Digital stories change the way we see disabilities and differences
Changing people’s perspectives isn’t an easy task, but it’s important for researchers using video to tell digital stories to challenge popular misconceptions about disability and physical difference. By encouraging more nuanced and diverse representations of people with disabilities and differences, these videos will contribute to overcoming stereotypes in health care and in the broader society.

Prof. Carla Rice in the Dept. of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, a Canada Research Chair in Care, Gender and Relationships, leads the Revisioning Differences Media Arts Laboratory at the University of Guelph.

In the laboratory, health care providers and people with disabilities share their first-person experiences, by making digital stories that pair audio recordings of personal narratives with visuals such as photographs, short videos, artwork and more.

The videos are screened in university classes, hospitals (during grand rounds), community health centres, government offices, and art spaces to captivate policymakers, health providers, and community members.

Once people have viewed the videos, Rice examines their perceptions of disability and physical difference, to see if they’ve changed.

“We test to see the efficacy, value, potential and power of the arts in shifting our notions of disability and difference, as well as helping people to understand that underlying our differences, there is a shared experience of being human and being vulnerable,” she says.

The videos are indeed changing people’s perspectives and challenging popular and professional thinking on the subject. Rice is finding they have a positive effect on the audience’s opinions and attitudes towards disability. Viewers commonly respond to the videos with reflective thoughts about the relationship between others’ vulnerability and their own vulnerability.

“We’ve found that the stories have a powerful effect on people in opening up their capacities to imagine disability differently,” says Rice. “The stories that emerge really generate conversations that move past disability as a personal tragedy or individual problem to be overcome and enable people to connect and get in touch with their own fragilities and interdependences.”

Said one viewer: “I was deeply touched, it made me more aware, humbled, and more. I felt a tremendous sense of connection combined with a greater respect for both our similarities and differences.”

Rice wants to bring this new way of thinking to a specific audience. That’s why the lab is organizing a traveling arts exhibition to showcase the videos in arts spaces and at hospitals and community health centres. This method encourages health care providers to have a better understanding of disability.

These events are organized to improve interactions between those with disabilities and health care providers.

Ultimately, this project, along with her other initiatives, will help promote positive perspectives in the public.

“We’re all going to be subject to the gradually disabling process of aging, so we’re all going to face disability,” says Rice. “So rather than seeing disability as something that only a few people live with and something that we can get rid of, we need to see it as a central part of the human condition.”

Also working with the project are graduate students Andrea LaMarre, Karima Dorney, Eliza Chandler, Elisabeth Harrison, Kim Wilson, Erin Watson, Carm de Santis, post-doctorate researcher Dr. Manuela Ferrari, and senior research associate Dr. Lisa Wenger.

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In this digital story from the project, Tanya Workman discusses the importance of focusing on the non-physical aspects of people:

http://www.envisioningnewmeanings.ca/?page_id=50

By Karen Ball