Article of the Week #21: Why Using the Word “Retard” is Retarding Progress
by Tim O’Donoghue in Millennials, Values, July 2012

My younger brother Aidan started high school this year, and unlike his male predecessors, he loves it. He has friends, he’s involved, and he loves his teachers. Aidan has been anxiously waiting for this juncture of his life for years, which was probably fueled by all those Nick-at-Nite TV shows. (Unfortunately, high school isn’t quite Drake and Josh or that pre-pregnancy Jamie Lynn Spears show.) Aidan wasn’t the only anxious one though. All those years Aidan spent in excitement, I spent in fear. I spent my freshman year in the same halls as Aidan, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the school. The whole social thing just wasn’t for me. My friend Ben likes to tell me it’s a confidence thing and I think he’s right. Round two was different though — Aidan is a completely different competitor. Still, I had no confidence. I had no confidence that his peers would treat him with the respect that he deserves, or even worse, simply as an equal. Aidan has Down syndrome, and it can be hard to see past that label.

I’m going to take a minute and diverge from Aidan’s story. I need to rationalize my fear. My entire life I’ve played witness to the continuous (and usually subconscious) relegation of people with disabilities. It’s an unfortunate habit passed down by our parents, and spread among millennials. It’s as simple as saying “Wasn’t that class retarded?” I bet if Aidan hadn’t been a part of my life, or had been born without Down syndrome, I’d be throwing the term retarded around like a baseball. So when I hear “retarded,” is my first reaction, “Hey you! You’re systemically oppressing persons with cognitive disabilities through your language!”? Of course not, because I don’t think most people realize that is what they’re doing. It’s a word that has become so ingrained in our vocabulary that we think it’s dissociated with its roots.

Often, when I ask someone not to say retarded, they’ll come back and say that it just means “stupid,” or “it’s a medical term!” or “I didn’t use it in that context.” To put it gently, any response in the negative simply shows ignorance. Stupid?

Well, that’s simply not the definition of “retarded.” Use the word stupid. Medical term? Not anymore. The term “retard” has been removed from both government and medical texts. You used it out of context? That works. If I were to use a racial slur out of context, that’d be ok too, right? “But there’s a history attached to racial slurs!” There’s a history attached to people of disabilities, too. People with disabilities were for all intents and purposes denied education until, funnily enough, the U.S. Supreme Court decided Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954. This was only the beginning. It was not until the early 1970s that true strides were made for persons with disabilities.

And it’s not only the classroom that has held back disabled individuals. People with disabilities were subject to Nazi eugenics and murdered en masse. This wasn’t the first instance of eugenics in the history of persons with disabilities. Before that, Americans practiced their own eugenics on people with disabilities, and frequently isolated and institutionalized anyone who looked or acted differently.

So, back to Aidan. Aidan loves public school, and I attest much of that to his peers that I feared so much. Aidan, through his vivacious, charismatic, and loving nature, has surrounded himself with an amazing group of friends. He joined the track and wrestling team, was in a school play, read a poem at the poetry slam, and sang “Soul Man” at the school talent show, fedora and all (big props to his Best Buddy Andrew on that one — someone needed to be John Belushi, and it sure wasn’t me). All of this is to say that we’re getting there, but we haven’t gotten there yet. The “r” word is still commonplace in our vocabulary. Like I said, Aidan is a happy kid. But if you say “retard,” or mention his disability, he goes straight to thumb sucking. His life-long sign for “I’m uncomfortable.” What does that tell you?

It has to stop. “Retard” is retarding our progress towards true acceptance. Spread the word to end the word.

From http://www.policymic.com/articles/9899/my-brother-s-keeper-why-it-s-not-ok-to-use-the-word-retard
Part One: Marking Up the Text
Annotate the article. Circle words and phrases you do not understand. Indicate points you agree with and points you disagree with, noting your thoughts and feelings about each. Jot down connections you make as you read – text to self, text to world, text to text.

Part Two: Three Levels of Questions

Level I: Recall
The answer is in the text, an explicit fact (fully and clearly expressed – leaving nothing implied). You can literally put your finger on the answer.

Examples:
- What were Cinderella's slippers made out of?
- How did Cinderella get to the ball?

Write one Level I question for the article:

1. ______________________________________________________

Level II: Analysis/Inference
An answer is derived through making inferences – drawing logical conclusions based on textual evidence. This is like reading between the lines and searching for deeper or sometimes hidden meaning (understood but not directly expressed.)

Examples:
- Why does Cinderella’s stepmother care whether or not she goes to the ball?
- Why did everything except the glass slipper return to the way it was?
- Why don’t the step sisters like Cinderella?

Write two Level II questions for the article:

2. ______________________________________________________

3. ______________________________________________________

Level III: Synthesis
The answer requires going beyond the text in the value, importance and real world application of the information presented, often dealing in Universal Themes.

Examples:
- Is a woman’s salvation always found in a man?
- What does it mean to live happily ever after?
- Does good always overcome evil?

Write two Level III questions for the article:

4. ______________________________________________________

5. ______________________________________________________