

Handout and mini lesson plan on interpretive discussion

Opening round robin: What motivated you to attend a workshop on difficult concepts and interpretive discussion? Do you use interpretive discussion regularly in your classroom?

Uses of interpretive discussion

1. Do you ever have students jump too quickly to evaluations of like or dislike about texts?
 - a. For example, a student claims a text is sexist when in reality the student was confused about a passage that was rhetorical or tried to illustrate a view opposite to the author's.
2. Do you ever have students participate unevenly in discussion because of differences in background knowledge or varying levels of confidence in expressing their own judgments?
3. Do you ever worry that classroom dynamics get confrontational rather than cooperative?

Basics of interpretive discussion

⇒ Resource: *Learning to Teach Through Discussion: The Art of Turning the Soul*, Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon

Three types of discussion about a text:

- a. Factual (unambiguously resolved by pointing to a place in the text)
- b. Interpretive (can only be resolved by making sense of the connection between several places in the text, often cannot be resolved definitively)
- c. Evaluative (involves judging the text based on values and ideas not present in the text but that one brings to the reading)

Strategies for leading interpretive discussion:

1. Come up with a “deepest point of doubt” (some concern about the meaning of the text that could potentially be shared by all who participate in the interpretive discussion)
2. Ask participants for their own questions about the meaning of the text (though note that knowing how to formulate interpretive questions takes practice)
3. Think of a question that organizes the inquiry on the deepest point of doubt, called the basic question (BQ)
4. Come up with a list of follow up questions and write down places where the text might help resolve said questions
5. Listen attentively to people's answers, noticing whether they are making factual, interpretive or evaluative questions or remarks
6. Do not be afraid to repeat the same interpretive question several times or ask people to clarify what they mean (“is that an answer to the question that x?”)

Teaching demo

The medical and social models of disability

The *medical model* understands a disability as a physical or mental impairment of the individual and its personal and social consequences. It regards the limitations faced by people with disabilities as resulting primarily, or solely, from their impairments. In contrast, the *social model* understands disability as a relation between an individual and her social environment: the exclusion of people with certain physical and mental characteristics from major domains of social life. Their exclusion is manifested not only in deliberate segregation, but in a built environment and organized social activity that preclude or restrict the participation of people seen or labelled as having disabilities. (*Disability: Definitions, Models, Experience*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Watch: [Aimee Mullins, My 12 pairs of legs](#)

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Deepest point of doubt: Does Mullins suggest that augmentation is the only or best ethical response toward disability or limitation?

Thinking about questions

Here are some questions that could arise naturally in the classroom or in our own minds, but which would be inadequate as a basic question that sustains interpretive discussion:

1. How many pairs of legs does Mullins have? (factual)
2. Does Mullins see her 12 pairs of legs as empowering her? (factual-interpretive)
3. What is Mullins' definition of disability? (interpretive, hard)
4. Does Mullins support the medical or the social model of disability? (interpretive, hard)
5. Is Mullins view of overcoming disability classist or elitist? (evaluative, hard)
6. Is Mullins a role model? (evaluative, easy)

Here is an approach that I find better:

1. BQ: Does Mullins consider herself disabled? Is she disabled according to her own view of disability?
 - a. Does Mullins equate wearing prosthetics with being disabled?
 - b. Does Mullins think that being super-abled entails you are not disabled?
 - c. Do you have to face some limitation or be socially regarded as in some sense "deficient" to be disabled?

Other possible questions:

1. Does Mullins place the onus of change on the disabled body or on the society that disables?
2. Does Mullins imply that being less able than others in some respect is bad?
3. Does disability equal deficiency for Mullins?
4. Does Mullins see limitation or difference as a bad thing or as a deficiency?
5. What does Mullins understand by disability? (Problem with a body, problem in social design, unrealized human potential, something else?)
6. What is the bad of disability according to Mullins?
7. Does Mullins in the end see disability as a deficiency (rather than a difference) because of her emphasis on overcoming and augmentation?
8. Is Mullins' "full, poetic, supra-organic view of human development" a reframing of disability and prosthetics?
9. Does Mullins see disability as necessarily disempowering?
10. Does Mullins see the meaning (positive or negative) of having a minority body as being imprinted in the body? Or does the meaning depend on the social context? [The possibility of augmentation and beyond organic abilities means that Mullins doesn't see the meaning or fate of a disabled body as lying in the body itself, but it is actually a product of the social context. In that sense, she does subscribe to the social model of disability]

Transcript of Aimee Mullin's My 12 pairs of legs

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3 I was speaking to a group of about 300 kids, ages six to eight, at a children's museum, and I
4 brought with me a bag full of legs, similar to the kinds of things you see up here, and had them
5 laid out on a table for the kids. And, from my experience, you know, kids are naturally curious
6 about what they don't know, or don't understand, or is foreign to them. They only learn to be
7 frightened of those differences when an adult influences them to behave that way, and maybe
8 censors that natural curiosity, or you know, reins in the question-asking in the hopes of them
9 being polite little kids. So I just pictured a first grade teacher out in the lobby with these unruly
10 kids, saying, "Now, whatever you do, don't stare at her legs."

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12 But, of course, that's the point. That's why I was there, I wanted to invite them to look and
13 explore. So I made a deal with the adults that the kids could come in without any adults for two
14 minutes on their own. The doors open, the kids descend on this table of legs, and they are poking
15 and prodding, and they're wiggling toes, and they're trying to put their full weight on the
16 sprinting leg to see what happens with that. And I said, "Kids, really quickly -- I woke up this
17 morning, I decided I wanted to be able to jump over a house -- nothing too big, two or three
18 stories -- but, if you could think of any animal, any superhero, any cartoon character, anything
19 you can dream up right now, what kind of legs would you build me?"

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21 And immediately a voice shouted, "Kangaroo!" "No, no, no! Should be a frog!" "No. It should be
22 Go Go Gadget!" "No, no, no! It should be the Incredibles." And other things that I don't -- aren't
23 familiar with. And then, one eight-year-old said, "Hey, why wouldn't you want to fly too?" And
24 the whole room, including me, was like, "Yeah." (Laughter) And just like that, I went from being
25 a woman that these kids would have been trained to see as "disabled" to somebody that had
26 potential that their bodies didn't have yet. Somebody that might even be super-abled. Interesting.

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28 [...]

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30 Curious encounters were happening to me at the time; I'd been accepting numerous invitations to
31 speak on the design of the cheetah legs around the world. And people would come up to me after
32 the conference, after my talk, men and women. And the conversation would go something like
33 this, "You know Aimee, you're very attractive. You don't look disabled." (Laughter) I thought,
34 "Well, that's amazing, because I don't feel disabled." And it really opened my eyes to this
35 conversation that could be explored, about beauty. What does a beautiful woman have to look
36 like? What is a sexy body? And interestingly, from an identity standpoint, what does it mean to
37 have a disability? I mean, people -- Pamela Anderson has more prosthetic in her body than I do.
38 Nobody calls her disabled. (Laughter)

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40 [...] So, three months after TED I found myself on a plane to London, doing my first fashion
41 shoot, which resulted in this cover -- "Fashion-able"? Three months after that, I did my first
42 runway show for Alexander McQueen on a pair of hand-carved wooden legs made from solid
43 ash. Nobody knew -- everyone thought they were wooden boots. Actually, I have them on stage
44 with me: grapevines, magnolias -- truly stunning. Poetry matters. Poetry is what elevates the
45 banal and neglected object to a realm of art. It can transform the thing that might have made

46 people fearful into something that invites them to look, and look a little longer, and maybe even
47 understand.

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49 I learned this firsthand with my next adventure. The artist Matthew Barney, in his film opus
50 called the "The Cremaster Cycle." This is where it really hit home for me -- that my legs could
51 be wearable sculpture. And even at this point, I started to move away from the need to replicate
52 human-ness as the only aesthetic ideal. So we made what people lovingly referred to as glass
53 legs even though they're actually optically clear polyurethane, a.k.a. bowling ball material.
54 Heavy! Then we made these legs that are cast in soil with a potato root system growing in them,
55 and beetroots out the top, and a very lovely brass toe. That's a good close-up of that one. Then
56 another character was a half-woman, half-cheetah -- a little homage to my life as an athlete. 14
57 hours of prosthetic make-up to get into a creature that had articulated paws, claws and a tail that
58 whipped around, like a gecko. (Laughter) And then another pair of legs we collaborated on were
59 these -- look like jellyfish legs, also polyurethane. And the only purpose that these legs can
60 serve, outside the context of the film, is to provoke the senses and ignite the imagination. So
61 whimsy matters.

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63 Today, I have over a dozen pair of prosthetic legs that various people have made for me, and
64 with them I have different negotiations of the terrain under my feet, and I can change my height -
65 - I have a variable of five different heights. (Laughter) Today, I'm 6'1". And I had these legs
66 made a little over a year ago at Dorset Orthopedic in England and when I brought them home to
67 Manhattan, my first night out on the town, I went to a very fancy party. And a girl was there who
68 has known me for years at my normal 5'8". Her mouth dropped open when she saw me, and she
69 went, "But you're so tall!" And I said, "I know. Isn't it fun?" I mean, it's a little bit like wearing
70 stilts on stilts, but I have an entirely new relationship to door jams that I never expected I would
71 ever have. And I was having fun with it. And she looked at me, and she said, "But, Aimee, that's
72 not fair." (Laughter) (Applause) And the incredible thing was she really meant it. It's not fair that
73 you can change your height, as you want it.

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75 And that's when I knew -- that's when I knew that the conversation with society has changed
76 profoundly in this last decade. It is no longer a conversation about overcoming deficiency. It's a
77 conversation about augmentation. It's a conversation about potential. A prosthetic limb doesn't
78 represent the need to replace loss anymore. It can stand as a symbol that the wearer has the
79 power to create whatever it is that they want to create in that space. So people that society once
80 considered to be disabled can now become the architects of their own identities and indeed
81 continue to change those identities by designing their bodies from a place of empowerment. And
82 what is exciting to me so much right now is that by combining cutting-edge technology --
83 robotics, bionics -- with the age-old poetry, we are moving closer to understanding our collective
84 humanity. I think that if we want to discover the full potential in our humanity, we need to
85 celebrate those heartbreaking strengths and those glorious disabilities that we all have. I think of
86 Shakespeare's Shylock: "If you prick us, do we not bleed, and if you tickle us, do we not laugh?"
87 It is our humanity, and all the potential within it, that makes us beautiful. Thank you. (Applause)

Conceptual learning goals:

I want my student to better grasp the idea that disability is not ‘a deficiency of the body’ (the medical model of disability) but the result of an interaction between particular body types, ‘minority bodies’, and a social context (the social model of disability). I also want my students to reflect on how different definitions of disability affect our ideas about what disability justice means.

If disability is not in the body, then the medical idea of erasing disability, of fixing bodies, is not necessarily the go-to response.

Disabled is one of the most internally diverse categories out there (it includes bilateral amputees like Mullins, people with Down’ syndrome, and)

1. To better understand the social construction of disability by looking at an argument that technology can help us reconceptualize prosthetics from subpar replacements to desirable augmentations
- 2.

Structure

Show participants how they would go about leading interpretive discussion, then encourage them to integrate student-led versions in the classroom.

Sometimes the pedagogical goal is for students to become better at getting the right interpretation of a text (not thinking the author is racist when she’s voicing a rhetorical racist).

So the tool is a useful way of structuring practice on interpretation (how to distinguish between factual and interpretive questions? Often the fact of the author’s view on a subject will blur the line between factual and interpretive questions).

However, the greatest use is in strengthening an understanding of a nuanced idea by evaluating different constructions of it. It has to be the right text, of course, one with a rich enough discussion of a concept or idea.

- What is the point of this pedagogical technique?
- What are interpretive questions? What is interpretive discussion?
- How to create interpretive questions? How to tell if they’re good?
- How to apply this technique to teaching a difficult concept?
- How to creatively use interpretive discussion?

1.

Before students jump to judgments about their agreement or disagreement with the ideas in some text, we want them to engage the text, we want them to check if they understood and to not be overly confident that they have. Raising the issue of interpretation is a way to create meta-awareness that, beside gathering facts (from the text or about the text) and forming judgments about the quality of the ideas, one must also engage in interpretive work. This is crucial specially if students' main genre of reading is textbooks, which are read for factual content but not as "making an argument" or having potentially conflicting or unclear ideas within it.

2.

If we choose the right interpretive question, we can make students engage a concept much more deeply than if we just present the view that's closest to what we judge true. Why confuse students in such a way? Why set them on a path of potential confusing, misunderstanding and mis-remembering? We have to trust students. If we don't cultivate in them the ability to tell a better formulation of an idea from a worse one, then what are we doing? Knowledge changes: if students don't have the skills to evaluate new information and form new ideas or concepts, but instead have to rely on figures of authority to do the work for them, then how can we call ourselves critical educators?

3.

Some limitations can be good: deaf people might want their children not to get cochlear implants so that they can participate fully in deaf culture. Blind people may not want vision. Parents of children with Down's syndrome may not want a fix (for older children or adults) even if there were one.

More positive toward Mullins

BQ: Does Mullins find her 12 pairs of legs empowering?(fact)

BQ: Does Mullins subscribe to the medical or the social model of disability? (evaluative)

BQ: Does Mullins define disability for us? (factual/interpretive)

BQ: Does disability = deficiency for Mullins?

BQ: Does Mullins see herself as disabled? Is she disabled according to her own criteria?

2. Does Mullins place the onus of change on the disabled body or on the society that disables?

3. Does Mullins think that prosthetics are a way of regaining or reaffirming one's humanity?

4. Does Mullins see augmentation as more essential to humanity than our organic capacities?
5. Does having prosthetics equal having a disability for Mullins?
6. Is there a difference between having a disability and being disabled for Mullins? (Or is disability purely social and all a body can have is a minority constitution, like being a bilateral amputee?)
7. Does Mullins think that disabilities according to the medical model don't really exist because everyone just has different abilities and even flaws that we must embrace as tools for realizing where we might augment ourselves and realize our humanity by transcending it?
8. Is humanity something specific, or is it the desire for augmentation and transcendence that makes us human?

How is this exercise helping me clarify: 1) the concept of disability, or 2) the social vs medical models of disability? Remember that I promised this activity is useful for understanding challenging concepts.