Superhero Comic Books as Frameworks of Inclusivity and Advocacy for Youth With Disabilities[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article explores cross-cultural collaborations between Syrian and American youth with disabilities interested in promoting social change by creating comic books to advocate for human rights of people with disabilities. During participatory human rights education and storyboard activities, youth drew from personal experiences with disability to create comic book characters that raise public awareness about disability issues. These characters and storylines aimed to promote inclusion, empowerment, and the readers' respect for diversity. The authors discuss issues of disability and activism across cultures that emerged from our visual art and human rights curriculum framework. This curriculum and resulting comic book are proposed as tools to promote disability awareness, increase personal empowerment, and raise consciousness around social activism and cultural understanding. From the perspectives of professors of special education and art education, we investigate the transformative aspects of advocacy, representation, and expression for youth cultivated within the comic book creation.

Introduction

During August of 2010, the Open Hands Initiative along with the Victor Pineda Foundation and Liquid Comics organized a three-day Youth Ability Summit in Damascus, Syria. This cross-cultural event generated collaborations between Syrian and American youth with the goal of promoting social change through creating comic books pertaining to the human rights of people with disabilities. Using storyboard and discussion activities, youth created heroes and villains representing issues related to disability awareness. This artistic approach stemmed from an ethos of inclusion and social participation in problem solving. In this article, we explore disability and advocacy across cultures within collaborative experiences of representing comic book superheroes with disabilities. Our participatory curriculum of storyboard and discussion is introduced as a framework for promoting disability awareness, social activism, personal empowerment, and cultural understanding.

Theoretical Context

According to the World Report on Disability, over one billion people or 15% of the world's total population have some form of disability. Persons with disabilities are among the most marginalized and discriminated against populations, placing them at risk for poorer health, lower educational achievements, and higher rates of poverty than persons without disabilities (World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011). In 2008, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD] was ratified to protect and promote the rights and dignities of persons with disabilities. The UNCRPD provides a new model for understanding disability as an interaction between a person's abilities and various societal barriers. This perspective shifts the focus of disability advocacy from addressing disability within the individual to emphasizing interactions with obstacles that a person with disabilities may encounter (which hinder individual potential to fully realize human rights).

Often people with disabilities encounter negative attitudes (both intentional and unconscious) that are held by members of society. Such obstacles can lead to negative self-esteem and reduced community participation of persons with disabilities (World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011). Finger (2005) notes there are also particular tropes and stereotypes of disability narratives pertaining to injury or trauma, often with a transformative arc lived out by a "spunky cripple, the wounded hero, the tragic but brave overcomer"

(p. 613). Individuals often interact with people with disabilities based on their stereotypes of actions, representations, and discourses that precede or preclude the person with a disability.

Through the creation of awareness-raising tools such as the Youth Ability Summit curriculum, youth gain opportunities to influence their "representation" and develop discourses to help bring more nuance and authenticity to interpretations of disability. Promoting disability awareness is an important aspect of the UNCRPD (Article 8) and contemporary youth with disabilities have indicated a distinctly different approach to raising awareness than their predecessors. Betsy Valnes (2011), an active member of the youth disability rights movement, examined gaps between the first wave of disability activism with today: "Leaders of the disability rights movement seem to want to stay in one wave. But the needs of people with disabilities have changed, and if we want to remain relevant, our vision and understanding of change must evolve" (p. 55). Valnes stressed that while it is important to learn about disability history and culture, the methods of the past may not solve the problems of the future. To achieve "rights that make us equal world citizens with equal responsibilities," young disability leaders employ "diverse methods by which [they] reach this goal" (p. 55). One approach includes using the arts to combat common stereotypes, discrimination, marginalization, and stigma association with persons with disabilities (Eisenhauer, 2007). The Summit invited youth to consider and revise common stereotypes about disability through art.

To probe social complexities within aesthetics and disability, the comic book medium was chosen for its accessible, youth-oriented appeal. Hewitt (2006) has observed a complex relationship between disability and so-called super powers, wherein exceptionality and disability are deeply linked (as in many characters from X-Men comics). Batgirl (Barbara Gordon) is an intriguing female characterization of superpower, for her mythology includes an injury that transforms her from an able-bodied super heroine into a person with paraplegia. Instead of returning to her life, Gordon chooses to reinvent herself

as a martial artist and computer expert in her second superheorine identity, Oracle. Visually, in the comic book pages depicting Oracle and her wheelchair, there is much visual emphasis on the physical disability and chair rather than the actions, strengths, and abilities of the character. Within our project, we wanted to raise some of these issues of physical disability, shifts in identity, and representation of the body and assistive devices within the experiences of youth with disabilities represented through the Silver Scorpion character.

Derby (2011) notes that disability studies examining first-hand perspectives of students with disabilities and others is sorely needed in art education. While there is a history of disability representation in the genre of superheroes that is well founded, the authors to date have not been representatives of the disability community and at times have served to perpetuate common myths and stereotypes. A need exists for new comic book characters that are representative of the views and experiences of those with disabilities themselves. Just as the comic book medium has historically addressed some issues of disability from an adult perspective (usually mobility impairment), we also found that international comic books have included some Middle Eastern superheroes (e.g. Archer of Arabia, Osiris, Sinbad). However, we hoped to focus upon youth representations of these particular disability and geographical communities from within.

Youth-friendly, user-generated content on Facebook, YouTube, and other spaces of youth culture also provide powerful pedagogical spaces for personalized representations of disabilities. The comic book format provided fluid, accessible frameworks that extended from conversations during the Summit to subsequent Facebook exchanges. The finished comic is also freely available digitally through Facebook, Twitter, and Scribd. Indeed, comic books and graphic novel explorations can also target a wide readership, employing modalities of traditional and visual literacy that are meaningful for diverse learners and/or those with disabilities. The unique narrative formatting in comics has also been observed to improve traditional and visual literacy among students with dyslexia (Weida, 2011).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to chronicle experiences of 23 youth with disabilities in collaboratively creating a comic book superhero, and to explore the following questions:

> How does the experience of being a change agent versus passive recipient during the Youth Ability Summit impact youth with disabilities?

> How does the collaborative process/experience of creating a superhero with disabilities enable youth with disabilities to a) investigate disability issues and b) develop skills to promote disability awareness?

Methodology

Due to the social nature of our research questions, we drew upon the theoretical research orientation of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) to gain an understanding of experiences of the youth during the Summit. Symbolic Interactionism frameworks encourage researchers to use qualitative methods such as participant observations, interviews, and open-ended surveys to study aspects of social interaction. We examined images, videos, and transcripts of activities during the Summit, as well as evaluations and social media from the release of the comic in order to probe youth experiences of self and disability expressed through discussion, writings, and artistic products. Over the course of the Summit, sources of information collected from the participants also included participants' drawings and notes. Three facilitators, one an author of this paper, and two research assistants implemented the Summit curriculum, recorded field observations, distributed and collected daily evaluations, and conducted video interviews in Syria.

Youth Ability Summit Background

The Summit was part of the inaugural launch of The Open Hands Initiative, a non-profit organization dedicated to improving interpersonal understanding and international friendship through dialogue and mutual respect. The Summit brought together American and Syrian youth disability advocates to share experiences, ideas, and cultures, culminating in a creative product aimed to promote the rights of youth with disabilities. The Open Hands Initiative chose to focus on generating communication between American and Syrian citizens, as a need currently exists for communication and cross-cultural relationships that can withstand political differences. As Desai (2005) suggests, "multicultural curriculum should provide a space for students to explore the ways events in their local communities are connected to the global and their role in this local/global relationship that is always contingent, fluid, ambiguous, and contradictory" (p. 306). We posit that disability may be viewed as a cultural grouping that can transcend some geographic, political, and cultural differences, particularly as a topic of shared experience providing a connective opportunity to build relationships based on common ground. At the same time, this Summit was structured to encourage youth to explore differences and shift perspectives around issues of Syrian and American culture from pre-judgments to more informed understandings.

During the Summit, the youth worked as creative consultants together with comic book and disability experts on the creation of a publishing platform new to them—a comic book—for promoting the understanding and acceptance of people with disabilities. The Summit discussions and presentations served as springboards for Liquid Comics (one of three facilitators) to develop the Silver Scorpion characters and storyline. The activities explored the contexts of disability, cultures (American and Syrian), and shared social values to be addressed in the superhero comic living with and representing these issues. The overlapping experiences youth identified as part of living with disabilities in Syria and in the United States (bullying, discrimination, and self-advocacy) provided context for the comic storyline. In addition, the attributes of superheroes were generated from youths' sketches, brainstorms, and group presentations (Figure 1). For the comic book's origin story, students also drew upon the myth of Zenobia's Crown[3] (Winsbury, 2010), a story significant in Syrian culture.

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[3] Queen Zenobia of Palmyra in Syria was a complex figure in classical antiquity,

Figure 1. Summit participants discuss rights of persons with disabilities at the Open Hands Initiative Youth Ability Summit in Damascus, Syria in August 2010.

Participants

American participants were contacted through a call for participation and selected through a rubric score that evaluated disability advocacy experience, extracurricular activities, and creativity within their overall application. Due to difficulties contacting young people with disabilities in Syria, selection processes were aided by collaborations with three disability organizations. These organizations were sent information about the Summit and asked to nominate five youth participants from their organizations.

heroine to Roman authors and to Chaucer, Gibbon, and the Neoclassical painters and sculptors of the nineteenth century. In her desperate search for the survival of her city, Zenobia fell foul of the Roman Emperor Aurelian. The image of her paraded in golden chains in Aurelian's triumphal procession at Rome has been transformed in modern times into a symbol of women's struggle for emancipation. Zenobia is subject of ancient and modern legends as a beautiful, intellectual Arab queen of the desert. Her crown serves to symbolize strength and intelligence (Winsbury, 2010).

Participants ranged in age from 15 to 24 years old with a mean age of 18 years. Of the 23 participants, 15 were female and 8 were male. Participants represented various types of disabilities, with 36% (8) indicating physical disabilities, 36% (8) indicating sensory disabilities, 23% (5) indicating intellectual disabilities, and 5% (1) indicating multiple disabilities. Types of disability included B/blindness, D/deafness,[4] autism spectrum disorders, Down syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, brain injuries, intellectual disabilities, and physical disabilities. In terms of creative sensibilities, it was observed that two participants had an affinity for drawing and one was an avid comic book reader.

The Setting

The Summit took place in a hotel conference room equipped with audiovisual technology (laptop computer, projector and screen, microphones), artistic materials (drawing paper, markers, colored pencils, tape), and accommodation supports (translators, sign language interpreters, and e-copies of materials) to ensure the events were accessible to all.

The Summit was led by interdisciplinary facilitators, one an author of this article, who were all experienced in leading participatory workshops. Two of the facilitators were experts in disability rights, youth, and advocacy strategies (one facilitator was a person with a disability). The third facilitator was the founder of an international comic book company aimed at addressing social issues. All three facilitators had higher education teaching experience. The second author of our article served as a consulting collaborator in developing additional Silver Scorpion curricula in the United States, bringing experience teaching visual art in K-12 and special education courses in art teacher training. Throughout the processes of organizing, facilitating and analyzing the Summit, the sharing of expertise in the study of pedagogy, disability studies, and visual art was integral in

[4] These conventions reflect debates within the disability community. The big D in Deafness relates to people who feel not only medically deaf but culturally deaf from society. Others use deafness (lowercase) as a medical indication of no hearing of hearing loss. There is a similar rationale for B/blindness.

The Youth Ability Summit Curriculum

The facilitators used a participatory approach of designing curriculum with ice-breaking activities, large group instruction, small group activities, and youth presentations. The Youth Ability Summit curriculum employed participatory human rights education to promote the rights of persons with disabilities as defined by the UNCRPD (2008). Activities were adapted from UNICEF's *It's About Ability Learning Guide* (Karr, 2009) to introduce the human rights approach to disability, to provide participants an understanding of human rights, and to introduce tools for becoming empowered social change agents. In addition, the curriculum included the "how to" of creating a superhero. Comic topics included: Creating a Superhero, Creating a Super-Villain, Debating Magneto: Separatism versus Inclusion, and Storyboarding Fun.

Summit Schedule

The sessions took place over three days with approximately 6-7 hours of programming. Following daily workshops, participants were invited on cultural tours of Damascus and dinner outings in the Syrian community. These evening activities were not merely tourism, but rather developed participant camaraderie. In addition, the visible presence of people with disabilities—not as isolated others, but as unique and social individuals— raised awareness about disability within the Syrian community of Damascus. During outings, community members who had a variety of questions about disability often approached participants with interest and curiosity. Rather than being in the roles of minority outsiders, the youth with disabilities represented their own community as a group. This inversion of minority status seemed to create space for some respectful discussions about disability and even shifts in consciousness within the local community. Although these experiences were limited in scope and depth, we believed that they could be foundational in more meaningful conversations across cultures over time.

Throughout the Summit, participants reported that they were able to learn more about each other's disabilities and cultures through the artistic processes of creating a superhero. Campana (2011) advocates such integration of "artmaking and education as vehicles for social justice . . . and, in some cases, for social and political activism [so that] the boundaries between art, education, and activism fade" (p. 278). For the youth with disabilities, these informal community exchanges were part of the process of community awareness and activist development. We believe that such a range of practices of immersion and community-building can be important for those with disabilities and those without disabilities to cultivate understanding and empathy across cultures.

Launch of the Silver Scorpion

The result of the joint efforts of the youth and adult facilitators was a new comic series featuring a Syrian superhero with a disability, the Silver Scorpion. Aiming to promote awareness and acceptance of persons with disabilities, as well as an appreciation for cross-cultural understanding, the first issue of the Silver Scorpion Comic Series (Figure 2) premiered in February 2011 at the Dar al-Assad Opera House in Damascus, Syria (Figure 3) and in San Diego, United States, in July 2011 at the Comic-Con International Conference. Youth continued to develop advocacy skills by speaking publically during various launch events and media appearances.

Figure 2. Silver Scorpion Comic Book Cover Image.
Figure 3. Silver Scorpion Launch at Dar al-Assad Opera House in Damascus, Syria.

Participant Reflections and Analyses

> It is not for me alone but for all disabled people because [the comic] gives the ability to defend and claim rights . . . and means of self-confidence and psychological support, and I hope that all the disabled . . . learn about these rights now and that we learn to demand them. – Participant

Multiple sources of data reflecting the nature of communal artistic expression and activism were analyzed to develop a detailed description and thematic interpretation (Creswell, 1998) of participation in the Summit, and to document lessons learned and implications, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Themes derived from Summit data include: 1) hero transformation, 2) valuing youth presence and participation, 3) tangible tools for activism through art, 4) reflections and realization of rights, and 5) coalitional change: the power of a group. Each of these themes will be explored below.

The Hero Transformation – Becoming Heroes

> I can become a hero. I learned that one must start from scratch and [can] reach . . .success. – Participant

Theorists like Campana (2011) prioritize community-based art education that is "community-inspired and driven," "participatory in nature," and rich in "dialogue and collaborative inquiry" (p. 280). Similarly, Silver Scorpion was rooted in a community of peers, and set in familiar Syrian cultural narratives and contexts proposed by the participating youth. Over the three days of the Summit and activities that followed, we observed participants' optimism about their futures and about the future of disability rights. While the facilitators had prepared many "icebreaking" activities to introduce the Syrian and American participants, they proved unnecessary: the participants broke into small and geographically diverse groups and began to communicate through youth translators, rough joined languages, sign language, gestures, and drawings. The camaraderie and excitement was palpable as these groups sprang into creative activities. Participants indicated in daily evaluations that assumptions that they had about each other's cultures were often limited and limiting. One Syrian participant summarized, "you'd think that Americans did not like us, but I discovered [they are] people like us and they are simple and humble [and] did not give me the feeling that they are better than me." An American participant reflected, "I've been impressed with how much they have to say and how eloquently they say it." Although the Summit was an exchange between young people from different cultures and geographies that was limited by its short timeframe within Damascus, we observed that the initial Summit experience grew into additional conversations and collaborations online via Facebook and email.

In addition, the group dynamics that evolved over several participatory activities during the Summit provided opportunities for participants to, in their words, feel "stronger" and "prepared for the task of making a difference in the world." They indicated "more self-confidence" not only in their willingness to use their voices to raise

awareness about disability issues, but also in their "ability to defend and claim rights." Core components of this transformative process that allowed youth participants to begin to see themselves as activists and heroes is explored further in the following sections.

Valuing Youth Presence and Participation

> We will raise awareness and I feel confident that we will be understood by the entire world.   – Participant

Although people with disabilities (particularly young people) are frequently recipients of "trainings" and "special programs," this Summit took a different approach, inviting youth with disabilities to explore how artistic expression can create space for changes in the perceptions and thinking of viewers / readers of the comic book series. By approaching youth with disabilities as valued authorities, youth were not only engaged in the program, but were in fact the co-leaders of the Summit. This program sought to honor and build upon their experiences and visions constructively, through dialogue and thoughtful representation. By seeing value in youth with disabilities and in their contributions to discussion and artistic output, we can shift traditional "passive recipient" approaches to "active engagement" approaches that can be considered a more "progressive, emancipatory force at both the individual and social levels" (Eisenhauer, 2007, p. 7).

Additionally, it was noted that the process of participants sharing experiences and opinions during the creation of the comic book characters contributed to their increasing confidence as speakers and leaders. We have found that empowering, creative, and activist work can provide an opportunity for persons with disabilities to begin to shape public perceptions of disability as they develop their voices and advocacy skills. The purpose of inclusive, awareness-raising activities structured around the abilities of persons with disabilities is to promote understanding that persons with disabilities can make significant contributions to society.

In addition, the comic book format was particularly useful as a tool encouraging growth of participants. Pierson and Glaeser (2007) examined how the act of creating visually rich comics around "social stories" can combat loneliness among children with autism (p. 460). Comics become a vehicle for self-disclosure and socialization through a series of "Conversation Symbols" that teach social interaction cues such as listening, interrupting, talking, and thinking (p. 463). Birge (2010) also pointed out that comics can uniquely represent feelings, ideas, actions, and interactions, creating special spaces for empathy for those with and without autism spectrum disorders   As one of the participants in the Summit was identified as on the autism spectrum, we found considerations of communication and empathy through art-making to be of particular interest. Translating their experiences and opinions artistically also helped students to develop a greater range of activist goals and ideals through scenarios of the comic book.

Tangible Tools for Activism Through Art

> I learned that you can be an activist and an advocate by speaking to one another about issues[;] you can do it in a creative way by creating a comic book. – Participant

As the preceding quote suggests, there was an inherent seriousness of purpose in planning beyond the walls of the conference room to produce a publication towards the engagement of many others in disability rights and culture through art. Campana (2011) distinguishes between the role of advocate and activist in art education, emphasizing that activism "encompasses a variety of work toward social and political consciousness, empowerment, and change" (p. 281). While many people may approach disability activism and advocacy through more traditional routes of public lobbying or protest, the comic book model can be seen as a non-confrontational and yet meaningful advocacy model for sensitizing the general public about persons with disabilities and their ability to contribute to society. It was our sense that the Summit contributed uniquely to activist work in terms of empowerment of the participating youth.

In addition, the youth began to imagine narratives of development through which a person could encounter personal difficulties with disability, yet emerge as a strong, thoughtful promoter of peace and understanding. It was important to the participants that the superhero should not "cure" his disability, but rather reconcile his strengths and weaknesses around personal goals and values. The storylines developed reflected the first-hand perspectives of students with disabilities, an approach proposed by Derby (2011).

Reflections and Realization of Rights

> We discovered that we have no limits and we can do
> everything.- Participant

In order to develop the knowledge base and confidence to impact social change, participants explored participatory human rights education activities based upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As one example, participants were invited to inscribe what they had learned about inclusion and human rights on images of fruit that they then collaged into an enormous, colorful tree (Figure 4). While an understanding that you have the same rights as other members of society may appear obvious to adults within mainstream and/or Western society, many people on the margins of society (such as those with disabilities) have learned not to expect or demand the same rights as others. Participants discussed and represented the interconnections and branches of rights within daily life in education, employment, and political representation.

Figure 4. An American Summit participant helps a Syrian participant attach a piece of fruit to the symbolic tree as the group learns about inclusion and rights of persons with disabilities.

This process also translated into the visual and literary content of the comic book, with characters Bashir (who experiences mobility impairment and becomes the Silver Scorpion) and Tarek (who is Blind) as complex and multifaceted characters with many goals. Rather than focus upon deficiency or pathologize it, as noted by Siebers (2004) when bodily difference becomes a dominant image or symbol, youth participants chose to emphasize that disability can be a source of strength and uniqueness. Transcending what Derby (2011) examined as a sort of feared otherness of disability—for all people are "at risk" for becoming disabled from aging or accidental causes—the youth were able to provide an alternative, nuanced view of disability. Valerie Karr highlighted this stereotype during the Summit, noting the myth that all people with disabilities are assumed to be "brave" or "heroic" for succeeding in life despite having a disability. In this way, she provided youth with disabilities an opportunity to create their own representations that neither stigmatize nor overlook difference.

Coalitional Change: The Power of a Group

I have a partner in advocacy. – Participant

Working as a group, participants exchanged ideas and experiences of how "everyone is different and has something to offer." Participants combatted isolation by recognizing that "unity is strength." While creating sketches for their own superheroes (Figure 5), participants also commented upon how the process allowed them to "band together to stop [discrimination]." The facilitators observed participants developing self-confidence as speakers and leaders, particularly as topics of advocacy were discussed. The most striking example of this transformation came from a young woman who stated, "I used to fear my words to speak and hesitate, but now after three days I feel stronger." She went on to give the opening address at the unveiling of the Silver Scorpion comic series speaking about her experience of disability and advocacy in front of 1,200 members of Syrian society. We felt that group experiences during the Summit particularly contributed to "progressive, emancipatory force at both the individual and social levels" as Eisenhauer describes (2007, p. 7)

Figure 5. Summit participant displays her artwork and vision for creating a comic book

Implications

The collaborative efforts of the Summit enabled the Open Hands Initiative to meet its initial mission of promoting cross-cultural dialogue and developing relationships that transcend political differences. This was evidenced by continued communication between Syrian and American youth via Facebook and e-mail despite recent political unrest in the region. This program also has implications for future services or programs that aim to empower youth with disabilities as well as other marginalized populations. Through partnerships with young people, educators, and comic book artists, documentation and extension of the project itself was possible around the comic book, which became an authentic work of activist art. Participation in Summit activities provided empowering information and encouraged contextual discussion of individual experiences for the youth to not only learn about their rights, but also to experience communal strength from their collaborations.

Shifting the power dynamic from one of passive recipient of information to active change agent allowed us not only to talk about empowerment abstractly, but to begin to empower participants as they learned about possibilities and created personal goals around social change. Future programs should foster a learning environment that not only provides information, but also gives opportunities for the voices of participants to be heard and for some action to be taken. We also believe that the artistic format employed is a relevant consideration as a model for re-presenting visual and cultural aspects of disability experiences and advocacy goals.

Concluding Reflections

Creating the comic book hero through the Summit was transformative for the youth involved. One participant reflected, "It is an important initiative and helped us overcome our disability to the point where I felt that I am, we are not disabled, but heroes." Another added, "I loved learning about the culture and meeting new people, but the most satisfying part was knowing that through learning, I was being

prepared for the task of making a difference in the world." From our perspective, this process of identification across cultures through positive symbols and icons of disability is particularly valuable. As this was the first intervention and study of which we are aware focusing upon both disability cultures and cultural exchange in this region, we hope that additional work can build upon these models of communication and expression with longer, more in-depth art education and human rights curricula and exchanges.

It may be noted that the Summit's blending of *It's About Ability* human rights advocacy models, artistic creation, and cross-cultural collaborations required a tremendous amount of curriculum planning and collaboration. Much pre-planning was successful, whereas ongoing openness to ideas and visions of the youth was equally valuable. In facilitating exchanges of youth with a variety of needs and language capabilities (Arabic and English), we were impressed at how they developed bonds around joined experience with disability. Campana (2011) identifies "compassion and empathy" as key elements of such community arts collaborations. Over the course of Summit activities and the comic book release, we observed participants built upon shared experiences pertaining to disability towards the development of compassion around cultural difference.

As an artist and as a facilitator of human rights education programs under the UNCRPD, we had addressed art and special needs advocacy issues in previous teaching experiences. However, the Summit was the first time that we embedded the creation of an advocacy tool for the public within a workshop intended for those with disabilities. From the beginning of the outreach, Summit goals shifted from a training session to asking participants to serve as experts and share their extensive knowledge and experiences with us. The active engagement and enthusiasm of participants inspired us to avoid curricular disconnect and boredom that can occur in more passive educational approaches. In providing many opportunities for youth with disabilities to share skills and knowledge, we were not only learning about human rights, but also documenting how

attaining these rights are represented by youth communities of disability.

We would like to conclude our reflections by emphasizing the value of authentic expression among creators (whether artists or authors) representing themselves as persons with disabilities, versus mainstream creators representing otherness in ways that unconsciously perpetuate stigmas and stereotypes. As Sideler (2011) points out, "disability artists . . . advance the affirmative model by directly questioning the sympathetic attitudes and assumptions about normalcy that inform prevailing attitudes toward disability" (p. 21). The Silver Scorpion comic models this affirmative framework in its representations of disabilities generated by creators with disabilities whose expertise and experiences are valued.

We believe that developing models of disability representation that are empowering are valuable pursuits for teachers. Alarmingly, Prater (2003) observed that most children's literature provides very limited models of those with disabilities in historical figures like Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, or Woodrow Wilson. And while these representations exist, they may be mysterious or culturally irrelevant to a child (p. 49). This is one area where sources including fictionalized comic book renderings of characters with disabilities (particularly when created by artists with disabilities) can paradoxically become more real and relevant for young students than mainstream historical examples. We have found that in generating a relatable comic book figure such as the Silver Scorpion, students are able to imagine themselves as change agents in cultivating empathy, community, and youth leadership.

Inspired by these experiences and other uses of comics to communicate issues about living with disabilities, we began using the comic book and related websites as resources for our courses in art education[5], education research, and special needs education

[5] One of these inspirational sources for us has been the Disability History Museum that features comic book pages among its collections as historical documents (Richards, 2005).

in terms of curriculum and research examples. We hope that the Silver Scorpion series will also provide a foundation to inspire future educators working within art and community activism to explore issues of disability and culture. As a participant noted: "Hearing everyone's passion gives me the confidence that we will continue building relationships . . . and changing the lives of people with disabilities in a positive way."

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