

Book Review

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Discovering Connections: A Guide to the Fun of Bridging Disability Differences. By Linda D. Hill, with the Cowichan Valley Independent Living Resource Center. Designed and Illustrated by Vancouver Island artists. Victoria, BC: Building Bridges, 1998. Paper, bound and laminated: \$17.95 USD (\$10.77 ea. for educational orders); Paper workbook, 3-hole punched: 10 shrinkwrapped for \$72.57 USD. 109 pp.

There is currently so much tension involved in the concepts of diversity and political correctness that when we see a book title that includes "Connections" and "Bridging" and "Disability" and "Differences," the last approach we expect the author to take is one that involves the word *fun*. But what we have in this slim workbook produced by Canadian publisher Building Bridges is an enjoyable itinerary for exploring new worlds of friendship and knowledge. Psychologist Linda Hill and her collaborators, who are native to the land of disability, serve as tour guides on an adventure not unlike that encountered during the highly successful PBS program *Sesame Street*. Here, the letter for the day is D, for discovery. And even those other D words - Difference, Disability, Diversity - are exciting and new. Here, learning is fun even when someone laments a tune much like Kermit the Frog's song, "It Isn't Easy Being Green."

If I were green, I would want to talk about it. Chances are, if I were green, you would like to know what green felt like. But the many barriers in our society, of both material and ideological construction, inhibit our sharing discourse on greenness. Yet, it is through the sharing of personal, lived experience that friendships are made and that understanding is fostered. That is what *Discovering Connections* encourages us to do in *fun* and safe ways. You and I might travel together, through this book, sharing our commonalities, as much as our contrasts and focusing on interaction and inclusion, personal reflection and partnership, accessibility and acceptance.

This journey of discovery is meant to be facilitated, by a teacher, counselor, or other tour guide who has some personal knowledge of disability. The facilitator uses the workbook to lead participants on an adventure that provides both outward bound skills of interaction and inner reflections on barriers to friendship.

There are four main segments to this journey. Sections One and Two offer tips on how best to travel, relax, observe, share, and keep a journal (nearly each page of the workbook has space for introspective writing). There is also a discussion of the stages of friendship that we will encounter on this journey as well as some reflection on the stage of preparation with which we begin our discoveries. Section Three maps the journey more fully with ten different itineraries to follow any of which could be carried out through *Armchair Travel* without leaving the classroom or community center. Included are such activities as: collaborative artwork, actual outing coordination (with focus on accessibility), reflections on choice and personal goals, sharing of personal memories, conducting interviews to learn more about what makes each participant unique (hobbies, interests, talents, ethnicity, etc.), supporting each other in building trust and talking positively, saying Goodbye while celebrating the connections made.

Section Four of *Discovering Connections* contains twenty skills building activities designed to enhance the ten journeys. This may be the most important feature of the workbook. Too often people with disabilities are deprived of various social interconnections, which leads to underdeveloped skills in turn taking, small talk, joining, expressing feelings, asserting rights, and solving problems. Practice in these skills results in higher self-esteem due to greater ease in communication and to the sense of community belonging. The tour through skill training alone is worth the fare of the journey/workbook.

It is to Dr. Hill's credit that both she and her collaborators bring personal experience in

disability to the content of this workbook. Hill grew up with a sibling who has disabilities, she is a professional researcher of diversity issues, and enjoyed years of experience in various cross-cultural adventures. Her consultants for the book are about twenty people themselves residents of the Cowichan Valley Independent Living Centre in Canada, a “consumer-run, cross-disability organization working to create healthy and inclusive communities. . .[for] everyone” (publisher’s brochure).

There is a fifth section to the book: it is an Epilogue of sorts and yet it is an introduction. Seven pages of dialogue among the people involved in the book’s creation reveal the project as having been difficult to design in order to meet everyone’s expectations (which is the nature of collaborative writing). Another aspect of this dialogic afterthought in Section Five, is its utopian language. Says one of the collaborators, “My dream would be a barrierless society.” Another participant dreams “of a world where everyone is included and makes valuable contributions” (98). These are valid visions, worthwhile dreams, but how far will their slim book go as an agent of social change?

Discovering Connections has the potential, in fact, to reach widely diverse audiences from individuals and organizations, to schools and suburbs, to young and old, to disabled and nondisabled. Although one reviewer suggested that this book become “a compulsory part of the high school experience. . .[as] a terrific life preparation,” I would argue that this text is useful in negotiating borders for every age group *except* high schoolers and toddlers (no parallels intended, but it seems life preparation should fall somewhere in between those years). The preschool and elementary grades will find *Discovering Connections* alluring for its illustrations and its suggested field trips. I can imagine the text being used in college as well, particularly in the Education or Counseling disciplines. For the career-aged reader, the graphics and vocabulary might seem too primitive, but for those adults who lead church or Scouts or youth groups the book has infinite possibilities. And for senior citizens this workbook could help to initiate countless friendships in community organizations or serve equally well in planning activities for residents of retirement communities.

A book that could be enlightening to so many people in our Second Millennium culture, which grows increasingly diverse, might very well participate in making Linda’s vision, printed in the Part Five dialogue of dreams, come true. She says:

My dream is a community where, when somebody meets somebody who is different (from a different culture, or has a different way of communicating, or thinks differently, or behaves differently, or gets around differently), that we would get excited about that difference rather than being afraid and that we would get curious and interested to learn more. (98)

Perhaps this little workbook on the *fun* of discovering difference has a very big future after all.