“In partnership with the Ryerson community, the Access Centre facilitates and supports accessibility and inclusion through education and academic accommodation for the diverse mix of students with disabilities in order for each to fully participate in his/her academic experience at Ryerson.” (Ryerson University, 2013).

As I read through the testimonials of students, I couldn’t help but wish that I could add mine:

Set up for failure. Locked out. Dis-abled – not because of my disability, rather, because of how others perceive disabilities.

References


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Crippling Narrative: Story Telling as Activism

Kim Collins

Stories are powerful. Thomas King, a Native American storyteller, states that “stories are all we are” (King, 2003, 32). It is through navigating these narratives and making our own that we weave our way through the world. This navigation can be treacherous. We see others, and others see us, through the interpretation and understanding of our stories. Once a story is told we lose the power to decide how it is interpreted or used by others. In spite of the perils that are a part of sharing narratives they can be an effective tool for activists. Some stories are easier to share than others. Part of the trick of effective storytelling is finding a place; a community which invites you to share difficult narratives. The socially accepted master narrative invites personal narratives which relate to the mythic norm of the nondisabled, white, heterosexual cisgendered male. This leaves many stories untold. It is into this vacuum that crip communities open a space for difficult stories which can neither be neatly packaged in terms of normalcy or within the rigid framework of the social model of disability. It is the fluid nature of crip communities that create a safe space for people to tell their narratives; narratives which may be difficult for the teller and the listener. This use of storytelling is an effective form of activism as it can be used to express the everyday lived experience of ableism/disablism.

Bill Moyer, in his conversation with Joseph Campbell states that, “we tell stories to try to come to terms with the world, to harmonize our lives with reality” (Campbell, J., 1991, 17).

While this may describe a generality it does not go far enough in addressing the subjective nature of reality. It is in this way that crip communities fill the gap by presenting narratives which harmonize reality for those who disrupt the mythic norm. This subtle disruption of the norm by narratives forged in crip communities, is an effective tool for activists. Being exposed to a persons lived experience of ableism/disablism makes is real; it creates a non-confrontation experience for the listener.
Mia Mingus states that, “ableism cuts across all our movements because ableism dictates how bodies should function against the mythic norm—an able-bodied standard of white supremacy, heterosexism, sexism, economic exploitation, moral/religious beliefs, age and ability” (Mingus, 2011). Mingus’ statement demonstrates how ableism/disablism and the idea of the mythic norm affect us all. While ableism is the foundation for all oppression, it is through personal narrative and storytelling that ableism can be evidenced most clearly. There is no one way to be disabled and there is no one way in which one experiences ableism/disablism. These experiences change with age, socio-economic status, race, sexuality, family status and a host of other social factors. While society at large may be labouring under the oppressive mythic norm, the merging of smaller communities opposed to this ideal have opened space for untold stories. Communities are a place where we are connected through shared understandings, where “we can count on each other’s goodwill” (Bauman, 2001, 2).

Crip communities,

*disrupt the assumption that we can ‘know unquestionably’, who our communal members are and therefore who they are not. We assume that communities are bound together by members who share the same or similar identities. However, the unpredictability and ever-shifting character of disability requires us to consider its identity also unstable*” (Chandler, 2012, 5).

This instability in membership creates space for stories which include aspects of disability which may not necessarily be in line with the social model of disability or the disability rights movement. This includes narratives of tragedy or shame, or narratives which intersect with race or sexuality. These narratives may be difficult to tell and may have been excluded from the more mainstream disability rights movements. This may be especially true for people with intersecting identities who do not necessarily identify as disabled. In this way crip communities become a productive space for people to relate their complete and unabridged lived experience rather than focusing on only one aspect of their identity.

So how does telling a personal narrative become a form of political activism? June Jordan states that, “to tell the truth is to become beautiful; to begin to love yourself, value yourself. And that is political in its most profound way” (Mingus, 2011). This statement can be seen in the work of Pat Capponi. Her peer group *Voices* empowers survivors of the psychiatric system to tell their stories and use their lived experience as a method of activism when dealing with service providers (Choudry, Hanley & Shragge, 2012, 7). Rather than perceiving their experience of mental health and ableism/sanism as only negative, they use their narratives transformatively; both for their communities and for themselves. In this way storytelling allows for people to witness the construction of a personal map of growth which can provide insight to others (Meekosha, 2002, 69). Thereby, strengthening crip communities and creating fertile ground for others to come to their own understanding of activism and pride.

According to Catherine Frazee it is this type of community engagement which transforms shame to pride. “Coming to pride is a delicate alchemy that can only take root in the fertile ground of community. It is our connection to each other that transforms stigma to grace, personal burden to collective struggle, shame to honour” (Frazee, 2003). This is not to say that all narratives coming from members of crip communities display pride, but rather it demonstrates the communal space needed to foster pride in personal narratives.

This is the work of Project ReVision. The project supports people to create visual stories relating their experience of difference. These narratives are then shared with medical health providers in order to exchange knowledge. The director of the project, Carla Rice said that she never expected to tell the story she did; it was the safe space of that community which welcomed her to tell her difficult narrative (Personal communication, July 19, 2012). The narratives do not need to be shared. The act of telling ones own story itself is a form of activism.

Other forms of activism can take a hard line. Protests, megaphones; situations presented in terms of conflict and struggle. More creative methods of activism, like storytelling and blogging tend to be discounted by media. A Youth Activist Forum found that many young disabled activists were using creative Do-it-Yourself forms of activism (Kelly, C. & Carson, E., 10). This was all but ignored by mainstream media and academic groups. These forms of activism bring to light what other, more conflict oriented forms, can exclude: the lived experience of ableism/disablism within a constellation of intersecting identities. It may seem that activism is not taking place if it is not loudly proclaiming itself. However, the power of narrative as a form of activism is that it does not need to be in your face to be effective.
So it is important to recognize how stories are being used. These can be both positive and negative. For example, stories of suffering could be usurped by large service providers to support the medicalization of disability. Or a story involving suffering could be used to change the perspectives of health care providers as in the case of Project ReVision.

At a parent activist panel one mother told her story. From one point of view she was dealing with post-partum depression, she was a bad mother, a bad wife and needed medical help. From another perspective she was overworked, overwhelmed, over tired and under supported (Public Lecture, July 16, 2012). These two drastically different presentations of her narrative show just how easy it can be to twist a story. How one small fact, like her previous experience with mental health can be understood in different ways. How would this story have changed if she were also racialized, a single parent, queer? Even now, her story is being retold by me. I would like to believe that she would approve of my retelling. But her story has been loosed, it is now mine and yours and “years from now we cannot say that we would have lived our lives differently if we had heard it” (King, 2003, 167).

Over the years activists have brought about great change in North America. Disability rights legislation like the ADA and the AODA have been important developments. But there is still more to be done. While changing legislation to ensure equality is important, it is vital to change attitudes as well. This is not accomplished through legislation. This is the function of art. So in spite of some of the potential negative ramifications of storytelling it is too powerful of a tool to be ignored by activists. By relating feelings, emotions and personal experiences it makes ableism real. It takes theories, ramp designs, legislation and makes it personal. We can talk about the social model of disability through megaphones till we are blue in the face and while we may reach some; a story gently told will stay with someone. A personal narrative will make someone stop and think the next time they say that something is ‘retarded’ or enter a building that is not accessible.

Like with the work of Pat Capponi we should use our stories transformatively. To view our stories as a form of activism. We do not always need to engage in conflict to spread our message; to change minds. We need to engage in deliciously subversive methods of activism that take those who intentional or unintentional hold ableist views by surprise. This is the work of crip
communities: to support people to tell their narratives no matter how difficult they are to tell, how much they differ from the social model, to expose the lived experience of ableism/disablism within a constellation of intersecting identities.

Bibliography


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