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# Changing Attitudes: The Impact of a Disability Awareness Class

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# Changing Attitudes: The Impact of a Disability Awareness Class

## **Abstract**

Attitudes towards people with disabilities can be either positive or negative. A undergraduate college course about disability awareness followed a structure focusing on awareness, interaction with PWD, and education in order to make a positive impact on attitudes. The study compared the disability awareness class to a general education humanities class. While results indicated that there was not a significant change in pre and post scores when comparing the classes, there was a significant change in the disability awareness class upon further analysis of data. There are additional suggestions to further the impact of the class within the disability awareness class and the university.

## **Keywords**

disability, awareness, college, person first language

## **Subject Categories**

Recreational Therapy

Changing Attitudes: The Impact of a Disability Awareness Class

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Honors Thesis

## **ABSTRACT**

Attitudes towards people with disabilities can be either positive or negative. A undergraduate college course about disability awareness followed a structure focusing on awareness, interaction with PWD, and education in order to make a positive impact on attitudes. The study compared the disability awareness class to a general education humanities class. While results indicated that there was not a significant change in pre and post scores when comparing the classes, there was a significant change in the disability awareness class upon further analysis of data. There are additional suggestions to further the impact of the class within the disability awareness class and the university.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Attitudes and beliefs are present in everyone. These can be formed from a number of sources and can impact how people interact with each other. This is especially true for attitudes towards people with disabilities (PWD). The idea of the impact of these attitudes was stated by Lundberg, Zabriskie, Smith and Barney, “The greatest impediment to a person’s taking full part in his society are not his physical flaws, but rather the issue of myths, fears, and misunderstandings that society attaches to them” (2008). People have varying attitudes towards PWD, whether they are positive or negative, and those attitudes are developed in different ways.

Corrigan, Lundin, Penn, Uphoff-Wasowski, Campion, & Kubiak examined the idea that attitudes towards PWD develop based on people’s personalities, as well as personal experiences with PWD. Results indicated that people who have higher levels of openness and agreeableness in their personality tend to have positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. Having

meaningful interactions with PWD lead to people developing positive attitudes as well (2001). These are opportunities to shape a person's perception towards PWD.

The attitudes that develop are either positive or negative. A study completed by Loo (2001) examined attitudes towards PWD using undergraduate students in a managerial class. The qualitative results showed supporting themes such as admiration, positive expectations, need to accommodate, sympathy for unfair treatment, desire to improve attitude, positive contact and importance of knowing what a person can do rather than cannot do (Loo, 2001). However, there were also negative themes, such as fear of the unknown, not knowing how to behave in the presence of someone with a disability, discomfort from interactions and belief that there should not be preferential treatment in the workplace (Loo, 2001). The idea of "not knowing" what could happen also appear in Fichten, Robillard, Tagalakis and Amsel's study. Participants who did not have a disability themselves shared themes of not knowing what to do or say in a situation, worrying if they are doing or saying the correct thing, or that PWD will have negative experiences from their conversation (1991).

With the way attitudes develop, it is questioned if they can change. If attitudes can indeed be changed, is the shift positive or negative? Sometimes people can have experiences that change their attitudes to be negative. An example is PWD being depicted in media such as movies and TV shows as causing harm towards others, or meeting someone who has a disability who does not have a friendly personality. On the other hand, some people may gain a new perspective from knowledge on their own such as efforts like the "Spread the Word to End the Word" campaign and groups like "Best Buddies". Others may have positive interactions through family members, neighbors or friends. Can attitudes change, regardless if they are negative or positive? If all of

these components (awareness, interaction with PWD, and education) were combined, would it be more likely to have an impact and change people's attitudes?

A disability awareness course, focusing on recreation, offered at a New England university encompasses awareness, education and interaction with PWD. The class follows a series of disability awareness content and is designed to change attitudes towards PWD. Lundberg et al., stated the structure of disability awareness content promotes positive attitudes towards disability through awareness, possible adaptations and modifications for recreation activities for PWD and promotes wellness, regardless of level of ability (2008). It is also suggested that negative attitudes such as prejudice and discrimination can be changed through positive interactions between PWD and people without a disability (Lundberg et al., 2008). Corrigan et al., discussed that education and contact leads to attitude change, while ignoring attitudes lead to no change (2001). The class touches on all of these components during the academic semester.

### **Components of the Disability Awareness Class**

Awareness, education and interaction with PWD are broken down into five key components (person first language, service learning, media awareness, history of PWD and accessibility awareness) during the course. The content has potential to teach students about disability related issues, help students with understanding and promote positive attitudes (Lundberg et al., 2008). Additionally, it is important to note that the class offered is as a part of a program that is certified by the Committee on Accreditation of Recreational Therapy Education (CARTE). Components of the class follow guidelines set by CARTE. The following guidelines relate specifically to disability awareness: 1.1.5 "knowledge of personal and societal attitudes related to health, illness and disability", and 1.2.4 "knowledge of the impact of limitations in

physical, cognitive, social and emotional functioning upon independence in life activities including work/school, self-maintenance and leisure” (2010.) When combined, these qualities of the class provide a curriculum that has potential to positively change student’s attitudes towards PWD.

### ***Person First Language***

Person first language is putting an individual before their disability. This helps to decrease stigma that often comes along with a disability as well as the objectification of an individual by their disability (Dunn & Andrews, 2015). Additionally, person first language promotes that while two individuals may have the same disability, what they experience is different and related directly to them as an individual (Dunn et al., 2015).

### ***Service Learning***

Service learning is when students take what is being taught in the classroom and utilize it in real life. This involves three core concepts; the experience should be related to what is being taught in class, students should be having a positive impact on the community and students end the experience with a reflection (Moorman & Arellano-Unruh, 2002).

### ***Media Awareness***

Media awareness is recognizing how PWD are portrayed in the media. Often times, media can affect people’s attitudes by portraying PWD into different contexts. An example is when individual is being depicted; the focus is on sports involvement compared to focusing on their disability (von Sikorski & Schierl, 2014). Additionally, media portrays PWD, especially with mental illness, as a stereotype and stigma, e.g. violent, childlike behavior as an adult, or inability to care for oneself (Quintero & Riles, 2016).

### *History of People with Disabilities*

The history of PWD is a long history that has important milestones from the movement of deinstitutionalization to the passing of the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA is the biggest stride for PWD, and shows how culture has changed to be more inclusive and pushes to rule out discrimination (Forber-Pratt & Zape, 2017).

### *Accessibility Awareness*

Accessibility awareness is being conscious of how the ADA affects business' ability to be accessible to all people, regardless of disability. When people who do not have a disability experience the accessibility, or lack of accessibility, they gain a better understanding to what challenges PWD may encounter (Pivik, Macfarlane & Laflamme, 2002).

### **Hypotheses**

The purpose of this research is to examine if a class with a primary focus on disability awareness can change student's attitudes towards PWD compared to student's attitudes in a general education humanities course. The disability awareness class's unique features have the potential change students' attitude.

### *Research Questions*

- Is there a significant difference in pre-test scores between the disability awareness class and the general education humanities class?
- Is there a significant difference in post-test scores between the disability awareness class and the general education humanities class?

- Is there a significant change in the students' score on the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale after taking the disability awareness class?
- What component of the disability awareness class had the strongest influence on participants in the disability awareness class' attitudinal change toward PWD?

## **Methods**

### ***Participants and Settings***

In order to participate, subjects needed to be university students enrolled in the disability awareness class or in a designated general education humanities class who voluntarily agreed to participate. They were compensated for their time with extra credit towards the class in which they were enrolled. There were twenty-eight students who participated in the disability awareness class and twenty-four students who participated in the general education humanities course (n=52). Between both classes, there were fifteen males and thirty-seven female students (n=52).

Subjects were selected as only those students that completed both parts (pre and post test) of the study. The students in the general humanities class who had either taken the disability awareness class previously or were currently in the disability awareness class did not have their data analyzed. Data of students who also did not complete both parts (pre and post test) of the study were not analyzed.

### ***Data Collection***

Students created an identity to be used for comparing scores of the pre- and post-test. The pretest opened to participants for two weeks after the first day of class. This was critical so participants were not exposed to course content that had the potential to change their attitudes

towards PWD. The posttest opened for the last two weeks of the semester, after participants in the disability awareness class had been exposed to the majority of the course content.

Demographics were collected in the first part of the survey by asking participants to identify age, gender, graduation year, and major. Participants were also asked about personal experiences with disability including having family, friends, or neighbors with disabilities. Attitudes were measured using the Attitudes Towards Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale, a 20 question Likert Scale with answers ranging from “I agree very much” to “I disagree very much”. Mean scores range from 0 to 60. The closer the score is to 0, the more positive the attitudes displayed are. A score closer to 60 indicates a more negative attitude.

Students in the disability awareness class had additional questions in their post test. Questions asked participants to identify the most influential component of the course as it relates to attitude change from a list including person first language, media awareness, service learning or accessibility awareness and why they felt that aspect was most influential.

### *Data Analysis*

Data was analyzed using the system SPSS and using quantitative methods for the ATDP scale. Descriptive data is presented by using one-way ANOVAs and paired sample t-tests. This shows pre and post test scores and if there are any changes. Interpretations of the data show if there are any positive changes in pre and post test scores. This indicated that there was a positive change in attitudes.

The different components of the disability awareness class (person first language, service learning, media awareness, history of PWD and accessibility awareness) were ranked from most effective to least effective in terms of changing attitudes.

### **Results**

### *Data*

***Is there a significant difference in pre-test scores between the disability awareness class and the general education humanities class? No,  $p=.253$***

Data was analyzed using a one-way ANOVA, results showed no significant difference in pre scores between the disability awareness class and the general education humanities class, one-way ANOVA ( $F(1,50)=1.34, p=.253$ ). There is no significant difference, evidence  $p=.253$ , being more than  $p=.05$ , a value of significant difference. This indicated that both classes started the semester with similar attitudes towards PWD. Mean scores and significance probability reported in Table 1.

***Is there a significant difference in post-test scores between the disability awareness class and the general education humanities class? No,  $p=.344$***

Data was analyzed using a one-way ANOVA, results showed no significant difference in post scores between the disability awareness class and the general education humanities class, one-way ANOVA ( $F(1,50)=.913, p=.344$ ). There is no significant difference, evidence  $p=.344$ , being more than  $p=.05$ . Mean scores and significance probability reported in Table 1.

It can be indicated that participants in both courses maintained similar attitudes from the beginning of the semester. However, it should be noted that the disability awareness class did have an improvement in mean score by 2.54 points. The general humanities course did also have an improvement in mean scores by 3.04 points. This is possibly attributed to the class covering the topic of disability awareness towards the end of the semester, right before the post test was administered.

**Table 1, One-way ANOVA comparing pre and post test between disability awareness class and general humanities class.**

Variable	DAC n=28	GHC n=24	Sig.
Pre test	18.75	16.79	.253
Post test	16.21	13.75	.344

DAC= disability awareness class

GHC= general humanities class

*Is there a significant change in the students' score on the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons (ATDP) scale after taking the disability awareness class? Yes, .008*

The disability awareness class is bimodal, meaning 17 participants scored 0 to 20 on the ATDP scale (high scorer group) and 11 participants scored 21 or higher on the ATDP scale (low scorer group). This prompted further analysis of the two groups using a paired sample t-test.

The high scorer group had no significance for pre test (M=14.35, SD=3.71) and post test (M=14.76, SD=12.51) conditions  $t(16) = -.145$ ,  $p=.886$ . This indicates that these students already had positive attitudes towards PWD prior to the class, and continued to maintain those positive attitudes after completion of the class. Mean scores and significance probability reported in Table 2.

The low scorer group had a significant change in scores. The pre test (M=25.55, SD=2.91) and post test (M=18.45, SD=6.99) conditions  $t(10)=3.316$ ,  $p=.008$ . This is a significant difference evidence by .008 being less than  $p=.05$ . There was an improvement in mean score by 7.1 points from the pre to the post test. This indicated that this portion of participant's attitudes

significantly changed in positivity from the beginning of the class to the completion of the course. Mean scores and significance probability reported in Table 3.

**Table 2, Paired sample t-test of differences within pre and post for disability awareness class for high scorers.**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>High Scorers n=17</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Pre test	14.35	-
Post test	14.76	.886

**Table 3, Paired sample t-test of differences within pre and post for disability awareness class for low scorers.**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Low Scorers n=11</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
Pre test	25.55	-
Post test	18.45	.008*

\*= indicated significant difference

***What component of the disability awareness class had the strongest influence on participants in the disability awareness class' attitudinal change toward PWD?***

Participants in the disability awareness class ranked the following categories: media awareness, person first language, service learning, history of people with disabilities and accessibility awareness, most to least effective. The rankings of most effective are reported in Table 4. Thirteen participants listed person first language as the most effective component. The ratings for least effective are reported in Table 5. Fifteen students ranked history of PWD as the least effective component.

**Table 4, Rankings for “most important” class aspect, ranked from greatest of most important to lesser of most important.**

<b>Most Important</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Person first language	13
Service Learning	10
Media awareness	2
Accessibility Awareness	2
History of people with disabilities	1

**Table 5, Rankings for “least important” class aspect, ranked from greatest of least important to lesser of least important.**

<b>Least Important</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
History of people with disabilities	15
Service Learning	6
Media awareness	4
Accessibility Awareness	2
Person first language	1

### **Discussion**

The data for the disability awareness class was unique in the fact that it was bimodal. This made comparing the change in scores between the disability awareness class and the humanities class difficult due to their projection of score difference. That is why it appears,

when looking at the two classes, that there was not an impact of attitudes for students who took the disability awareness class compared to the general education humanities class.

However, as mentioned previously, when the disability class was split into the high scorer and low scorer groups, there was a significant change.

There are a few reasons as to why there was a split in scores amongst the participants. One reason is the high scorers who signed up to take the disability awareness class could have already had positive attitude towards PWD, and that intrigued them to want to take the class. This aligns with a previously done study that noted student's pre test scores on the ATDP indicated positive attitudes towards PWD, and there was not a significant change in post scores (Zychlinski, Ben-Ezra, & Raz, 2016). Further more, 18 participants listed having regular interactions with PWD. These interactions ranged from occurring everyday to every month. People who experience meaningful and personal interactions with PWD form positive attitudes as a result (Page & Islam, 2015). These factors could be indicators as to why there was division of scores in the class.

Another impactful factor on the data was the importance of person first language. For students in the disability awareness class, thirteen out of twenty-eight participants, almost half of the class, marked this as the most influential. One student noted, "Person first language influenced my attitude towards PWD because it shows how much language and your words can affect people. By using person first language I think it also influences your mindset to pay more attention to the way PWD are treated by society".

Person first language helps to break stigma that often comes with putting a disability before a person (Jensen, Pease, Lambert, Hickman, Robinson, McCoy, & King, 2013). When people change their use of words, and ensure the person is put before their disability, it is

promoting attitudinal change in the speakers and others around them. It additionally promotes inclusion and the feeling of community, regardless of a disability (Jensen et al., 2013).

Participants may have felt these impactful factors of person first language and led to them selecting this aspect as the most influential part of the disability awareness class.

### *Limitations*

There were multiple factors that influenced data results. The first is small sample size. This was secondary to numerous students not taking both the pre test and the post test, resulting in their scores being excluded from data analysis. Additionally within this small sample size, there were 15 males compared to 37 females. This did not allow for the comparison of how different genders perceive disability.

Another factor was that it is possible students did not attend every single class during the semester. This can create gaps in their knowledge, e.g. they missed the day that the importance of media was discussed in depth. These gaps of knowledge could effect how they answered the ATDP scale. The next limitation is human error, many students could have misinterpreted or read the questions wrong. Also, students could have not taken answering the questions seriously, as it was an extra credit opportunity for them rather than a graded assignment.

The last limitation is students answering the survey how they feel the ATDP scale should be answered. Often times with a self reported survey, participants feel the need to provide a self-deemed socially acceptable answer (Loo, 2001). This would have in return provided an inaccurate representation of their attitudes.

### *Delimitations*

In addition from the small sample size secondary to students not completing both the pre and post test, the size was affected by the study being administered to only two classes. The disability awareness class and the generally humanities class were only observed for one semester, with only one group of students. Additional semesters could have helped to show a data trend for one particular semester of students, given a larger male participation and provided a difference in significant change pre and post test scores.

### *Recommendations*

While the disability class is having a positive effect on the students who take it, there are still areas to increase attitudes, especially in the students who come in with positive attitudes by providing more knowledge. The two aspects of the class that should not change are person first language and service learning, both being ranked as first and second respectively as “most important” for influential factors in the disability awareness course. The curriculum should be adjusted regarding the history of PWD, accessibility awareness and media awareness based on participant’s responses to what was the most influential in their learning.

For history of PWD, students learned how PWD were treated throughout history, with the focus of unfair and unequal treatment. In Li, Wu & Ong’s study, participants learned about influential people in history who had a disability. Participants reported how it impactful in shaping their opinions of PWD to be positive (2014). The class could change its focus from negative history such as institutionalization of PWD to important positive milestones achieved by PWD, having potential to be more impactful towards students.

For accessibility awareness, students not only learned about it in the disability awareness class, but also went out into the community and inspected public places of

business to see if it is correct with ADA regulations. This appeared to not be effective with students. In a study done by Pivik et al., middle school students took part in a virtual reality wheelchair experience. In the virtual simulation, students came across different barriers, both physical and attitudinal. This helped improve student's knowledge of accessibility barriers (2002). A virtual reality simulator would provide the experience and a new perspective of using a wheelchair.

Lastly, for media awareness students examine how PWD are portrayed in the media and have to provide examples. A suggestion to make this more impactful is for students to study the different theories that are associated with media portrayal of PWD. One example is the theory of implicit anticipatory responses. This states that a stimuli, such as media, can condition a person to have a response, whether it be positive or negative (Byrad, 1988). By studying theories, students may better understand how media and attitudinal responses are related. These suggestions are to enhance the impact of all factors regarding the disability awareness class.

Even though there are some aspects of the class that could be potentially altered, the disability awareness class still has an impact on student's attitudes. Currently, the class is being offered to fulfill requirements towards student in particular majors, such as allied health professions. The university and department the class is run out of should consider offering the class as credit towards a humanities course for basic university requirements. This would encourage more students, not just those interested in working with PWD and related major fields, to take the class. This could help to further promote positive attitudes with thin the university community and create an environment that is not restricted due to

attitudes. The disability awareness class could have a positive and powerful impact on the student body if offered to a larger scale of students.

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