current system of mostly segregated schools. How would the class be different with students with disabilities added?

In Gritz’s poem “No” the speaker is a new mother trying to nurse her infant. She has trouble holding the infant and tries to use pillows as a prop. A nurse appears to be disrespectful in her dismissiveness of the new mother's perceptions of what her baby needs. “One” in the line immediately below refers to “nurses”:

When a new one came, I shyly
explained the pillows, the palsy.
“No,” she said coolly and I stared.
“No. That baby needs sleep not milk.”
I tried again: “he’s hungry.”
Shaking her head, she left our room.
I attempted the football hold
The cradle. Tried setting up pillows
then sitting between them. They fell.
Keeping you in my arms, I paced, I sang.
We cried in unison, both of us
so helpless, so desperately new. (n.p.)

This poem invites empathy with the mother struggling in her first attempts to be a caretaker for her newborn. Although she has a disability, we can relate to her as an “ordinary” mother in other respects, just as we should, for example regarding the helplessness she feels in a new situation which may be the same reaction a non-disabled mother might have. Note that she feels “shy” about referring to her disability. Earlier in the poem the speaker says: “My hands / couldn’t take you to the right place. / *Cerebral palsy* I mumbled, apology, / explanation.” The fact that she feels shy, not confident enough to speak up clearly (she mumbles), and apologetic about having cerebral palsy shows the social power people with able bodies seem to have relative to people with disabilities; perhaps this poem also depicts the relative power of the medical establishment (a power imbalance between the nurses and the “patient”; see Wendell, 1996, chapter five, for a discussion of this theme). The meaning of the title and elements of the story told could be usefully discussed by students.

“The Shaking” is a beautiful villanelle by poet Laurie Clements Lambeth who has MS. It ends:

Many times I've trembled when you're making
love to me, my round shoulders open, bare
but never have I broken into such shaking,

when my body shows us our lives breaking
apart. Still, you hold me. Your kind is rare,
who know (or pretend) dreams seem worse upon waking.

Surprising you stayed; here you are, forsaking
quiet nights for me. Will you be there

when it worsens, my gait palsied with shaking?
Who could be strong enough to hold back its waking? (n.p.)

For me this is a powerful poem inviting the reader to be empathic with her situation, especially her concerns about the effects her illness may have on her relationship with her partner.

Poet Sheila Black writes in an essay: “As a person with a visible disability, I have often felt intruded upon, defined and even circumscribed by the gaze of others” (in Black et al., 2011, Kindle version, n.p.). Her poem in the same book titled “What You Mourn” ends:

Crippled they called us when I was young
later the word was *disabled* and then *differently*
abled,
but those were all names given by outsiders,
none of whom could imagine
that the crooked body they spoke of,
the body, which made walking difficult
and running practically impossible,
except as a kind of dance, a sideways looping
like someone about to fall
headlong down and hug the earth, that body
they tried so hard to fix, straighten, was simply
mine,
and I loved it as you love your own country,
the familiar lay of the land, the unkempt trees,
the smell of mowed grass, down to the
nameless
flowers at your feet — clover, asphodel,
and the blue flies that buzz over them. (n.p.)

There are many possible entryways into this poem, including a discussion of the speaker’s love for her body despite or because of its imperfections, and the changing language usage surrounding disability.

Nine items for discussion

In a presentation titled “Teaching About Disability” I raised nine items for discussion or consideration for teachers introducing disability as a topic in their classes. These are:

1. People with disabilities face employment discrimination and other forms of discrimination and prejudice.

Jennifer Barlett (2014) wrote:

To be crippled means to be institutionalized, infantilized, unemployed, outcast, feared, marginalized, fetishized, desexualized, stared at, excluded, silenced, aborted, sterilized, stuck, discounted, teased, voiceless, disrespected, raped, isolated, undereducated, made into a metaphor or an example. To be crippled means to be referred to as retard, cute, helpless, lame, bound, stupid, drunk, idiot, a burden on society, in/valid. To be crippled means to be discounted as a commodity or regarded as mere commodity (p. 10).

2. Persons with disabilities are far more likely to be sexually assaulted as compared with the able-bodied (e.g. in USA persons with disabilities were said to be seven times more likely to be assaulted on a 2018 PBS news broadcast, see also Shapiro, 2018).

3. People with disabilities are plagued by stereotypes such as the superhero (Helen Keller, Stephen Hawking) or the opposite (a useless, assumed sad and ill, lonely person).

4. Relevant language use has changed over time. These expressions have all been used: differently abled, physically/mentally challenged; disabled, person with a disability, crippled, handicapped, “the” disabled. Currently in the US, person with a disability, or person with ___ (name of disability, such as “person with cerebral palsy”), or disabled person seem to be the most widely used by persons with disabilities. When in doubt one could ask a person what she or he prefers.

5. Disabilities can be visible, invisible, or a bit of both (e.g., persons who have conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis or fibromyalgia may have good and bad days or periods throughout the day, weeks or months where pain fluctuates, making the disability also fluctuate).

6. Physical pain is rarely depicted in literature (compared to psychic pain such as in Hamlet, etc.)

7. Some think that, in English, there is not adequate language to describe pain. Is this true in Japanese as well? I would like to get a reaction from a native speaker of Japanese. I myself feel the difficulty in both languages. For example, see Spero, 2017.

8. Persons with disabilities are absent from many English language books, mass media reports, films, etc. If appearing at all, it may often be a before/after story about achievement following an accident versus a person disabled from birth. Rather than hiring actors with disabilities, often an able bodied actor plays a person with a disability in Hollywood films. An exception is NHK which regularly features persons with disabilities in Japanese language broadcasts.

9. Intersectionality (coined by Kimberle Crenshaw; see for example <https://www.law.columbia.edu/pt-br/news/2017/06/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality>), retrieved November 27, 2018): Problems related to disability may be seen as carrying over from other problems related to gender, class, status, racial or ethnic background and other identities and circumstances. For example female rather than male persons with disabilities are more likely to be sexually assaulted; poor persons with disabilities or persons with disabilities who are also minorities have various overlapping and interweaving difficulties.

Resources

Four of the poems above come from the anthology *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability* (Black et al., 2011, Kindle version) which contains dozens of poems plus accompanying essays by poets with disabilities. Many of the poems and essays are within the reach of an intermediate level student in Japan if skillfully used, by which I mean, for example, vocabulary and cultural issues would be addressed and students would be allowed to work in groups to discuss them. The Dickinson poem is online; the other books mentioned are written by poet Jennifer Bartlett. Another book of interest may be Kamata, 2008 (see references). This anthology is not restricted to poetry but it includes poems. However note that all the works are by caretakers of persons with disabilities versus by persons with disabilities themselves.

Persons with disabilities are not well represented in EFL textbooks. I am only aware of two textbooks. In Pearson's *Impact Issues 1*, in a chapter titled "Close your eyes and see," a blind man is disrespected by a waiter in a restaurant (see R. R. Day et al., 2011). In Uchida and Iwabuchi (2007) there are two chapters depicting persons with disabilities. One chapter depicts a couple, one of whom is a well known Tokyo University professor with a disability. It depicts the couple as an ordinary arguing couple with just one difference being one has a disability. My students liked this chapter. The other chapter seems to me to fall a little bit into the superhero stereotype and was less liked by me and my students; for example it seems to make it sound remarkable rather than ordinary that a person with a disability would also be talkative, cheerful and optimistic.

As far as resources for the teacher (academic books), I mention above Wendell, 1996, which is my favorite book on feminist disability issues. Also of interest may be Helten, 1996. Both are written by persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

I have explored the usefulness of some poems by women who have disabilities or in the case of Dickinson which have a relation to disability (discussion of Dickinson's health is beyond the scope of this article, but if interested see for example <https://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/health>, retrieved November 30, 2018). Black et al. (2011) also includes work by gay and straight men; the anthology is not merely female poets although many women are included.

I think of the feminist classroom as one where all differences are respected, and where there is better representation of the work of women and minorities than in other classrooms and where thus the voices of women and minorities can be heard.

I believe that feminist disability poetics has a useful role to play in an EFL classroom for the teacher who wishes to introduce poetry by disabled women.

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