

# The Social Model of Disability: A View from the College Library

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Kathy Torvik's article "Transitioning to a Social Model of Disability" draws much-needed attention to a new approach: viewing disability as a "social" rather than a "medical" phenomenon. According to this model, disability is a variation on human experience, rather than a special pathology. With this social construct, we can begin to visualize disability as a neutral function around which we construct neutral institutions. We therefore routinely develop organizations and society to meet the full range of human needs.

I have taken this approach to look at how we provide for students in the college library, and in particular those with a range of visual and visually-related cognitive disabilities. Increasingly, as a reference librarian, I have encountered students who:

- find reading difficult
- simply don't like to read or read under duress
- have a range of visual disabilities across a spectrum, from presbyopia to blindness
- respond much better to audiovisual inputs.

These students are part of a broad spectrum of people who struggle with text, especially in community colleges.

How do we serve these students in a college library? The medical approach suggests that this is a "special" situation. Despite age, misfortune or genetic inheritance, colleges expect students to engage with text, because that is what college is about. When students can't engage with text, they become candidates for the special services that the college is legally required to provide. Sometimes these special services don't really fit, especially when the "disability" may fall anywhere along a diverse and complicated spectrum.

A social construct, on the other hand, might be that the student enters the library and seamlessly encounters a range of ready-made resources that provide an alternative to the conventional printed text, if the student so chooses. These may be:

- a stack of cheap mp3 players preloaded with current books
- a selection of large-print books
- a range of cd audiobooks, which are mostly now available for a few dollars more than the print version.

Unfortunately, the student will almost never encounter that situation in a two-year or four-year college library anywhere in the US. For example, the Orbis-Cascade consortium of 36 academic libraries in the Northwest serves 211,000 students, and includes 28 mil-

lion items.<sup>1</sup> Of these 28 million, somewhere between 600 and 1700 are audiobooks<sup>2</sup>—a truly insignificant number.

Let's take a famous recent example: *The Audacity of Hope* by Barack Obama. The audio CD costs \$13 on Amazon, \$15 as an audio download, and \$16 in print hardcover. This is the number three non-fiction audiobook on Amazon.<sup>3</sup> Print copies are in virtually every college library and public library in the US. Within Oregon, California and Washington, over 145 public libraries have the audiobook, ranging from huge multi-branch library systems to tiny rural libraries. However, in the three-state area, only three college libraries have the audiobook: Pierce College, Seattle University and Bellevue Community College.<sup>4</sup> In Oregon and California, it appears that not a single college library carries the audiobook, which incidentally won a Grammy. More than 1100 public libraries in the US have the audiobook,<sup>5</sup> but you could literally drive for days to find a copy in a college library.

This is certainly a remarkable and curious situation. I think the answer lies partly in tradition. Formerly, most audiobooks were fiction, and hence considered recreational reading. However, the market changed some years ago, and now serious non-fiction is a huge and flourishing part of the audiobook market.

Of course, many typical college books are not published in audio format. It would be hard to listen to a book about calculus or photography. Nevertheless, the audiobook inventory now includes almost all recent (and best-selling) books in history, politics, travel, religion, biography, memoir, current events, popular, literary and classic fiction, drama, and poetry. Many such books do not require a close engagement with the text, and could be equally useful as either an aural or a textual experience.

Another cause for this gap may lie in the medical model that Kathy postulates. Colleges may look at the vast range of visual and learning disabilities as a special construct that can be accommodated by special services, partly because those services have already been embedded in law. Public libraries on the other hand do not have this fallback position, and thus provide the learning experience that the person wants, not what the structure dictates.

What is the solution to this odd situation? First, colleges have to find out if students and faculty truly want audiobooks, which requires a close and honest consultation with their college community. Once the need is established, colleges may have to simply invest at the appropriate level. Another possibility may be for college libraries to enter into cooperative arrangements with the local public library to share audiobook collections. There are plenty of precedents for this type of community collaboration. On a macro scale, large library consortia such as the Orbis-Cascade Alliance could set up joint shared audio collections that could float as needed within the member college libraries. Libraries are very

accustomed to these shared systems. The Orbis-Cascade Alliance, for example, already shuttles 430,000 books and DVDs annually amongst the 35 member institutions.

Learning needs and desires are changing in colleges, propelled by changes in our student population. Students are older, perhaps more challenged. Many are uncomfortable with text, and may be more used to audiovisual stimuli derived from our media-saturated society. Colleges and college libraries need to keep a close and sympathetic eye on how student learning is changing, and to adapt to any new technologies that help us meet those changes.

## Endnotes

1. "What is Summit?" Lane Community College Library <<http://www.lanec.edu/library/circ/summit.htm>>.

2. "Search results for 'compact disc\*' > 'Audio book, etc.' limited to Summit." Summit Beta <<http://tinyurl.com/6ym4j3>>. The lower figure represents audiobooks of narrative fiction and non-fiction. The higher figure includes CD language learning sets and recorded poetry and drama.

3. "*The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (Audio CD): Product Details." Amazon.com <<http://tinyurl.com/6n8bsr>>.

4. "The audacity of hope [thoughts on reclaiming the American dream] /Barack Obama. Sound Recording : Non-music : 5 sound discs (6 hr.)." WorldCat. OCLC FirstSearch. Random House Audio ed., Books on Tape ed., OverDrive Audio Book ed. <<http://firstsearch.oclc.org/>>.

5. "The audacity of hope [thoughts on reclaiming the American dream] /Barack Obama." OCLC: 73300278. <<http://firstsearch.oclc.org/>>.