A Study of the 1988 National Art Education Association Convention and its Accessibility to Delegates Experiencing Disabilities

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People experiencing disabilities are no longer content to be treated as victims, objects of pity, and passive recipients of charitable impulses. They are aggressively and actively bringing discriminatory policies and environments to the public's attention. This activity is based on newer definitions of disability that do not associate disabilities with individuals, but with policies and environments that fail individuals.

This article documents a study of the 1988 National Art Education Association Convention for its accessibility to delegates experiencing auditory, visual, speech, and physical disabilities. The convention and aspects of the convention program are analyzed through the use of guidelines from the Eugene Commission on the Rights of People with Disabilities, The National Endowment for the Arts and The Research and Training Center on Independent Living. Areas of accessibility and inaccessibility are evidenced. Recommendations are given for future convention coordinators, the National Art Education Association Board of Directors and the general membership.

On October 6, 1986 two hundred and eighty members of "American Disabled for Accessible Public Transit" (ADAPT) assembled at the Los Angeles Westin-Bonaventure Hotel to protest the inaccessibility of the United States' public transit system to people experiencing disabilities. A lack of wheelchair lifts on buses and the failure of the system to develop transportation alternatives motivated the participants. Hotel security and members of the Los Angeles Police Department were mobilized to prevent the protestors from entering the hotel. One observer of the event later described the Westin-Bonaventure as a "police held fortress" (Hentoff, 1986).

This protest in Los Angeles is an example of an emerging assertiveness on the part of people experiencing disabilities. These individuals are no longer content to be perceived as victims, objects of pity, and passive recipients of charitable impulses. They are actively and aggressively bringing to public attention the discriminatory policies and environments which exist for them. These policies and environments exist in the United States despite legislation such as PL. 94-142 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This discrimination, according to disability activists, exists in part because of the non-disabled community's unwillingness to take responsibility for policies and environments which fail to adapt to the needs of all citizens (Hahn, 1985). The potential success of this civil rights movement was reconffirmed in March 1988 with the realized demand of the Gallaudet University student body for a president who experiences deafness. This is a significant and appropriate accomplishment, considering that this university is a higher education institution for people experiencing auditory disabilities.

An estimated 36 million children, youth and adults are experiencing disabilities in the United States. It is predicted that by the year 2000 the numbers of people experiencing disabilities will be equal to the non-disabled population (Hahn, 1983). Consequently, it is likely that many of the potential readers of this article are, or will be, experiencing the visual, auditory, emotional, behavioral, communication, intellectual, learning, and health-related handicaps associated with disability. Policy analysts, researchers and civil rights advocates are aware of these demographics and are beginning to articulate a socio-political definition of disability which does not associate disability with people, but with failure in the social environment. This is in contrast to previous definitions of disability which focused on medical etiologies, personal inability and norms accessible to few people. These earlier conceptions also failed to consider that perceptions and definitions of disability are culturally influenced (Hahn, 1983).

A socio-political definition of disability focuses less on the individual's responsibility to adapt to any given environment and more on the adaptability of the environment to any given individual's aspirations. A socio-political definition of disability recognizes that people are not inherently disabled but are disabled by environments shaped by discriminatory policies (Hahn, 1985). It is this conception of disability which is encouraging people experiencing disabilities to begin to think of themselves collectively as a minority group oppressed by the same discriminatory practices which have confronted other minority groups defined by race, age, ethnicity, religious preference, and gender. Disabled people, like members of these other groups, are experiencing welfare dependency, high unemployment, social exclusion, segregation, stigmatization, and stereotyping (Hahn, 1985). In art education settings, these discriminatory practices have resulted in "special" curriculums, segregated educational environments, professionals using medically derived etiological labels, stereotypic assumptions based on these labels, and the creation of programs and environments which disallow people to act in a culturally appropriate manner (Blandy & Congdon, 1987).

People Experiencing Disability and the NAEA

The language of The National Art Education Association's (NAEA) Constitution and Bylaws (1988b) does not discriminate against those people experiencing disabilities. The Preamble to our Constitution affirms "...our faith in the power of the visual arts to enrich the lives and endeavors of humankind" (p. 30). The visual arts are recognized as "...giving dignity
and a sense of worth to the individual" (p. 30). As an organization, we will "...communicate our belief to the organized teaching profession and to the community-at-large, to strengthen the position of the visual arts as a discipline in the schools, and to affect positively the role of art education in the culture" (p. 30). Article II of the Constitution charges the NAEA with representing art teachers, promoting instruction, and encouraging research. The NAEA is to disseminate widely, through various means, the results of the programs it sponsors. Article III supports a membership composed of "individuals, professionally interested in or engaged in activities concerned with, or related to, art, art education, or education..." (p. 30).

The NAEA Constitution and Bylaws do not distinguish between those of us who are experiencing disabilities and those of us who are not. Additionally, it states that all members of the "community-at-large" should have access to our profession's collective knowledge and wisdom. However, one wonders what would be found if one of the NAEA's most visible manifestations of its Constitution and Bylaws, the annual convention, came under the same scrutiny as the other social environments that people experiencing disabilities are examining for prejudicial practices. What would the protestors who entered the Los Angeles Westin-Bonaventure in 1986 think of the convention environment which the NAEA Convention Planning committee constructed in the same hotel from April 8-12, 1987? Was this most recent example of our yearly gathering as a profession enabling of all of those who could attend, or did we create a disabling environment incongruent with the implications of our Constitution and Bylaws?

Hopefully, the NAEA membership and the policies and programs that we support will eventually be formally scrutinized by people experiencing disabilities for discriminatory practices. Such scrutiny will force us to be accountable to this constituency. However, it is important to be accountable and knowledgeable now about the social environments we construct. In doing this the art education profession can join with people experiencing disabilities in support of their aspirations for programmatic and architectural accessibility.

The purpose of the remainder of this article is to report on my study of the 1988 NAEA Los Angeles convention facility and selected aspects of the program for its accessibility to delegates experiencing disabilities. This study assumes that this convention environment was reflective of NAEA policy and the values and attitudes of those people responsible for implementing the convention, as well as the NAEA Board of Directors and the general membership. Evaluative tools will be identified in this article which can guide future convention planners. Recommendations for future conventions will be made.

Methodology

This study of the 1988 NAEA convention took place from Thursday, April 7, through Monday, April 11, 1988. It was completed in part as a portion of a general NAEA convention evaluation coordinated by Robin Alexander. During these five days the convention was studied in terms of its accessibility to persons experiencing mobility impairments, visual impairments, auditory impairments and speech impairments. Mental retardation was not considered in this study. It is unlikely that people experiencing mental retardation would be delegates to this Convention. However, this should not be interpreted to mean that the NAEA does not have an obligation to this constituency or that under some circumstances people experiencing mental retardation might attend. This study did not determine the number of delegates experiencing disabilities. Determining such numbers might be worthy of study. However, the current incidence of disabilities among the general population warrants consideration when we design our conventions. We should not be consciously constructing discriminatory environments under any circumstances.

The guidelines used to study the convention are those produced by the Eugene Commission on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (ECRPD, undated), the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA, undated) and the Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities (1984). These three sets of guidelines were chosen because people experiencing disabilities assisted in their production. They are also widely recognized for their ability to shape accessible environments. This study of the convention was limited to the standing physical facility of the Westin-Bonaventure Hotel, the additional physical facility designed by the NAEA staff and convention coordinators, and selected portions of the print materials published by the NAEA in conjunction with the convention. The contents of scheduled individual presentations were not studied; however, their program descriptions were considered. Although such a content analysis of all presentations dealing with disability would be illuminative and warrants study, it was not possible to attend all such presentations. To analyze a selection would not be particularly instructive or fair.

The 1988 Convention Site

The Westin-Bonaventure Hotel facility was first studied in terms of the ECRPD guidelines. These guidelines are based upon directives from the American Standards Institute and respond to the minimum recommendations for the physical accessibility of any given environment (ECRPD, undated). These guidelines attend to parking, entrances, rest rooms and public telephones. The following statements can be said to be true of the convention facility.

Parking was available in conjunction with the Westin-Bonaventure with at least one designated handicapped parking spot. There were curb cuts, ramps, or level approaches to the entrance. The hotel could be considered accessible in these ways. Some main guest entrances to the hotel were level or had a threshold of less that 1/2 inch high. The door clearance width was 32 inches or more. The Westin-Bonaventure could also be considered accessible in this regard. Rest rooms for people experiencing disabilities were available in the hotel. The highest operable parts of public telephones were at 54 inches or less and were considered to be accessible.

The convention site was next studied in terms of the NEA guidelines for making visual arts programs accessible to people experiencing disabilities. Their guidelines attend to the relationship that exists between an
individual and the visual arts environment or program. Ease of movement, display, viewing zones and signage are considered. This portion of the study revealed the following about what people experiencing mobility, visual, auditory and speech impairments are likely to have encountered at the convention.

People experiencing mobility impairments would have found the facility generally accessible in all areas but the standard guest rooms. The hotel staff did, however, indicate that “special” rooms for people experiencing disabilities were available upon request (personal communication, registration staff, April 10, 1988). Persons using wheelchairs would have also found the site to be generally accessible in all areas but the standard guest rooms. “Special” guest rooms were also accessible to these individuals. Rest rooms and elevators for people experiencing disabilities were designated through appropriate symbolic signage. Furniture throughout the convention site was movable and spaces could have been modified to accommodate people experiencing mobility impairments.

The NAEA convention coordinators posted several informational and art related displays throughout the public areas of the Westin-Bonaventure. These were generally accessible to people seated in wheelchairs; however, some portions of the displays were placed above the designated accessible height of 48 to 67 inches. This tended to be particularly true of areas where art work was displayed. Signage posted by the NAEA was generally accessible; however, schedules posted outside of presentation rooms may have posed some difficulties in terms of the height of the display.

The NAEA registration counter was not accessible to persons in wheelchairs due to its height. A delegate sitting in a wheelchair would have found the top of the counter to be about eye level. This is not a comfortable or an acceptable position from which to access information placed on the counter top. Lighting at the convention site varied. It is likely that the low lighting in some public areas could have proved difficult for ease of movement and the readability of signage.

People experiencing visual impairments would have been very handicapped at the convention site. The map in the convention program was completely inadequate for this population due to its size and the dimensions of the print accompanying it (The National Art Education Association, 1988c). Raised maps were not available. Braille and large print convention publication were not available. Signage throughout the convention site was generally inaccessible due to either low lighting and/or print size. However, staff tours of the convention site were available if requested (Personal communication, Jeanne Rollins, May 24, 1988).

People experiencing auditory or speech impairments would have found convention signage accessible. Jeanne Rollins, convention coordinator, indicated that sign language interpreters were available if requested, as were signed tours of the facility (Personal communication, May 24, 1988). However, it is important to note that a sign language interpreter was not available at the registration desk. It is also important to acknowledge that the convention pre-registration form did not allow for the notation of needs associated with disability (The National Art Education Association, 1988a).

The Convention Program

The Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities were compiled in consultation with over fifty disability organizations (The Research and Training Center on Independent Living, 1984). These guidelines are specifically concerned with issues related to the portrayal of people experiencing disabilities and the manifestation of such issues in the language used to describe people with disabilities. These guidelines advocate that disabilities only be referred to when necessary, sensationalism should not be practiced, individuals should be emphasized over disabilities and labeling people into groups by disability should be avoided. These guidelines can be helpful in examining the NAEA Convention program for language usage acceptable to people experiencing disabilities.

Eight presentations at the 1988 convention treated topics specific to art education and children, youth or adults experiencing disabilities. All were listed under the “Special Populations” category in the convention program (The National Art Education Association, 1988c). Program descriptions indicate that four presenters addressed this topic in a general way. Four separate presentations examined art education problems related to behavior disabilities, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), emotional disabilities and developmental disabilities.

Four of the eight presentation descriptions in the convention program conformed to the Guidelines. Three did not because the language used in the program descriptions categorized people into large groups such as the “disabled” (p. 44) and the “handicapped” (p. 46). More importantly, the categorization of presentations which consider children, youth and adults experiencing disabilities under “special populations” is incongruent with the recommendations of The Research and Training Center on Independent Living (1984). The term “special” “…is not an appropriate term to describe persons with disabilities in general” (p. 5). “Special” can be applied to any person’s differentness, not just to those people experiencing disability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The choice of the Westin-Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles for the site of the NAEA 1988 Convention contributed to the general, but not complete, accessibility of the convention to delegates experiencing visual, auditory, speech and physical disabilities. This site generally conformed to the physical facility recommendations of the ECPRD and some aspects of the NAA guidelines. As a convention site it primarily failed in terms of the environmental and programmatic requirements of those people experiencing visual disabilities. The NAEA convention coordinators demonstrated some sensitivity to the needs of convention participants experiencing disabilities in relation to signage and displays; however, there were some serious oversights in the development of convention publications and registration procedures. Jeanne Rollins did indicate that special services such as staff tours and sign language interpreters were available if requested. However, it is important to again note that the NAEA Convention Pre-Registration Form did not provide a space for participants to note such needs.
It is also a matter of concern that only eight presentations addressed issues related to art education and people experiencing disabilities. Eight presentations is a very small number when one considers that 109 presentations were devoted to elementary and secondary art education. It is commendable that the 1988 convention program included a presentation on AIDS; however, the absence of specific presentations on auditory, visual, physical and health-related disabilities does not indicate that the NAEA membership is involved to any great extent with educational theory and practice associated with these disabilities.

This study of the 1988 convention suggests that changes need to be made which will encourage, promote and reinforce participation by people experiencing disabilities at the NAEA annual convention. The following recommendations, if implemented, will bring future NAEA conventions closer to 100% Accessibility.

1. The NAEA Board of Directors should establish a committee to advise convention coordinators on making conventions accessible to people experiencing disabilities. The membership of this committee should be composed largely of people experiencing disabilities.
2. All print materials associated with the convention should conform to the Guidelines for Reporting and Writing About People with Disabilities (The Research and Training Center on Independent Living, 1984).
3. Print materials associated with the convention should also be available in braille, large print, and on audio tape.
4. All convention signage and displays should conform to the NEA guidelines for making arts programming accessible (NEA, undated).
5. Convention sites should continue to be chosen with an emphasis on maximum accessibility to people experiencing disabilities.
6. Convention registration forms should be redesigned to allow participants experiencing disabilities to indicate their needs.
7. On-site registration desk personnel should be prepared to work with participants who are experiencing disabilities.
8. The NAEA membership should be encouraged by convention coordinators to submit convention presentation proposals which attend to art education theory and practice that specifically addresses children, youth and adults experiencing disabilities.

References


