Establishing a Presumption of Competence through the Tattoo

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Biography

Christopher Bass is a Ph.D. candidate in English Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and has more than a decade's experience teaching English in public high schools across the United States. His research focuses on disability studies, critical literacy, and English methods.

Abstract

In my action research of teaching English Language Arts to high school students, I conduct narrative inquiry into my efforts to push against the normative, ableist pressures mandated by the high school's administration. The high school is located in an affluent White suburb of a large city in the United States. As the teacher-researcher, I investigate how the tattoo genre could model asset-based rhetoric and initiate a presumption of student competence toward creating a more inclusive anti-ableist classroom.

Keywords

Challenging the Ableism of the IEP:
Anti-ableist Teaching in the Secondary English Classroom

I have been a high school inclusion[1] English Language Arts (ELA) teacher for more than a decade. My school, Des Plaines Public High School (DPHS)[2], is located in one of the many suburbs of a large city in the United States. The affluent community is predominately White and focused on academic success. While DPHS prides itself on having many students enrolled in Advanced Placement and Honors courses, their institutional satisfaction hides the challenges diverse learners experience in DPHS's ableist curriculum. For many years, I was complicit in perpetuating the ableist values of our curriculum.

In my ELA classes, we often engaged with literary portrayals of race, gender, sexuality, and economic status in the curriculum. These portrayals led to challenging, important conversations with a mutually respectful exchange of perspectives among the students. Though I was proud to have reworked my curriculum to assure that it contained texts that reflected the social and cultural contexts of the students in my courses, I had not considered the absence of autistic perspectives. There was neither an autistic protagonist nor an autistic author in the curriculum. Worse yet, some of the canonized texts that I loved to teach had problematic portrayals of disability, which I never critically examined with the students. I had been completely oblivious to the othering and stereotyping that my teaching was inflicting on students. At the same time, I had consciously crafted a curriculum that avoided harmful stereotyping or absence of other minoritized students. Far from being an open and inclusive space, my ELA classroom was harmful for autistic students because of my ignorance around representations and experiences of ability.

In effect, I had silenced the autistic lives and relationships in my classroom. While it is uncomfortable, as teachers, to recognize our complacency in enforcing exclusionary bias, the time and effort to seek opportunities to develop anti-ableist instructional methods is worthwhile.

However, the flexibility required can be challenging in established institutions and competitive communities like DPHS. Disability Studies scholar Linda Ware (2003) notes that "[i]nstitutional structures have long served to authorize particular narratives of disability, histories of deficiency, and the very language used to name disability experiences will not be easily disentangled" (p. 135). Once I embraced a more flexible, malleable definition of ability, I began to appreciate the the autistic lives of students.

Coming to Terms with Ableism and Inclusion

Ableism is a term used to describe discrimination based on assumptions regarding what makes a healthy body and normal mind (Campbell, 2015). Ableism perpetuates a belief that there is a singular normative approach to living and thinking as a human. This ideology often emphasizes the deficits of differing abilities outside the societal notions of the normative and assumes that differences in ability need to be helped, corrected, or eliminated (Baglieri, 2017). Perhaps most disturbing, ableism is often at work in the inclusion classrooms. Julie Allan, a leading scholar in the field of Disability Studies in Education, argues: "Well intentioned efforts to develop inclusive policy and legislation appear to always lead to the repetition of exclusion and add to the confusion, frustration, guilt, and exhaustion experienced by teachers" (2008, p. 25). Often inclusion teachers remain unaware of the ways in which their ableist bias excludes students. Though differently abled students may be physically present in the classroom, ableism often excludes those students from being accepted and included as a whole person within the classroom (Kraft & Keifer-Boyd, 2013). Moreover, defining inclusion as a physical space in which select students are enrolled perpetuates deficit thinking and assumptions around abilities (Baglieri, Bejoian, & Broderick, et al, 2011). And, labeling classrooms as either inclusion or general education spaces creates a false dichotomy that "justifies sorting people according to their differences" (Keifer-Boyd, Bastos, Richardson, & Wexler, 2018, p. 2). Such sorting

undermines inclusive pedagogical practices.

In presenting my action research of interventions into and reflections on my teaching, I inquire into how and why I turned toward disability studies theories, specifically the values of inclusive pedagogy. Inclusive pedagogy recognizes that inclusion is a *process*, not merely a label or space (Artiles & Dyson, 2005; Danforth, 2015). Inclusive pedagogy pushes against the social and cultural forces of ableism and believes that all students, no matter their ability, are harmed by deficit assumptions around ability. Rather than view inclusion as the definition of a space in which there are students who demand accommodations, inclusive teaching is a process that values the assets of all abilities in all spaces. Heshusius (2004) explains that inclusive teaching is a process that promotes "more participatory modes of consciousness within which the constructed separation between other and self begins to blur, as the self begins to consciously lower its boundaries that were constructed to exclude" (p. 147).

Presumption of Competence

In exploring inclusive pedagogy, I came to appreciate Biklen's (2005) concept of *presumption of competence* , as a way to push against the ableist pressures of the DPHS administration's proximity and placement notions of inclusion. Biklen, a DS scholar and leading advocate of facilitated communication (FC) in the United States, describes a presumption of competence as a belief that "[p]eople classified as autistic, even those who cannot speak, are thinking people with ideas about their lives and their relationship to the world" (2005, p.1). Teaching with a presumption of competence demands that teachers create a learning environment that allows all students to be experts of their lived experiences. I recognize that too often I have taught with ableist assumptions that focused only on the lives and relationships of the "able bodied" students in my classroom.

In order to teach with a presumption of competence, I had to do more than merely meet

requirements of student IEPs, I had to be an anti-ableist teacher. To be an anti-ableist teacher one must understand how ableism is at work within the school, locate ways in which the curriculum undermines student abilities, and adjust instructional planning to create space for the multiple subjectivities of students to be expressed. Put simply, all students deserve an opportunity to think about and share their lives and develop relationships with their peers. Biklen and Burke (2018) assert that presuming competence "is a stance, an outlook, a framework for educational engagement" that avoids ableist assumptions and seeks to find differing modes through which autistic students may demonstrate individual agency (p. 273).

However, teaching with a presumption of competence in a school with entrenched ableist pressures, like DPHS, can be daunting. Often, both students and teachers are unsure how to respond to and engage with divergent perspectives. Therefore, after much trial and error, I learned that a presumption of competence demands that teachers first acknowledge the ableist barriers present in many inclusion classrooms. As teachers, we may have been complicit in ableist assumptions about what autistic students can and cannot do.

As a teacher-researcher, I use action research and narrative inquiry to explore the effects of integrating asset-based rhetoric in the classroom. This work was led by a central question: *Would asset-based rhetoric foster a presumption of competence in the secondary high school classroom?* To respond to my action research question, I conduct narrative inquiry of my teaching about tattoos as an anti-ableist visual art and literary genre that employs asset-based rhetoric. The tattoo, as an asset-based rhetorical genre, is one of many different genres and methods that I have applied to my teaching as I continue to work towards teaching with a presumption of competence in the classroom..

Fostering a Presumption of Competence
via Asset-based Rhetoric at DPHS

Most of my inclusion classrooms at DPHS have had autistic students, so I am drawn to Biklen's theory of the *presumption of competence*. My experience working with autistic students is not unique. Rozema (2018) claims that "nearly every English teacher will have at least one student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) among their student populations" (p. 3). In making this claim, he cites the Center for Disease Control, which found that in 2018 autism now affects 1 in 59 children. I would add that almost all teachers, irrespective of their discipline, will work with autistic students, so it is important for all teachers to consider how we can move towards teaching with a presumption of competence.

In reflecting on how to teach with a presumption of competence, it became apparent that too often the rhetoric used to describe our autistic students at DPHS is laden with deficit assumptions. Often, descriptions and definitions of ability are rooted in binaries that perpetuate the deficit based, medical model of ability. As someone who facilitated communication amongst autistic people diagnosed as non-communicative, Biklen gained insight into the varying acts of communication that get silenced, interpreted as merely an uncontrollable physical movement, and miss-diagnosed as non-rhetorical. Often, institutions like DPHS employ rhetoric in ways that silence differing abilities. Rhetoric and disability studies scholar, Catherine J. Pendergast (2003), notes that "to be disabled mentally is to be disabled rhetorically" (p. 202). She finds that students who fail to communicate in the normative manner are often "treated as devoid of rhetoric" by the ableist habits of institutions (p. 203). These students get ignored, misplaced, or disciplined because their acts of communication break fixed habits around the normal rhetorical modes commonly valued in institutions. Anti-ableist educators must push against ableist rhetoric. Rhetoric and disability studies scholar, Margaret Price (2011) adds that "[r]hetoric is not simply the words we speak or write or sign, nor is it simply what we look like or sound like.

It is who we are, and beyond that, it is *who we are allowed to be*" (p. 27). Inclusive educators must seek opportunities to allow students to be fully competent, successful, members of the classroom community.

Establishing a presumption of competence demands that teachers employ a rhetorical flexibility that pushes against binaries and emphasizes what I call an *asset-based rhetoric*. I define asset-based rhetoric as an intentional rhetorical move away from binary definitions and ableist biases about ability. An asset-based rhetorical perspective values divergent, atypical traits and pushes against simplistic binary, ableist jargon. For example, my district often references students as a general education student or special education student. This is a false rhetorical binary: Being a special education student implies he or she has an "abnormality" that requires accommodating while general education peers have no such association—they are deemed "normal." The very word accommodation carries a negative connotation of a forced adjustment to the general education curriculum. These rhetorical terms undermine the rich lives and relationships of autistic students labeled as special education.

Asset-based rhetoric pushes classroom discourse to make rhetorical choices that enable teachers to capture the fluidity of ability. Scholars of rhetoric and disability studies, James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson (2001) assert that those who foster truly inclusive environments understand how language shapes the social world and implements "strategies for using language to further the inclusion and self-empowerment of the disabled" (p. 12). The authors encourage teachers to shift the classroom rhetoric away from binary notions of ability. Asset-based rhetoric helps create language that re-imagines the social order of the classroom as a space that avoids binary thinking about ability and views everyone as capable, competent individuals.

I first moved towards asset-based rhetoric when I consciously stopped using the term "autistic" and actively used neurodiverse, a phrase coined by autistic scholar Judy Singer in the late

1980s. The neurodiverse community pushes against the deficit rhetoric too often associated with autism and appreciates that autistic lives include a wide range of cognitive styles, strengths and weaknesses, gifts and peculiarities. Critical disability scholar Anne McGuire (2016) explains, "neurodiversity references the assumption that human neurology is neither static nor singular," but rather encompasses a wide range of variation (p. 59). Rather than remain separated by differing diagnosed conditions, neurodiversity links a wide range of neurodivergent voices. As teachers, a rhetorical shift in how we describe our students pushes us to consider how we can make our classroom more inclusive. Rather than merely "accommodating" autistic students, I needed to restructure my curriculum to be more inclusive of the diverse lived experiences and relationships of all students.

Asset-based Rhetoric in an Anti-ableist Curriculum

Part of applying asset-based rhetoric is assuring that atypical, divergent acts of communication amongst the students are valued and not punished. Students should feel comfortable exploring different modes of communication. Recognizing the value of differing modes of communication gives students a rhetorical empowerment to express their lived experiences. Disability scholar, Joseph Straus (2013) describes autistic rhetoric as purposeful: "Like poetry, especially modernist poetry, autistic language often involves unusual, idiosyncratic combinations of elements and images, with as much pleasure associated with the sounds of the words as with their meaning" (p. 469). Teaching with a presumption of competence values divergent acts of rhetoric as purposeful—filled with poetic potential. The social environment of the inclusive classroom listens for and engages with divergent rhetorical acts that communicate the lived experiences of students, which have been unheard in typical classrooms. If we value every student as a fully thinking person with ideas and experiences to share, then, as inclusive teachers, we must assure the classroom allows all students opportunities to be felt and seen as competent.

Working with asset-based rhetoric pushes the classroom to question the idea of normal. For most students at DPHS "being normal" seems to be a static set of beliefs. Normal is an un-interrogated truth passed on from upperclassman to freshmen, year after year, via social pressures, accepted codes of conduct, and social routines. Norms exist as a set of standards that determine a wide range of acceptable actions, particularly how we communicate. Individuals who go against the norm are often stigmatized in differing ways: either socially, amongst peers, or academically, through placement in differing academic tracks and institutionalized codes of conduct. Often the regulations and application of norms go unnoticed; however, disability studies scholar Tanya Titchkosky (2015) notes that valuing differing perspectives on abilities shows that "norms change radically over time and from place to place" (p. 131). Therefore, using asset-based rhetoric creates the potential to examine norms in a way that previous instructional approaches have failed to do.

Teacher-as-Researcher: A Practice-Based Narrative Inquiry

The primary function of action teacher research is to improve pedagogical practice rather than to produce theoretical academic knowledge. Teacher research is a methodology that advocates for needed change in the community in which the teacher is a member. Social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1948) coined the term, action research, and defined it as a cyclical process. Lewin developed action research as "a critique of existing forms of research, on the basis that the research is never neutral, but is used by a researcher for a specific purpose, which is often linked with the desire to predict and control" (as cited in McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 41). The term action research, connotes the purpose of doing research, which Lewin believed went unacknowledged by too many researchers. Education scholar, John Elliott (1991) more succinctly defines action research as "the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it" (p. 69). Put simply, research is done to enact a desired change in response

to that research.

In many ways, teacher research, which is often critical of the researched social environment, builds on John Dewey's emphasis that critical reflection is key to teacher development. Dewey (1916, 1938) warns that too often educational researchers jump from one new idea to the next without reflection. He defines education as a reflective, "continuous reconstruction of experience" (1916, p. 80). Therefore, for teachers to continually learn, they must investigate educational theories such as inclusion from within their teaching environment and enact change to the environment in response to their critical reflection.

Methodological Plan and Narrative Inquiry

Such a critical research process is not linear. In many ways, active teacher research is an ongoing process that continually adapts and reflects on the changing community. Crotty (1998) notes that critical research is a "cyclical process (better seen perhaps as a *spiraling* process for there is movement forward and upward) or reflection and action" (p. 175). Though cyclical, the research process must be planned and purposeful in order to push for action that moves to change in the community. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993), both leading scholars in education research, define teacher research as a "systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers about their own school and classroom" (p. 23). This systematic, spiraling process of critical inquiry must be planned and well organized. While there are differing approaches to focus action research, I adhere to the action-reflection cycle. Elliott (1991) outlines the five key steps to the cyclical process: identifying and clarifying the general idea; reconnaissance; constructing the general plan; developing the next action steps; implementing the next action steps. Repeat is an additional sixth step, which assures the research process spirals back into action and critical reflection.

I applied Elliott's (1991) cyclical steps to my research for a full year of teaching. Prior to be-

ginning the research process, I received the required Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval as well as DPHS district permission for classroom research. The class in which I focused my research was a semester long course. I taught two sections of the class each semester. Over the course of one year's research, I worked with four different sets of students and had completely new students at the start of the second semester. This benefited my research in two ways: First, I was able to collect data from roughly 100 students–student writing (journals, drafts, final drafts), recorded classroom discussions, targeted questioning, and a teacher-research journal. Second, not only did I apply the action-reflection cycle multiple times each semester, I was able to have a fresh start at the beginning of the second semester with a completely new set of students. This was advantageous because I had an opportunity to re-teach the materials from the prior semester and adjust my action steps based on a full semester's worth of reflections.

In doing teacher research, I relied on narrative inquiry as a method to help guide my listening. Rather than begin my research by *asking* a formal question and following a clear methodological plan, narrative inquiry demands that research begin by *listening* to the stories being shared by the community, then these stories lead the research process (Gorden et al, 2007).

Listening and sharing counter-narratives is the power of narrative inquiry as a research method. While education researcher John Creswell (2013) notes that "the methods of conducting a narrative study do not follow a lockstep approach" (p. 73). He acknowledges that narrative research always begins with listening to "the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals" (p. 70). As a teacher-researcher, I sought to create moments for students to share stories around concepts of ability and planned to pay particular attention to counter-narratives, that is stories that pushed against the dominant perspective of ableism. After hearing specific students share differing counter-narratives, I would continue to track those students and collect their narratives throughout the semester. These narratives would become my "field texts" that might reveal larger themes or ideas around inclusive pedagogy (Clandinin

& Connelly, 2000). It was my hope that this plan would align with the founding principle of the Disability Rights Movement (DRM)–"nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 2000). Put simply, I could not do work on inclusive pedagogy without listening to and sharing the divergent stories of students who have been ignored or negated because of a diagnosed ability.

Change in the Social Environment: Enacting Asset-based Rhetoric via Tattoos as Models for Asset-based Rhetoric

In the first semester of the academic year, our opening assignment was a "window frame" activity in which students were asked to answer typical icebreaker questions: What activities do you participate in? What is your favorite movie? What object best represents you? The students would sketch an answer to each question in a quadrant of the window frame on their paper. These became the "window to the student," which they shared with the class. While this assignment worked to help get the students talking amongst themselves, reviewing last semester's student portfolios revealed the inherent ableism of that opening task.

In many ways this first assignment reinforced the ableist norms that undermined the inclusive intentions of my work. The activity relied on binaries to get students to define themselves: Each student was expected to be either good or bad at certain tasks, or have favorites and least favorites. As examples, to get students thinking, I always referenced the mainstream activities—sports and popular clubs. Often, when asked to present the windows, the students who had filled the most into each windowpane (those who did more activities) spoke longer in front of the classroom while those with less spoke little. As a result, there was no impetus for students to break the binaries and share themselves as anything other than a normal, typical teenager that fit into a typical, four-pane window.

Therefore, for the second semester, I wanted to replace the window frame activity with a new genre that would better employ asset-based rhetoric. Ultimately, after reviewing different

genres, I chose to integrate the tattoo into the curriculum. The tattoo works because, as critical literacy scholar David Kirkland (2009) explains, "the tattoo itself is filled with the intentions of the inscribed, emanating from individual imagination. Individuals choose a tattoo, a semiotic form and literacy artifact, that in some ways makes sense to them" but does not have to fit into normative expectations for others (p. 388). In many ways the tattoo is a divergent genre, a genre that encourages individuality rather than the uniformity common in the traditional plots of memoirs or persuasive essays. As a result, the tattoo creates the needed space for the visual expression of asset-based rhetoric. Tattoos "have the function of providing symbolic information about the bearer's personal interests, social position, relationship, or self-definition" in a way that breaks the mold from the binary ideals that appeared in last semester's window-frame activity (Sanders, 1989, p. 21).

While I personally don't have a tattoo, many of my friends and family members are inked with images that express an aspect of themselves that goes typically unnoticed by others. Their semiotic expressions align with Kirkland's findings that getting "'tatted up' affords [him] agency over inscription, over how he is perceived in public spaces, and over how [he] could place himself and his meanings within a larger human context" (2009, p. 376). The goal of this first assignment was to encourage students' agency in presenting themselves. I wanted to break the standard frame in which we had worked last semester. The malleable, divergent, and visual nature of the tattoo as a genre allows the students to use asset-based rhetoric and describe aspects of themselves that others may find negative.

Interpretation is a key aspect of working with asset-based rhetoric. My goal in using asset-based rhetoric is to get students to redefine aspects of themselves about which some people may fear, judge, or assume to be negative. Wilton (1991) explains that there is a misunderstanding about tattoos and "the lack of knowledge available to the general population has prevented understanding, which in turn has perpetuated a widespread fear and contempt of skin art, those

creating skin art, and those collecting skin art" (p. 73). The tattoo, as a misunderstood visual art genre, links with the goals of asset-based rhetoric, which seeks to reclaim misunderstood aspects of one's abilities. Moreover, the interdisciplinary nature of the tattoo works in the English classroom because it moves beyond words to include a broad set of semiotics that best convey the assets with which students identify.

In preparing to teach the second semester, I noted that the class had 24 Junior-level students. Of the 24 students, there were six IEPs. Four of the IEPs were autistic students. Two other students had severe anxiety and depression for which they also had IEPs. I wanted to assure that the tattoo assignment afforded all lives and relationships to be shared with the classroom.

Last semester's window frame activity took two days; however, I planned for the tattoo assignment to take a full week. Rather than quickly assign the task of sketching a tattoo, the students were given models, a brief explanation of tattoos as divergent genres, time to research asset-based symbols for their own tattoos, and ample time to trace and color those images to a final piece of paper. Finally, in addition to the visual image, I would ask the students to write a brief analysis of the tattoo and informally share the image with the class. Throughout the week, I videotaped student dialogue and kept research notes with general summaries of the classroom environment. I also planned to keep and code both student tattoos and written reflections. All of these collected documents became field-texts that might reveal counter-narratives that could create narratives of working with tattoos. The following narratives are of the students' experiences as I facilitate asset-based rhetoric and move towards a presumption of competence in the classroom.

Asset-Based Rhetoric in Ink: Tattoos of Competence

When the bell rings on the second day of class, I get right to the assignment. I want to start the class enthusiastically, "Good morning! Hopefully everyone successfully made their way

through their schedule yesterday."

After the greeting, I review the day's lesson plan, which appeared behind me on the screen: "Rather than do the typical icebreakers that I have done before, we are going to try something different this year. Let's just jump into it. Does anyone here have a tattoo?"

I look around and see several surprised faces.

Stacy responds, "don't you have to be 18?"

Marco adds from across the room, "Not if you go with your parents. I do have a tattoo. I went with my mom and got one."

Sure enough, Marco reveals the small ink on his forearm in the shape of a rose.

I ask, "why a rose?"

"It's for my grandma. I got it last year when she died. We lived together. So, we were pretty close." He puffs his chest as the tone of his voice hints at a lingering sadness for his recent loss.

"Thank you for sharing, Marco. Anyone here want to get a tattoo at some point in their lives?" About half of the students raise their hands.

"Wait! Do you have any tattoos?" Marco asked before I could move on.

I admit to not having a tattoo, but see the value of having them:

"Tattoos can convey individuality. And, that is what we want to discuss today—what makes you unique? We are all going to create our own tattoos. Those of you who are not artists—don't worry we can trace images we find online."

I pause being cautious to not get ahead of myself. I need to clearly model asset-based rhetoric. "Before I talk more about tattoos, let's do a journal. Please take out your journals. I have paper for anyone who doesn't have theirs yet."

Once everyone has something on which to write, I turn to the journal prompt, which encourages the students to think about their divergence. I read the first slide:

"Tattoos are a kind of text that allow individuals to express themselves. There are

many reasons that people get tattoos—not all of them are positive. However, today we are going to use tattoos to celebrate one's divergence. Divergence means to be boldly different than the majority. There can be a lot of symbolism in the colors and ink styles that are used. Being divergent is often tied to being atypical. Atypical is the aspect of ourselves that makes us an individual or makes us stand out from the "norm." Sometimes we hide our divergent or atypical traits. Other times, people may judge us for these traits. BUT this is the chance for you to think about an aspect of yourself that others may find negative, but you see as an asset—a positive to your life. Tattoos are the perfect place to express those. Be proud of them."

As I read the slide, heads nod in response. I continue, "okay, the next slide has a bunch of prompts. Use these to get your mind thinking. These entries are personal, so you won't have to share these with the class. You have five minutes, so it's low stakes—just get your thoughts out."

I switch to the next slide, which was a series of questions:

Do you have any traits that make you stand out from others? Do you have any traits that some people assume to be negative, but you think are positive? Is there something about you that most people don't know? Have you ever been "diagnosed" by a doctor? What was that like? How does that impact you today? What are you proud of that most people may not know about you? Is there an aspect of yourself that your peers or teachers don't always understand?

The students work quietly as eyes dart from their journals to the screens and back to the journals. After around five minutes, I ask the students to pause their writing, and I formally introduce the tattoo assignment:

"So, you don't have to share your answers to the prompts. However, I hope you all understand that this is an environment that wants to value divergence and atypical traits. Our classroom is a stronger place when we all let our divergent selves be free. Okay. So, like I said earlier. We are making tattoos. Here is an example of mine [see Figure 1]. I will explain it in a minute, but I want to focus on the images first."

I walk around to show the students. As I walk around, student heads squirm to see the image.

I assert, "Remember! You are tracing these images. I traced them, too! So, you don't have to draw them by hand. Let's look at the screen again and see the assignment."

The assignment prompt is projected on the screen. It asks the students to locate three different symbols that convey their atypicality. The students are given three days to search for images online. After finding three images, they print the images and rearrange them to all connect. Finally, while tracing the three images, the students are asked to be intentional about their choices: color, image arrangement, thickness of lines, and size of images.

In addition to the tattoo itself, the students are expected to write an informal narrative analysis of two of the three images. There are different questions to consider in the analysis: Does this symbol make you atypical? Have you ever been judged for this symbol? Would people be surprised to learn this about you? How many people know about this symbol? How does this symbol strengthen your perspective? How comfortable are you about this sharing this symbol? Each of these questions leads the students into applying asset-based rhetoric in explaining how their tattoos convey divergence.

"Okay, before I let you all look for your symbols. First, I want to share mine."

I again hold up the tattoo that I traced, which contains a red tulip, rough outline of a lake, and three solid bars (see Figure 1).

"How many people were surprised by the red tulip on my tattoo?"

Most of the students raise their hands. I explain:

"I have to admit that I felt a little embarrassed to share this at first because I knew no one would understand the value of this symbol. The red tulip is the international symbol for Parkinson's. It is something that my grandmother had and my mom was recently diagnosed with. Does anyone know about Parkinson's?"

Figure 1. The image is of a rearranged clip art, traced, and sketched with color pencil, and approximately 6" x 8". Permission for publication granted by article author, Chris Bass.

A handful of students raise their hands.

Sam adds, "My grandfather has Parkinson's. He has had it for a while."

"Isn't that when your body shakes a lot?" The student next to him asked.

"Yes, but my grandpa actually doesn't shake much. Now, he has a hard time walking well. He has had it for a while."

"Right." I add. "There can be a lot of variation. Everyone is different. I included the tulip because, for me, Parkinson's is part of my divergence. For me, the tulip symbolizes the compassion, understanding, and love that I have gained from better understanding Parkinson's. Though challenging, it has made me stronger."

I then refocus the conversation to the students' journal prompts and encourage them to consider using their own thoughts to look for their own symbols. I reiterate, "not every symbol needs to be analyzed, but the goal is to express aspects of life that you value and others may not."

The students spend the remaining period either working on laptops or searching for symbols on their phones. As they search, many students share differing images with each other. After the students find an image, they store it to a google doc. Then, once they have collected three images, they print the document and begin re-arranging the images to form one tattoo. Over the next two days, the students work on finding symbols, piecing them into a larger tattoo, tracing that tattoo, and writing an analysis of two symbols.

After the workdays, the students come to class with completed tattoo designs. I greet each student as they walk in and overhear several students talking about the tattoos.

"I might actually get this tattoo on my ankle" I overheard Stacy say to her neighbor.

The bell rings, and I decide to build on the conversations already started:

"Good morning! Okay, today we are going to share our tattoos. It looks like many of you have them done and are ready to go! First, let's remember that this is an

informal presentation. You do not need to share the significance of all the symbols. The goal is to share two symbols that best convey your divergence or atypicality. We want to recognize how each of us is different than the other. To help guide your talk, I have a slide that reminds you what to say when it's your turn."

I pull up the slide that outlines the expectations: introduce yourself, hold up the tattoo, and explain two symbols. Does the symbol link to atypicality? Why is this significant to you? Is there significance to the design of the symbol itself?

Tattoos of Competence

After a few students present their tattoos, Amelia volunteered to go next. She walks confidently in front of the room. She holds up her tattoo, which is filled with brightly colored, detailed images. She takes a breath and points to an image of a lock, which is the largest image on the page (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. The hand drawn image uses both crayon and color pencil, and is approximately 11"x 8". Permission for publication granted by Amelia.

> "I am going to read from my paper. The lock is significant because it represents my
> struggle with anxiety and the ability to free myself from the tendency to close up
> and lock myself into my own mind. I allow anxiety and distress to rule my life and
> find myself holding my emotions in."

She pauses to take another breath. The class listens attentively. Few students fidget, almost all students look at Amelia as she speaks. As I scan the room, the students remain focused on Amelia—many students eyes seem to empathize with her comments. I am caught off guard by the classroom's attention. It seems as if they did not expect to hear such honest comments from one of their peers. I certainly had not received such focus from the class yet this year. Amelia

continues:

> "I seldom let others know how I really feel. In the past, I felt self-conscious and unworthy for feeling this way. I thought that others would judge me for being more quiet and reserved. With time I have learned to accept this, and be content with needing time to open up to others. However when I do open up, the person who I allowed myself to trust and get to know on a level that is no longer superficial will always possess the key to my heart, I will always feel comfortable and trusting with them. When I open up to someone, I put all of my trust in them."

Amelia notes that the bright colors represent her scattered personality, which highlights how challenging it is for her to focus in school.

"Thanks for sharing. Amelia. Beautiful image, and again your honesty helps us better understand where you are coming from. I wonder how many of us connect to feeling atypical about our anxiety and depression."

Annie raises her hand to go next. Her tattoo contains an image of a semi-colon, which I learn connects to Project Semicolon (2013). (See Figure 3.)

She explains that the organization "is for people who struggle with mental health issues like depression, anxiety, or suicidal things."

Annie speaks quietly as she explains her trials with mental health, but she ends saying:

> "I think these challenges have made me stronger, and I actually want to get this tattoo because a lot of people can relate to it and if they saw that I had the tattoo and that they had also been through the kind of stuff as well, then they wouldn't be afraid to open up to me."

Annie looks up with a smile and walks back to her seat. Her neighbor whispers something to her and places her hand on Annie's shoulder.
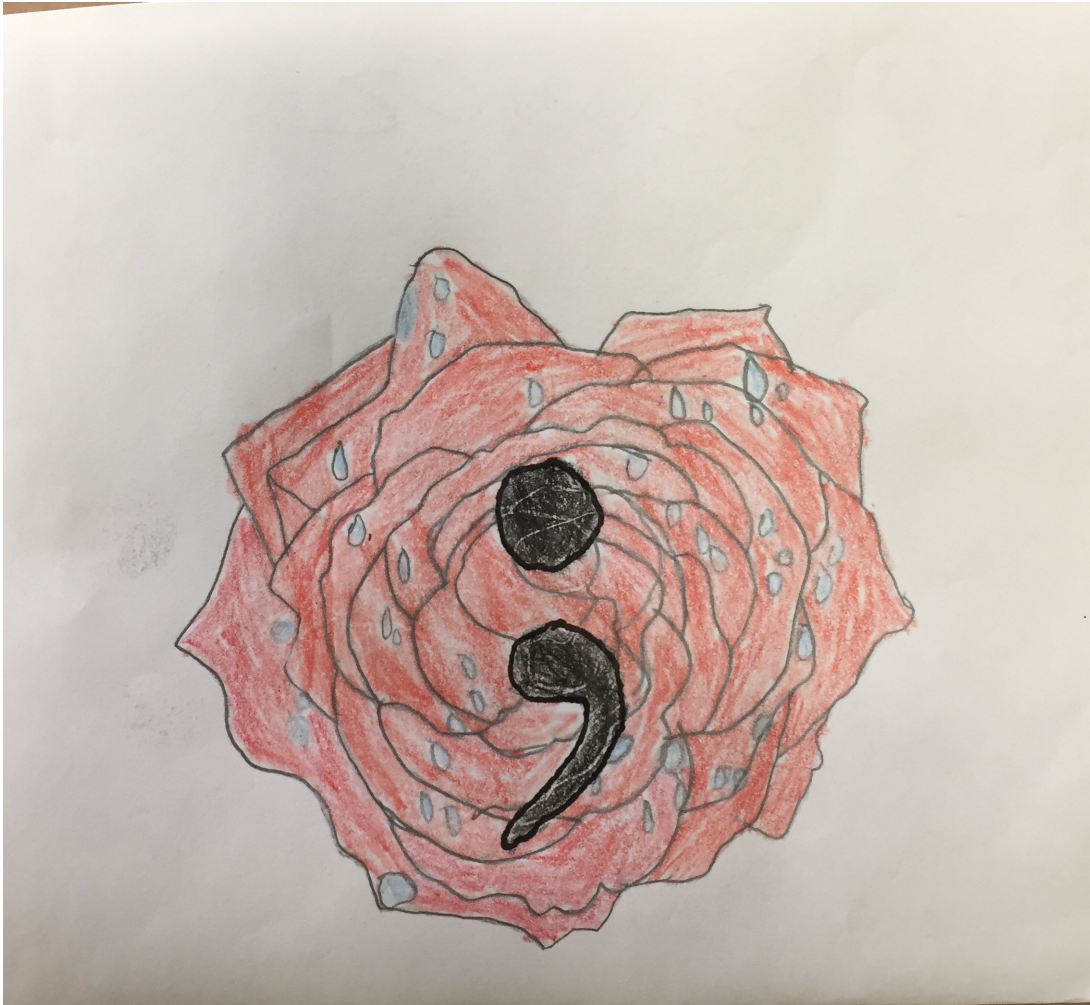
Figure 3. The image of a rearrange clip art, traced, and sketched with ink pen and color pencil, and is approximately 6"x 8". Permission for publication granted by Annie.

I respond, "Wow. I really appreciate the honesty that we have shared with these tattoos. We'll keep sharing and hopefully continue to learn about ourselves."

As the students continue to present, it becomes apparent that not every student applies the asset-based language like the first few. There are many students presenting information about their favorite sports team, school activity, or the cities where they were born; however, mixed amongst these tattoos are two more pieces that contain the semi-colon, which builds on Project Semicolon.

Interestingly, while four of the autistic students do not share images linked directly to neuro-diversity, the multi-colored puzzle piece, the international symbol for autism awareness, appears in two different tattoos. Each of these tattoos is designed by students who have autistic siblings. At first, I react to these images with concern—the puzzle piece is linked to the controversial organization Autism Speaks, which activists claim is too focused on curing autism rather than celebrating it; however, as I read over their analysis, each student notes that autism positively impacts their lives every day, and it helps them to see the world differently.

In her reflection, Stacy writes, "my sister reacts to sudden, loud noises and really bright lights. As a result, I also get anxious around bright places. She has helped me find calm and always seek out quiet spaces, which most people avoid."

Matt, a starter on the Varsity baseball team, also has a small puzzle piece in the corner of his tattoo. He explains, "I always try to make my brother proud, and I have the best memories of reviewing sports statistics with him—he loves baseball. Actually, he has given me great advice that has made my game better. This is probably something most people don't know about me."

Ultimately, out of the 24 students, nine tattoos engaged with asset-based language. Two of the nine student tattoos had images linked specifically to autism and seven other tattoos had images tied to divergent traits. Twelve other student pieces did not seem to engage with the asset-based language. Three students did not have the tattoos completed.

The following Monday, I post all of the student tattoos above the chalkboard in front of the classroom. As I greet the students at the classroom door, I encourage them to check-out the tattoos and find theirs. Once the bell rings, the journal prompt asks for a reflection—thoughts about the tattoo activity.

While only ten students use asset-based language in their journal responses, 15 students comment that they enjoyed learning asset-based rhetoric and appreciated the chance to hear their peers share atypical traits. Nick writes, "I kinda thought I was alone, but I see other people

who think like me, which I think will make this class more interesting. I don't think we will have only one answer for stuff…" While Stacy reflects that "we need to read more stories about these kinds of things. I feel like this stuff is stereotyped at our school."

The tattoos remained above the board the rest of the year. Each morning, as I entered the classroom, I noted the multi-colored designs and symbols all of which revealed the competence of inclusive classrooms. While there were many more activities, I assigned throughout the semester in an effort to foster a presumption of competence, it all began with shifting the rhetorical moves of the classroom. As the tattoos, student narratives, and reflections suggest, students who are introduced to asset-based rhetoric want the rhetorical and curricular space to hear and talk about divergence and the differing lives and relationships of their peers.

Implications: Teaching Towards a Presumption of Competence with an Extension of Asset-based Rhetoric: Were our Tattoos Truly Permanent?

In addition to the tattoo, there were many more methods that I used throughout the semester in my attempt to build a presumption of competence in my teaching; however, building an asset-based rhetoric at the start of the semester proved to be an essential step towards instilling a presumption of competence amongst the students. As a classroom, we must appreciate Biklen and Burke's explanation that the key to a presumption of competence lies in moving student assumptions away from ableist bias: "The observer's obligation is not to project an ableist interpretation on something another person does, rather to presume there must be a rationale or sympathetic explanation for what someone does and then to try to discover it, always from the other person's perspective" (2018, pp. 272-3). In other words, as teachers, we must first recognize how we have privileged the ablest interpretation in our own curriculum, then push to create room for greater understanding of the lives and relationships that all our students have experienced. In order to value all perspectives and voices, we must instill divergent thinking,

promote atypical perspectives, and employ asset-based rhetoric. The goal of this article is to suggest that the malleable, interdisciplinary nature of the tattoo proves to be an ideal genre for the introduction of asset-based rhetoric. The wide range of tattoos that I collected reveal that the tattoo encourages divergent perspectives and interpretations that had been silenced in previous semesters.

However, the ink of our tattoos alone was not permanent, a presumption of competence did not develop overnight. The tattoo was the first of many changes that I made to the established curriculum. It is important to maintain asset-based rhetoric in each lesson, and I continually find different opportunities in the curriculum to create space to assure that the lives and relationships of all our students are valued. I recognize that my classroom is one of many at DPHS, and it is likely that most classes maintain ableist thinking; however, if continually reinforced, asset-based rhetoric may become habitual for students. In turn, this rhetoric may change the assumptions and bias that individual students hold. Ultimately, students may carry these new values beyond my classroom just as those with tattoos wear their permanent images on their physical body every day.

I conclude with Figure 4, a list of the differing moves that I made throughout the semester to employ asset-based rhetoric and foster a presumption of competence. These changes seek to maximize opportunities of success for all abilities. Such changes should be made in response to individual classroom environment and student abilities.

-Reclaim labels and characteristics associated with disabilities.

-Use introductory lessons and ice-breakers as a means of redefining labels via asset-based rhetoric.

-Develop journal prompts that encourage students to redefine terms that recognize the assets of differences.

-Provide more time for in-class independent work.

-Develop assignments that allow for more individuality/interdisciplinary tasks.

-Differentiate assignments for student interest and ability.

-Provide feedback that recognizes divergent strengths.

-Provide feedback that views norms as opportunities for further development.

-Encourage "mindful" editing and revisions.

-Loosen assessment deadlines.

-Arrange desks in an equitable manner that assures students feel safe and confident.

-Allow students who arrive late/leave early or who have exit passes to sit near the exit in order to draw less attention/embarrassment.

-Consider the lighting—does it negatively affect student abilities to focus?

-Allow music listening.

-Consider alternative work settings (perhaps incorporate spaces with fabric, calm colors).

-Allow for appropriate movement of students during work time.

Figure 4. The table with one large column contains a bulleted list of 16 different pedagogical methods that I used throughout the semester to employ asset-based rhetoric and foster a presumption of competence.

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Notes

[1] The DPHS administration defines inclusion as any classroom in which the administration enrolls a minimum of six students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP is a Federal legal document that asserts a student's legal rights to an adequate education based on individual needs and diagnosed abilities; however, too often inclusion teachers focus more on the mandates and medical jargon of the IEP (Myers, 2019; Smagorinsky, Tobin, & Lee, 2019).

[2] All names of people and places are pseudonyms as designated in the approved IRB.