

*In 1984, Anne Donnellan introduced the concept of “the least dangerous assumption” as it related to people with disabilities. For many, this was the “aha” needed to begin to think and act in completely new and respectful ways. In 1994, Anne and Martha Leary published *Movement Differences and Diversity in Autism-Mental Retardation: Appreciations and Accommodations for People With Communications and Behavior Challenges*, which provided the field with further information, research, and practical considerations when thinking about people with labels of autism and mental retardation. With this article, we respectfully submit our own interpretation of the concept of “least dangerous assumption” and hope that it furthers the discussion even more.*

## Outing The Prejudice: Making The Least Dangerous Assumption

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People with disabilities are people first. Because of the presence of a disability, a person may act, get around, look, dance, smile, read, learn, show what she knows, or communicate differently. The key here is that this is *a difference and not a deficiency*. As humans, we are all alike only in that we are all different. The fact that society tends to create a hierarchy of these differences, by labeling some of them deficiencies, is a manifestation of an out-dated paradigm plagued by prejudice. This inherent prejudice against people with disabilities means that some differences will be defined as deficiencies and looked down upon by

all of those "higher up" on the social ladder.

What makes this even worse is that most people do not even recognize this prejudice. It is disguised as compassion and justified as “help.” The segregation of people with disabilities into "special" classrooms and separate lives is justified by this paradigm of deficiency. Too many people continue to believe that, "since they do not look or act like us, they must not be as good as us." This way of thinking needs to be outed, challenged, and changed in order for all people to be valued just as they are.

Anne Donnellan and Martha Leary, in their book *Movement Differences and Diversity in Autism-Mental Retardation: Appreciations and Accommodations for People With Communications and Behavior Challenges* (1994), identified why this old paradigm was not sufficient and needs to be replaced by a more humanistic and respectful one. The key to the new paradigm is the concept of the "Least Dangerous Assumption."

"Least dangerous assumption" states that in the absence of absolute evidence, it is essential to make the assumption that, if proven to be false, would be least dangerous to the individual. She continues by explaining that the "absence of evidence can never be absolute evidence of absence," and as such, it is always safest and most respectful to make the "least dangerous assumption."

Consider it this way. If I were to go fishing for a week and not catch any fish, there would be two assumptions that could be made. First, I could say "there are no fish in the lake since I did not catch any, and I know what I am

doing." Or, second, I could say simply that "I did not catch any fish that week, and I will keep on trying." The first assumption seems rather arrogant, while the second one is more realistic and respectful. (There is a third assumption that I could make which would be that I am not a good fisherman, but we won't go there).

The same holds true for students with disabilities. Imagine a child who does not talk with the spoken word and moves around using a wheelchair. Her teachers have worked with her for a month and have not yet seen any evidence of what she understands. In fact, they wonder if she knows or is aware of anything at all. These teachers can make one of two assumptions. They can assume that "what you see is what you get" and that this child does not know anything, that her brain is as empty as that lake. As such, they can educate her in a way that reflects those assumptions (perhaps segregated classes or regular classes with low or no expectations). Now imagine her as she graduates and uses a communication device to say, "Why did you treat me so poorly?! I am smart and you wasted twelve years of my life!" A

very dangerous assumption was made, with results that none of us would desire.

Now, consider the second assumption. These same teachers can recognize that her movement differences are differences and not deficiencies. They can assume that she knows lots and just isn't currently able to show what she knows. Her brain is as full of knowledge and potential as that lake is of fish, but they just have not been able to reel anything in yet. As such, her schooling would reflect these high expectations and she would be considered and respected as a valued member of her school and classes. Now again, imagine her twelve years later at graduation, using her communication device to say, "Thank you from the bottom of my heart to all of my teachers who believed in me and made me feel as if I truly belonged and treated me like all of my classmates." This is the least dangerous assumption, one that results in a young woman who can celebrate her full and fulfilling life.

But consider a third scenario as well. What if we never come up with a way for this young woman to communicate

her intelligence? What if, after twelve years as a valued and respected student in all general education classes, we still do not know exactly what she has learned and knows? What harm was done? What was lost? Nothing. And that truly is the least dangerous assumption.

Understanding the concept of "least dangerous assumption" and acting on it are two different things. The idea of considering all people as capable and intelligent may not come naturally to some people due to the influence of society's prejudices against people with disabilities. Most well intentioned adults and professionals have been taught to believe in the out-dated paradigm and, therefore, may make very dangerous assumptions about students with disabilities. Many people's first impressions of people with disabilities are tainted by years of societal prejudice and media portrayals of what is enviable and worthwhile. While the power of these experiences is strong, we can no longer allow this to serve as a justification for the perpetuation of the prejudices against students or adults with disabilities.

The question we should all be asking ourselves is: "Do you really believe that the individual with disabilities is a valued and competent and unique person?" Think long and hard about that question. If you cannot honestly answer "yes," then the next question is simply, "Why?" Think about your beliefs, your experiences, and the prejudice you have been taught. Ask yourself how you can change those dangerous assumptions and mindsets. Talk with people who are friends, parents, siblings, lovers, and colleagues of people with disabilities. Listen to people who have been segregated or devalued because of the way they look or move or communicate. Learn everything you can about the many ways people communicate and get around and show us who they are and what they know. Introduce yourself to people who had labels of mental retardation while in school, who now are able to communicate their thoughts and feelings and tell us all, loud and clear, "I am intelligent!" Recognize your prejudices and work through them. It will not be as difficult as it first seems. And you will never again make assumptions about people that result in

the loss of opportunity, experience, or respect.

All people are people first. Everyone belongs to this wonderful life. No one should have to conform to someone else's standards before they are told that they are "good." We all belong. We all have strengths and weaknesses and our own individual potential to be great people and to live the lives we want. We can all lead happy and fulfilling lives, supported by those around us to be successful adults. It is up to all of us to examine our own core beliefs and to spread the word of the least dangerous assumption. We can no longer allow the justification of a prejudice that is so dangerous. Now is definitely the time to believe that all people are valued individuals with limitless potential. Keep on fishing - the lake is overflowing!!!!