

Who's Teaching Whom? Learning and Teaching in the Leadership Gym

Lauren Kendrick

Lauren Kendrick describes her experience of working with disabled young people in leadership gym as a complex activity system. Kendrick shares her story of how her antecedent knowledge expanded to include new knowledge of the complex tools, goals, rules, and people involved in leadership gym.

Looking back at high school, leadership gym had a significant impact in my life. I'm not talking about any ordinary gym class, but my high school's leadership gym class which was a program where I worked with special needs students. Leadership gym is a program for students with disabilities held at my high school every school year and still being held today. Students get chosen after an application process and interview to be able to work with disabled students. During the interview process, they focus on qualities that will be valuable for supporting disabled students and building relationships. Together, we would do activities, practice social skills, and go on field trips. During this program, I made special bonds and friendships with disabled peers that I will never forget.

An article from University College London states that "People affected by learning disabilities often face negative attitudes and behaviors from others, and also experience exclusion from education and social activities" ("Tackling Stigma Associated with Learning Disabilities"). Still in 2023, too many people stereotype people with disabilities. Many people often struggle with seeing students with disabilities as people, rather than seeing only their disabilities. Many people have not been in contact with, related to, or worked with

disabled students. Being a part of leadership gym gave me an opportunity to learn about students with disabilities like autism, Down syndrome, ADHD, cerebral palsy, and others—and to learn about the complex system of the program that supported our work together. Through the literate activity of working with young people with disabilities, I learned a lot of new things, like how to interact with different people, different methods of learning, and different ways of communicating. Like all of us, disabled students need different ways of interacting and need people to adapt to what we need.

Antecedent Experiences Paving the Way

I was first interested in this program when my neighbor Cal, who is autistic, came to our house to play basketball and baseball with me and my sister. When I was interested in the leadership gym program, I talked with my older sister Kaitlin Kendrick who had already completed the program. I realized my experiences interacting with Cal were part of my antecedent knowledge. According to the ISU Writing Program, **antecedent knowledge** is a term that describes all the things a person knows when they enter a given situation (“Uptake Terms”). This is a way of saying my “previous knowledge” on the topic, but it’s more than that. Antecedent knowledge can shape how we approach new kinds of activities and learning in different ways. For example, a person might get frustrated if they are using prior knowledge and experience that they think will apply in a new situation, but that knowledge doesn’t match up well or does not seem to be helping them succeed in a new activity.

In my case, this part of my antecedent knowledge was useful. I had already learned a lot from knowing Cal, and my sister’s experience was also useful to me because it made me curious about working more with students with disabilities. To learn more about the program, I informally interviewed my sister about her experience. She explained how excited the disabled peers would get for each meeting and how they would have something new to share. She shared that, like all of us, each disabled student was different and said that leadership gym was always something to look forward to because it was something new each day (Kendrick). After hearing stories from being in leadership gym, I was inspired to join. When I talked to my sister, she explained she would never forget the bonds she formed and how special they were to her (Kendrick). I was even more excited to join the gym.

My sister explained to me that I would need to go through an application process and interview with teachers to get into the program (Kendrick). I submitted a written application, obtained teacher recommendations, and

interviewed with both leadership gym teachers. This was a new situation for me, and having an interview my sophomore year of high school was nerve-racking. I hadn't yet had a job at that time, so I had no idea how the interview process worked. Asking teachers to recommend me was also nerve-racking. The constant thought of "what if they don't like me or don't think I'm a good fit?" was terrifying. But I knew I needed to be confident going into the process.

After finding out I got into the leadership gym program, I had a lot of learning to do. Before this class, I didn't have much of an understanding about working with people with different abilities. Some people with disabilities are nonverbal, which means we must learn to communicate with them using methods we may not have relied on before. After talking to teachers in the leadership gym program, I had some helpful tips and tools to communicate with students who are more nonverbal. I learned that I could use hand gestures, using one hand to mean yes and one hand to mean no, and then someone who was nonverbal could pick a hand as an answer to communicate with me. Like many of us regardless of age or ability, some disabled students also struggle with anger, which required me to learn how to work to help calm people down when I could. I also learned that disabled students can have ways of communicating that involve moving their bodies and playing. One person I worked with liked fidgets to play with, and someone else liked playing a tapping game where she would tap me on the shoulder and look away, and then I'd do it back to her. These were all ways of coping during the school day by moving our bodies.

Learning to Teach in the Leadership Gym Activity System

Anyone who has taken a leadership class in high school or has worked with anyone with disabilities knows that both can be complex **activity systems**. An activity system is made up of the cooperative interactions of people, tools, and spaces to achieve a shared goal. No matter what the goal is, there are always a lot of steps to accomplish it ("Literate Activity Terms"). Leadership gym can be an activity system because everyone has a shared goal of teaching and working with young people with disabilities in a shared space using tools and methods for supporting diverse learners' needs.

Activity Systems

"An **activity system** refers to a group of people or community working toward shared goals over time. When we talk about activity systems, we include the people in the system, the tools people use to accomplish shared goals, the rules surrounding their activity, and how people go about doing work in the system" ("Literate Activity Terms").

Literate Activity

“When we talk about **literate activity**, we include reading, writing, listening, speaking, thinking, and feeling—all social practices that influence how we make meaning and communicate” (“Literate Activity Terms”).

Learning how to do this work also meant, for me, learning a lot of new ways of teaching and communicating with people. So even though a lot of the things I was learning and teaching were activity based, and not only limited to reading or writing, they can altogether be understood as **literate activity**, which describes the range of complicated activities we engage with when we’re trying to teach, learn,

or communicate with each other (“Literate Activity Terms”). Working with others can often be difficult and takes a lot of patience. As a high school student, I had to figure out my own teaching and learning styles—and figure out how to work well with people whose styles were likely different from mine. With little professional training, I had to fill in many of the gaps in my antecedent knowledge about ways to accommodate people with disabilities based on their individual and social needs. This process was challenging because the students with disabilities can get upset and need ways to express their feelings. This literate activity was a struggle and learning process for me. When someone was upset during the school day, trying to make their day better was a rewarding experience when I succeeded.

Going into the activity system of leadership gym, I was so nervous that I would do or say something wrong, that I wouldn’t have the tools I needed to respond to young people with disabilities, or that I would not fully understand

the rules of the complex system I was participating in. The more I learned how to work toward the shared goal of meeting individual disabled students’ needs, the more I felt comfortable in the activity system of the program. Within a few weeks, I started to look forward to participating and learning alongside young people with disabilities more and more each day.

Like everyone, disabled students have vastly different personalities and needs. When I was learning to participate in leadership gym, I was told about the different disabilities of the specific students I would be working with so that I could learn

Literate Activity: More Than Just Reading and Writing

“In the ISU Writing Program, we often use the term **literate activity** rather than just saying writing, because we want to remember that communications between humans involve much, much more than just words written on a page or screen. Not only do we write (or communicate) using lots of different modes (speaking, visuals, writing, sound), but we use many different kinds of tools to create our texts. And every human activity also includes semiotic signs and forms of meaning-making that we often overlook.

“In addition, we like to use the word **activity** because it helps us to remember that our literacies are not just in the texts we produce, but in the things we do in the world.” (Walker)

how to better interact with individual people. But like all activity systems, leadership gym is complex, and human communication is never simple. When I learned how to communicate and interact with each student in ways that worked for them, I was amazed to see how relationships grew between us. For example, I worked together with a student who was nonverbal and had a visual impairment. In my role in leadership gym, I had to support him in working toward the system's shared goals for each student (1) being able to participate in activities and (2) being able to communicate with other students. I was able to learn how to participate in this activity system toward these shared goals because of the support and knowledge of the teachers who worked with each student before I had even entered the system.

It's also just as important to note that the ways people in this system communicate change over time depending on the situation and goals. When the goals of working with disabled students changed—and when disabled students' goals changed—then as participants in leadership gym, we also had to change how we communicated. For instance, I worked with two disabled students who often wanted to participate in activities with me at the same time, but who communicated in very different ways. I had to learn to be able to communicate both ways simultaneously as best I could to support them in feeling included: one through speaking and one using an iPad to communicate.

Flexible, responsive social skills are a very important tool to succeed in leadership gym. In the ISU Writing Program, the term **socialization** might help here to describe this process: “We use socialization to consider how people represent and transform social and cultural practices as we interact ... whether we do so intentionally or not” (“Literate Activity Terms”). One example is transforming the social and cultural practice of teaching and learning how to play a sport. During leadership gym, we worked with disabled students to learn and play sports like soccer, basketball, and volleyball. For everyone, learning a sport is a process that involves a lot of steps and takes a lot of time. Specifically for disabled young people who have varying antecedent knowledge of a particular sport, I had to in some ways relearn the rules of the sport (and system) to be able to break things down into manageable, teachable parts that we often forget how we learned: learning who is on your team and how teams work, learning the rules about how to pass the ball (which varies by sport of course), and learning what practices are available to try to score (a goal, a basket, a hit). My antecedent knowledge and flexible social skills were necessary to participate in this activity and this activity system with the available tools (sports equipment) and people (teachers and students).

When we can practice flexible, responsive social skills, the activity system works for the most part: people have fun, and we build relationships while we are doing the activity, creating an unforgettable bond. However, that is not how every activity system works all the time. Sometimes, we don't succeed in an activity system, whether it's because of the tools, people, goals, or rules. It's important to remember that disabled young people are young—and people. People often have trouble focusing, listening, hearing, processing, and then remembering what to do, too. We struggle to follow instructions and need things to be repeated. And, like all learners, we learn by doing, so we need to see a demonstration in practice—and then do one ourselves to learn what it's all about. Add to this that all components of activity systems are complex and constantly changing, including people's emotions. For example, people get upset when we don't get what we want or when things don't go the way we planned or hoped. In leadership gym, these moments required responsive social skills and emotional intelligence. It was often up to leaders to figure out if an emotional situation could be made better by encouraging words (telling someone they've done a good job), by interacting with others to change what's happening (asking someone to pass the ball to a particular person the next time), or by taking a time out and having a brief rest (for an individual or for the game).

Understanding different possibilities for action—and different paths for socialization, for transforming a social practice we think we understand to make it work in a new situation with different people and priorities—can help people reach our goals in a specific activity system like leadership gym. But we also need to constantly assess, rethink, and change the system's goals to accommodate different ways that participants can engage and succeed. While this is true of all activity systems, it's true of leadership gym because of the diverse and constantly changing nature of young people with disabilities at the center of the system and its goals.

Social Identities Influencing Action

In every activity system, it's also important to recognize that people are diverse in so many ways and have so many intersecting social identities that influence how we act.

In the ISU Writing Program, we understand **social identities** “influence people's ... beliefs and actions among themselves and each other.” So even though people were in the program because they had been identified as disabled, their different disabilities aren't the only things

different about them. In addition to gender and race differences, people in the program have varying socioeconomic backgrounds and different home lives—all social identities that influence how they interact with each other and other members of leadership gym. There's no way of fully knowing how each part of their social identities influenced their actions or personalities. Some of the disabled students were shy than others, some expressed how they felt often through sounds and movements, and some were more comfortable engaging physically than others. Each person had their own way of interacting with others, whether it was physical touch, telling stories, asking questions, or other ways.

Social Identities

“In our program, **social identities** refer to the broad categorizations that individuals are born into or assigned (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sex, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, religion/religious beliefs, national origin, and emotional/developmental abilities/disabilities). We focus on how these identities influence peoples' collective/ individual beliefs and actions among themselves and each other” (“Identities Terms”).

Based on my experience in the leadership gym activity system, I also saw how as leaders we brought in our own social identities that influenced our actions, which then influenced the interactions we had with the students we were working with. Sometimes, we were role models for interaction, and some disabled students would imitate what we would do. For example, after seeing one of the leadership gym teachers tap a student on the shoulder and then look away as a playful joke, one of the disabled students took up the same playful joke with that teacher and other people. So, it was important for us to recognize that our presence in the activity system was shaping the experience not just for ourselves, but for the young disabled people we worked with in small ways that we don't always pay attention to.

My Relationship with Michelle

Each day I participated in leadership gym, I tried to make the students with disabilities day better, and other people made mine better whether they knew it or not. I would also see people outside of leadership gym. In the hallways, their faces would light up and they would give me a hug, sharing that they missed me. This truly warmed my heart.

During leadership gym, I had the opportunity to work with a young woman named Michelle (to protect her privacy, I'm not using her real name), who is super outgoing and loves dancing and singing. Over time, Michelle and I built a strong connection in a way that shows me that what matters

most to me about activity systems is not just the people in them but the relationships between people as its own goal for the system. During our interactions, Michelle would tell me all about her day and what she was doing over the weekend and ask to talk to me outside of school, too. She would also ask other people where I was if I wasn't there that day and would talk to her teachers about our friendship. Building this relationship with Michelle made me feel like I accomplished my goal as a participant in leadership gym. We have made an impact on each other's lives as young people. So, if two of the activity system's shared goals are for each student to (1) be able to participate in activities and (2) be able to communicate with other students, I would also add a third: (3) building relationships with people that last beyond the bounds of leadership gym. I know that we have accomplished this goal. Even though I'm no longer a participant, I still talk about Michelle to my friends and family, and she talks about me to her friends and teachers. My friends who are still participating in leadership gym have told me that Michelle continues to talk about our friendship. I talked to my friend Alyssa Krass who is in the program, and she shared with me that Michelle had said, "You are my best friend because you remind me of Lauren" (Krass). Alyssa sends pictures and videos with messages from Michelle waving and smiling to me, telling me she misses me and that she hopes I am liking college. Knowing that I have made a long-term bond with her warms my heart. When I return home for break, I plan to go visit her and other folks in leadership gym.

For me, participating in the activity system of leadership gym took a lot of patience, kindness, learning, and relearning, but it was worth it in the end. My participation in leadership gym has influenced me to continue to work with disabled young people, and I have joined a Best Buddies club here at ISU. As a participant in that club, I work with one young person with disabilities. We do a lot of crafts and have conversations, too. I am also thinking about minoring in special education. Being a part of leadership gym showed me some of the basic things I need to know to continue to do this kind of work. It's a complex and often challenging activity system with many constantly changing factors that play a role in meeting goals successfully. One of the most important tools is flexible, responsive social skills, and one of the most important goals is building relationships with other young people. Working with young people with disabilities using this tool toward this goal has impacted me deeply, and the people of leadership gym will always have a special place in my heart.

Works Cited

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Lauren Kendrick is from Bolingbrook, Illinois. She has two sisters and is the middle child. She is currently a sophomore majoring in Elementary Education. She is in Chi Omega on campus.



Notes