

Dear Teacher,

First, thanks for what you do. I was a high school teacher for over a decade, so I know that your task is a difficult and often thankless one. But like me, I'm sure that you're in it because you believe that a better world is possible, and that improving society starts with education. Most of us are aware of the "isms" embedded in our culture that generate discrimination--racism and sexism, for example. But fewer people are aware of ableism. I had never heard the term until I enrolled in a Disability Studies class this semester. Ableism is often more insidious than other types of prejudice, because it's not as easy to identify. It more often takes the form of simply "overlooking" issues of access. But the culture that it creates marginalizes and excludes people with disabled bodies and minds.

As educators, we're trained to think about disability in terms of intervention, medical diagnosis, and accommodation through IEPs. But we need to move beyond the medicalized perspective to start thinking about the sociocultural aspects of disability. We need to include disabled voices in our curriculum. We need people to become aware, in their formative years, of our culture's discriminatory attitudes and practices toward certain types of bodies and minds so that they are prepared to help work toward a more fair, more equitable society. We need disabled teenagers to become more enfranchised, to read literature and have discussions that help them find their voices in a culture that often ignores, silences, and bullies them. That is why I created a unit plan for teaching the poetry and fiction of disability to high school students.

I initially wrote these as individual lesson plans intending each plan to be delivered on one day. But because classroom schedules vary so much and because what takes one class 15 minutes to complete might take another class an hour to complete (and even then, you have pry the activity out of their hands!), I decided to refer to each segment of the unit as a "block." Each "block" can be delivered, in truncated or full version, on a single class day, or can be extended over multiple days. It all depends on how much time you want to spend on this unit. I've designed each lesson plan "accordion style," which means that elements can be removed or expanded depending on how much class time you want to devote to each block. The learning activities that can be most easily removed without too much impact to the learning targets *are written in italics*. The elements that can be easily expanded--that could even fill a whole class period--**are written in bold**. ***Some activities are in both bold and italics, indicating that activities can easily be either expanded or removed at your discretion.***

Before you begin teaching this unit, I strongly suggest that you read three articles (especially if you are unfamiliar with disability studies): Lennard Davis's "Why Is Disability Missing From the Discourse on Diversity?", Nirmalla Erevelles's "How Does It Feel to be a Problem? Race, Disability, and Exclusion in Education Policy", and Simi Linton's "Disability Studies/Not Disability Studies." If you only have time to read one article, read Linton's. I know how precious and how limited your time

is. I promise you that these texts will be extremely valuable resources to help frame your approach to the discussions you'll be leading and the analyses of texts that you'll be guiding. And hey, I saved you some time with lesson planning, right? :)

The novel I chose for this unit is *Me, Who Dove Into the Heart of the World*, by Sabina Berman. Set in Mexico, the novel is written from the perspective of an autistic girl named Karen who has a deep connection to nature and whose spirit remains indomitable, despite the violence she encounters in contact zones with people who label her, ignore her, and even mistreat her. Read the text well before you teach the unit to decide if it's right for your class (trigger warning: there are a couple of scenes in the book describing violence and sexuality). I love the novel *Me*, and think it's a great choice for this unit. However, if you decide to teach another novel instead, I've structured the activities and assessments so that they will work with multiple texts. You could choose something from the more traditional canon, such as *Of Mice and Men* and read it for representations of disability, or you could choose a novel by a disabled author. It's up to you. The other major text is called *Beauty is a Verb*, and it is a stunning anthology of essays and poems by disabled authors.

Consider the unique needs and disabilities (diagnosed and undiagnosed) of the students in your classroom and think about how you can create a truly accessible unit for everyone. In the "accessibility" section, I've tried to help inspire your thinking in regard to your students' diverse needs. I've noted some of the ways you might make the lesson plan more inclusive of all students, but of course, it is not by any means comprehensive. You know best how to create a space that will maximize the learning potential of every student in the room.

Thanks for visiting, and please know that it is my absolute joy and pleasure to provide to support to teachers. PLEASE contact me for anything related to this unit. If you have questions, if you need support, if you notice an accessibility issue I overlooked, if you have ideas, if you want to brainstorm how to make this unit work for your schedule or your grade level--contact me. My university email for the next few years is [emwilso@umich.edu](mailto:emwilso@umich.edu) and my personal email is [emilymullaswilson@gmail.com](mailto:emilymullaswilson@gmail.com).

In the cause,

Emily