Daniel L. Preston

Finding Difference: Nemo and Friends Opening the Door to Disability Theory

By addressing a different set of questions about well-known animated films, students learn to think critically about how disability is represented in society.

Our students have no doubt watched a good chunk of the Disney library of films. Earlier generations saw *Cinderella, Snow White,* and *Robin Hood* in first release; later came *Beauty and the Beast, Aladdin,* and *The Lion King.* Over the last 25 years, Pixar has joined in by releasing *Toy Story* and its sequels and a host of other films to delight audiences everywhere. Entertainment, however, has never been the only reason that as parents we allow our kids to watch the Disney and Disney/Pixar films. We hope that the stories will teach them lessons about people and situations. We hope they can see themselves represented there—and represented well—and we hope they can find something to take away from the film other than the characters' names, colors, and characteristics.

While middle school and high school students may have watched these films when they were younger, chances are they did not do so with a critical eye toward difference and disability, despite the fact that these films serve as excellent tools for teaching about difference. Recent estimates label 20% of the world's population with some form of disability (Riley 1), making it important for us to consider the ways in which disability is represented in literature, film, and other cultural texts. Disability does not only exist solely on the televised stages of a Jerry Lewis telethon but also in the fabric of the cartoons that we enjoy with our children. The following pages describe how the film *Finding Nemo* can be used as an excellent tool for helping students at all levels to start thinking about disability in different ways.

Interpreting Disability

Scholarship across the relatively new field of Disability Studies has defined several models through which disability can be interpreted, and for the purposes of this article, I will use two of the primary ones: medical and social. In broad strokes, the "medical model" focuses on a physical difference of the body: a broken or missing limb, blindness, or the inability to hear. The medical model seeks to "normalize" the population identified in its ranks. In contrast, there is the "social model," developed in Great Britain, in which disability is seen as arising at least partly from an environment that creates barriers for people with impairments. In other words, disability does not exist solely because people use wheelchairs; disability exists because people who use wheelchairs need more ramps. In this way, the focus is not on "fixing" the person with the impairment, but rather how society can improve its integration of people as they are. These models are just a framework, however, as even these scholars admit that the criteria used to account for persons with disabilities are out of date (Riley 3–4). As Disability Studies scholar Tom Shakespeare has pointed out, no one model can completely encompass the need for an interpretation of "disability." "Disability" as a single concept, therefore, becomes just as difficult and complicated to define as the concepts we now identify as race, gender, sexual identity, and ethnicity. This places disability on equally important and intersecting terms with the other identity categories. In discussing disabilities, it is important to focus not
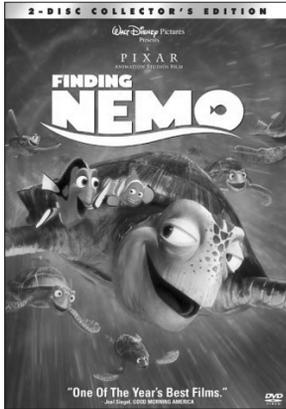
The *Finding Nemo* DVD Cover.

only on physical disabilities but also on hidden disabilities, those that cannot be seen.

Reading *Nemo*

For readers who don't know the film, *Finding Nemo* tells the story of an overprotective father and a son who are separated when they have an argument. Marlin, the father, spends the rest of the movie searching "the entire ocean" looking for Nemo. Along the way, Marlin meets Dory, a fish with short-term memory loss, and the two fish travel together. Nemo, on the other hand, has been taken across the continent to a dentist's fish tank as a present for his niece at the end of the week. Viewers see the film from both sides of the story, and as Nemo and his father attempt to find each other, Nemo learns that he can do things by himself. Along the way, Marlin learns to trust others and realizes that the world isn't as frightening as he once believed.

After watching the film with students, I ask them what they saw and how disability was represented in the film. The first answer surrounds Nemo's "Lucky Fin" (one fin is congenitally shorter than the other), and the second is about Dory and her memory loss. It's not difficult to imagine Nemo's smaller fin as a disability, nor is it uncommon to place Dory's memory loss on the spectrum of disability. Likewise, viewers are likely to translate Marlin's overprotective nature as that of a typical father. All of these assessments are based on the medical model. Even Marlin's interactions with his son become that of a father trying to "fix" his son in

particular ways. Fewer than ten minutes into the film, Nemo is swimming around talking to his father and gets stuck inside a plant. As he is working his way out, his father remarks, "Nemo, let me do it; you'll never get out of there yourself"—and already depicts his son as "less able" than other fish. Later, as Nemo is introducing himself to his new classmates (an octopus, a fish, and a seahorse), one of them notices his smaller fin:

KID#1 (Octopus):	What's wrong with his fin?
KID #2 (Fish):	He looks funny.

(Seahorse's DAD slaps Seahorse with fin.)

KID #3 (Seahorse):	Ow! Hey, what'd I do? What'd I do?
Seahorse's DAD:	Be nice, it's his first time at school.
MARLIN:	He was born with it, kids. We call it his lucky fin.
NEMO:	Daaad!
KID #1 (Octopus):	See this tentacle? It's actually shorter than all my other tentacles, but you can't really tell, especially when I twirl them like this. (twirls)
KID #3 (Seahorse):	I'm H_2O intolerant. (sneezes)
KID #2 (Fish):	I'm obnoxious.

Already, there have been clear demonstrations of both models of disability under discussion here. Marlin, as the protective father concerned about Nemo's success, worries and smothers Nemo to the point of alienating him. The kids, on the other hand, acknowledge the difference and take it in stride, creating an atmosphere free (at least for the moment) of disability. What is particularly nice about this exchange is that the kids share their differences with Nemo as well, establishing that they are all different in that they each have different attributes, but on some level that makes them the same, too. While moviegoers are likely to find intolerance to water and obnoxious behavior humorous, it is easy to see that when taken on their own

Nemo with Gill, who never tells Nemo he can't do something. From *Finding Nemo.* Dir. Andrew Stanton and Lee Unkirch. Dreamworks, 2003.

Classroom Activities for a Deeper Understanding

While trying to identify disabling conditions in *Nemo* or any text, students may have difficulty determining what constitutes a disability. They should realize that they are not alone and that scholars are grappling with this question every day. One of the many reasons for models of interpretation is *because* the definition has become so complex. Also, the chances are good that they are already familiar with these concepts, just in more general ways. Remind students that they are likely to have seen characters with disabilities on TV or in movies before, but might not have thought about how those characters were depicted. As Paul K. Longmore points out, there are plenty of examples: Porky Pig and his stutter, Mr. Magoo and his huge glasses, and Captain Hook from *Peter Pan,* to name a few (65). Here are some basic questions to get students thinking about disability in what are perhaps new ways for them:

- Which characters in the text appear to be physically different from the others?

- Which characters in the text are treated differently from the others? Why?

- Which situations in the text cause characters to feel inferior to others?

- What stereotypes are present in the text?

- What labels are used to identify certain characters to the rest of the group? This could take the form of name-calling or identification with (or by) a physical, cognitive, ethnic, or cultural trait, among other things.

- Which characters are always allowed to do what they want? Which ones are not? Under what circumstances and by which characters are they stopped?

Posing these questions does not automatically expose a character's disability, nor does a discussion stemming from these questions guarantee a thought-provoking, critical look at disability in society. There is more work to be done than this for both a textual reading and practical application. What these questions can do, however, is help students notice where different treatment occurs because of a disability, and it is up to the students to determine the correctness and value of those behaviors. Such questions, and a subsequent guided dis-

merits, these conditions can be socially isolating and debilitating.

Later, as Nemo meets the others in the fish tank at the dentist's office, we are introduced to a variety of characters, each with a unique trait that can be troublesome in certain circumstances and incredibly useful in others. Consider Bloat, for example, the blowfish that expands under stress. Several times throughout the movie, Bloat expands to the point where he needs help to recover. Stress is disabling for him. However, during the rescue of Nemo near the end of the movie, that particular trait is invaluable as Gill is exiting the tank.

Gill is the character that Nemo most admires. Like Nemo, before he came to live in the tank, Gill lived in the ocean. Also similar is Gill's damaged fin, which allows Nemo to understand that a physical deformity need not negatively affect the life led. More than that, Nemo is valued as important and capable—even special—because of his size and ability. Never once does Gill tell Nemo he can't do something. This behavior directly contradicts Marlin, who constantly reminds Nemo about his fin and how it limits his ability. A class discussion of this film could go into far greater detail, with space given to all characters: what makes them different, unique, and interesting, as well as what might create the context for their (mis)treatment.

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cussion of them, help students form their own critical questionings of other texts, as well as a way of looking at society, and disability, through a Disability-Studies lens.

Along with movie discussions, an activity that challenges standardized thinking about ability can also serve students well. The following exercise is suggested in Wendy Chrisman's essay, "The Ways We Disclose: When Life-Writing Becomes Writing Your Life." Chrisman discusses the importance of the time and place of disclosures, including the ways that those disclosures take place between students and teachers, particularly in writing classrooms. She suggests developing a "hierarchy of disability," paying attention to the social costs of a public disclosure. The exercise she recommends helps promote critical thinking:

> Together as a class, make a chart on the social hierarchies of disability, the relative risks of disclosing each type of disability, the stigmas associated with each type, the material consequences in terms of employment, civil rights, and so forth. (135)

Figure 1 shows a chart I made for *Finding Nemo* that follows Chrisman's directions.

As Chrisman suggests, the questions raised through such an exercise can become a point of departure for further research, such as "finding employment statistics of people with disabilities" (135). Research projects that grow out of a genuine curiosity about real people in the real world—even if that curiosity is initially sparked by a film or cartoon—are likely to be taken much more seriously by students than are typical projects completed for the generic "research paper."

Enabling Views of Disability

Many feature films and novels already familiar to students can offer further opportunities for critical thinking about disability. Along with *Finding Nemo,* Disney/Pixar's *The Incredibles* (2004) offers a good look into the world of being different. The discussion about Dash going out for sports and the question of who is considered "special" can spark a lively debate among students. Tom Hanks's Oscar-winning role as *Forrest Gump* (1994) could also prove fruitful for analysis, especially if students recognize their own perceptions of his disability and how they shift throughout the movie. For a more classic (and text-based) example, students could be encouraged to read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* or John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* through the lens of disability studies, looking specifically at conditions or characters that help to establish a disabling environment for the other characters in these novels.

I show movies to my students to get them talking about disability in ways they haven't thought of before. Teachers use movies in classrooms all the time because, as Joseph Coencas writes about working with movies and students with special needs, "[M]ovies are an ideal motivational device for auditory or visual learners who resist or have difficulty with the printed word" (67). Teaching, however, is never

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FIGURE 1. Analyzing Disability in *Finding Nemo*

Character/Trait	Trait	Visible	Consequences of Disclosure
Nemo/"Lucky Fin"	Boy/Missing arm	Yes	Employment/social/physical ability
Dory/Short-term memory loss	Short-term memory loss/ mental disorders	No/Maybe	Social stigmas/employment/family
Jacques/OCD cleaning	OCD	No/Maybe	Social stigmas/friends/interactions
Bruce, Anchor, Chum/ Addiction disorder	Alcohol/Drug addiction	No/Maybe	Employment/social stigmas/ family/friends

about a single audience, and so we need to think in broader strokes: movies, if framed by critical questions, become useful for all classrooms at all levels. It is the work of disability studies in part to question and change the representation of people with disabilities.

Finding Nemo is just one movie among several that can teach that lesson simply by virtue of presenting both sides of the argument and letting the audience decide for itself. However, as teachers who want to provide tools for interpretation, we are in a unique position to shape the kinds of questions asked about texts. Therefore, using the films, cartoons, and novels our students already know to introduce critical questions posed by disability studies makes a lot of sense. As teachers, we are invested in changing the lives of our students for the better. We know that students will go home and talk to their friends and families, sharing information on social networks such as Facebook and MySpace. The more enabling view of disability they get in our classrooms from a sophisticated critique of these cultural texts has the potential of transforming how people with disabilities are treated in the larger community. *EJ*

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Daniel L. Preston teaches for the English department at the University at Albany (SUNY) and is currently earning his doctorate in Cultural Foundations of Education with a focus on Disability Studies from Syracuse University. His research interests include how disability is represented in literature, film, and to students, and he speaks widely about how disability continually interacts with society. Email him at Daniel.preston@gmail.com.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

"Exploring Satire with *Shrek*" uses fairy tales as an introduction to satire. Students view a scene from a movie and examine the ways in which it departs from typical fairy tales. They are then introduced to the four techniques of satire—exaggeration, incongruity, reversal, and parody—and asked to identify these techniques in a clip from *Shrek.* Students next select a fairy tale to satirize and share their finished stories with the class or in small groups. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exploring-satire-with-shrek-810.html

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