

# (Dis?)Ability Online Course

## Lesson 3: Let's talk about the language



Welcome to the third lesson of the online course (Dis?)Ability, in which we will explore ways to increase accessibility in activism and event organising. This time we will take a closer look on the topic of language – how discriminatory or emancipatory it can be, how to speak without harm and, instead, show our solidarity and support on the level of communicating.

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### Transcription of the lesson



**Katarzyna Bierzanowska:** An important part of equal treatment of people with disabilities, taking their needs and rights into consideration, is the language we use. Words and expressions play a major part, and so does the narration, the way of thinking about ability and disability.

There is a discussion about the basic term. How to call the group of people itself? Can we talk about one single group in the first place?

There are many answers. In my opinion it is important to remember that there is a list of bad and unsafe words or expressions, which can potentially offend someone, make them feel inferior, exclude, stigmatize. You can really add to somebody's chronic trauma with your aggressive language. I mean words such as 'invalid', 'handicapped', 'cripple', 'retarded', etc, all of the terms that focus on the negative, what a person cannot do. They immediately create a group that you don't want to be part of, because it is socially perceived as inferior.

As far as 'disabled person' or 'person with disability' goes, I believe they are fine. However if you don't have the experience of disability yourself it is safer to say 'with disability'. The point is that the disability should not be viewed as the core of someone's identity. Outside people should not have

the right to judge what role the disability plays in someone's life. Hence, the expression 'person with disability' is safer as it separates the person from the disability, and it puts the person first. You can talk about a person with blue eyes, blond hair, with a family, with or without glasses, with a good job, or with disability. Disability is one among many characteristics to consider when working with accessibility. But it doesn't have to be the main one. We don't need to be immediately viewed through the prism of a wheelchair, white cane, assistant dog, or visible disability. It is just a trait to consider in order not to exclude certain people.

On the other hand, there is a growing 'disability pride' movement: people don't want to separate their disability and their selves. It is an integral part of their identity. For them, disability is an enriching experience. But there is a big difference between individuals labeling themselves, and enforcing this language on someone else.

Then there are people who don't care how you talk about their experience and that is OK too. Whether or not you include the needs of all the rest, however, is a question of your sensitivity. Words that seem natural today, such as 'idiot', used to be medical terminology for people with mental diseases and intellectual disabilities. Today we understand them differently and no one would dare to use them for diagnosis.

The language is fluid, no doubt about it. But it also reflects social changes. The language shows how dynamic the disability-related justice movement is. We keep creating new expressions and questioning them. It is an ongoing process.

Some narrations about disability can be a trap. We might have good intentions and think and talk about people with disabilities as brave, or well adjusted. That is neither welcome nor flattering. What it actually means is that we compare the person's life to some 'abled' norm. We assume that their life is all about combatting the disability and nothing else.

However, people with disabilities can have interesting jobs, hobbies, personalities, etc. They can be different not only because they have a certificate of disability, or some diagnosis, but simply because people in general are all different.

I recommend thinking of disability as a universal need not as heroism or a tragedy. Of course living with disability is hard. There are many obstacles to overcome. But the question is, how many of these obstacles really are caused by the disability itself? Or are they actually caused by lack of accessibility, law, education, competence, awareness?

Social issues that a person with disability has to face are often much more traumatic than the disability itself. If we had accessible bathrooms, transport, education, jobs, etc., then the disabilities could become imperceptible to a degree that individuals want them to be.

Assuming that disability is automatically something tragic does not help to build a sense of self-worth and confidence. It is not empowering or supporting. On the contrary, it only points to the things you can't do, can't reach, can't achieve. It is very challenging to hear such things about you all the time. It does not help, it undermines the things you want to do, change, or achieve.

In sum, for me two things are key to start with: words that are worth weighing, and analyzing, and narratives how we think about disability-related topics.

The last thing I want to mention here is the representation of people with disabilities. It has to do with giving back the voice. Part of the work on language is to give the voice back to the people with disabilities. If you don't have that experience, let those who have it talk about their needs and rights themselves.

So these are the 3 main issues to start from: the words we use, the narrative we create, and the representation, that is, giving the voice back to people who have the experience.

## Questions

This time the task is easy and quick. Make a list of the words mentioned in all video lessons that are considered inappropriate and then destroy it. Don't forget to make the decision not to use them anymore. Listen to people with the experience you don't have and follow their advice. The change often starts with language.

## Further reading recommendations:

10 Answers to Common Questions People Ask When Being Called Out for Using Ableist Language – <https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/on-ableist-language/>

### Po polsku:

O języku i nie tylko – [https://www.humanityinaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/19\\_pl\\_o-osobach-z-niepelnosprawnosciami.pdf](https://www.humanityinaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/19_pl_o-osobach-z-niepelnosprawnosciami.pdf)

## Credits:

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