I AM – A Resource that Transforms
Student Attitudes Toward “the Other”

By: Beth Porter

The Genesis of the I AM…Video

Four years ago, the L’Arche community in Cape Breton asked Cheryl Zinyk, founder of the Sol Express Creative Arts group in Toronto, to lead them in a community weekend. Cheryl invited the community members each to complete with a partner the sentences: I am…, I love…, I hate…, and I dream…The exercise allowed the community members, who consist of roughly equal numbers of people with and without intellectual disabilities, to share about themselves, and it generated much enjoyment. Subsequently, inspired by this experience, L’Arche Cape Breton’s community leader, Jenn Power, and six members of its drama group who have intellectual disabilities created the I AM… video to celebrate the International Day of People with Disabilities (December 3rd). The video consists only of the six individuals with disabilities completing the four sentences. There is no mediation. Each person completes the sentences however they are inclined, and in several ways. While in most cases the speech of individuals is clear, English subtitles are provided. Transitions consist of music by Natalie McMaster, a friend of the L’Arche Cape Breton community.

Introduction to I AM…as a Transformative Teaching Resource

Prejudice and exclusion are often fed by the sense of “the other” as being inferior, strange, dangerous, or all three. Experience teaches that we human beings are more likely to alter our attitudes when we have an encounter that involves surprise and that engages us personally both at the level of the intellect and of the heart.

The Initial Discovery

A little over two years ago a Toronto principal called us to ask for any resources that might help him with a half-day he would be spending with his grade 11 workplace students who tended to be restless and easily bored. He had noted their interest when he showed them a fast-paced film on the social vision of Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche. He thought perhaps something else by Vanier.

I had recently viewed I AM…on YouTube and it struck me as disarming. Some of responses of the people with disabilities are light-hearted, others sobering. (“I love my dad; I love ketchup! I hate it when people die; I dream of going to Germany; or of smaller sized pants! or of not having to wear braces anymore.”) I suggested the video to the principal, thinking it might speak to or touch his students. I heard a little later that the video was indeed well received by the students. Signs were that it could be a valuable resource for initiating reflection and discussion on the theme of difference and how we tend to view those who seem different and to distance ourselves from them.
Laying the Groundwork for the Element of Surprise

An enjoyable preliminary exercise that engages the entire class strongly around the video’s four themes can greatly enhance the video’s impact. We suggest a social activity related to the students’ own interests and sense of identity. The video is then shown with no introduction, so that the element of surprise is preserved. We have found that this approach produces an “aha!” moment as students recognize the similarity of their own responses to those of the people in the video. “They are the same as us!” is a common observation.

Research on “aha!” moments reveals that preparation helps facilitate the sudden insight. Kunios and Beeman describe this insight as “a sudden comprehension that solves a problem, reinterprets a situation, explains a joke, or resolves an ambiguous precept” (italics mine). The insight is “the culmination of a series of brain states and processes” (Kunios and Beeman 2012). In the case of this video, the pre-viewing activity serves to activate these states and processes and permits the students to recognize themselves in the people in the video. Often students are touched and surprised by the frankness of those who speak in the video. In this case, the insight has to do with a false value placed on difference in ability, but once students achieve this insight they can be helped to extend it to others who may be regarded as different and hence excluded. Effective follow up can lead students to want to build a more inclusive school community.

Below, we outline in detail an effective pre-viewing activity developed by our colleague and co-writer of the teacher’s guide, Greg Rogers, M.Ed. This approach has been tested by Greg and ourselves with numerous groups--secondary students and also teacher candidates and gatherings of educators.

• Ask students to sit in two rows facing each other, so that each has a partner.

• Ask them to introduce themselves and then to take turns completing the first sentence, “I am…” in as many ways as occur to them over a 30-40 second period. The other partner should then have a turn.

• At this point, teachers may wish to invite students to share anything that surprised them in their partner’s responses.

• Then ask students on one side to move down three chairs so that everyone has a new partner whose previous sharing they could not have overheard.

• Proceed through the other three themes in the same way
  I love…, I hate…, I dream….

• Then call the class to order and show the video with no introduction.

• There is often a moment of silence when the video ends. Allow the class to linger briefly in this reflective state. Then invite the students to share whatever struck them.
**Effective Follow-Up**

After viewing the video, the class time can unfold in various ways and over one or several sessions. Begin with a class discussion on how we perceive difference - how different are we really, as human beings? The art or journaling worksheets can be used to deepen the reflection and allow space for this to become more personal. If the resource is being used for more than one session, the teacher’s guide also provides inquiry and research questions that can be assigned to groups or individuals. These help students to engage the content at different levels of understanding, to strengthen their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and to gain the needed knowledge to create effective action plans. Items include:

1. Inquiry into the school environment: What policies does the school have regarding integration of people who have intellectual disabilities? What are some of the school’s best practices? What more could be done? Talk with people with intellectual or physical disabilities. What challenges do they face? What are some student leadership initiatives they could commit to together? Develop an action plan.

2. Research into the history of a local institution for people with intellectual disabilities. Why is there presently a lawsuit by former residents of some institutions? What housing challenges do people with disabilities face in their community today?


**Creating the Kit**

The I AM… video is copyright to L’Arche Cape Breton. With its agreement, L’Arche Canada’s Educational Initiatives office had the technical quality of the original video enhanced for projection purposes and put it on a DVD. Based on our experience testing the video, we prepared a teacher’s guide and art or journaling worksheets. These elements in a sturdy folder constitute the I AM…Kit. The Kit has been evaluated and recommended by Curriculum Services Canada as “useful for implementing curriculum in a number of areas--Intermediate and Senior High School Health, Career Education, Character Education, Guidance, Social Studies, Civics, and Citizenship.” L’Arche Canada makes the Kit available at cost. Contact education@larche.ca or find further information at www.larche.ca/en/education.

**Pedagogical Background**

This simple resource grows out of the pedagogy of L’Arche, where people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together in homes and daytime activities. L’Arche is based on the conviction that every person has something important to contribute in a relationship. Many young people come to L’Arche to help out and to experience community life for a year or two. In the process these young “assistants” almost invariably discover the mutuality, or reciprocity, in their relationships with those they came to help. This discovery tends to happen in moments when they are surprised by commonalities they share with “the other” or when they come to see that they are learning from the person they are assisting and growing and being changed in
the process, indeed, often becoming friends. Assistants cite growth in self-knowledge and confidence, lessons in self-acceptance, forgiveness, patience and generosity, and insights into social structures and systemic attitudes that separate and label people. They come to see the people with disabilities as their teachers. (The approach of L’Arche stands in sharp contrast to the client–service provider approach that emphasizes professional distance. Social services today are becoming a little less rigid but still often retain the “us and them” culture that can prevent genuine encounters with the one being helped.)

A Final Note: Since it was uploaded in 2009, the I AM… video has been viewed a remarkable 15,000 times on YouTube at last check. It is accessible also in Vimeo on the L’Arche Canada website (www.larche.ca/en/education). L’Arche Toronto has created a different I AM… video. It can also be used with the suggestions in this report (see Sol Express on www.larchetoronto.org.) We chose the Cape Breton video for our kit because of its simplicity.

* L'Arche Canada is a registered not-for-profit organization. It is part of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities. There are 29 L'Arche communities in Canada and 137 communities in 40 countries around the world. In L'Arche communities, people with and without intellectual disabilities share life together. L'Arche also seeks to contribute an appreciation of diversity and inclusion to the wider society.
REFERENCES