

Engaging the Right to Disrupt: A Pilot Project

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ABSTRACT: Disability Studies (DS) has poised itself in a contentious position between advocacy and activism, service provision and theoretical interpretation (Goodley, 2010, Jarman & Kafer, 2014). This context invites examination of the role of the undergraduate learner in the unsettling of notions of disability and the re-imaging of people with disabilities in increasingly valued roles (O’Driscoll, 2012). Students experience the dichotomous task of disrupting and learning best practice while the post-secondary system expects them to act concurrently in the role of good student. Students are expected to maintain academic standards and engage as competent learners who are comfortable questioning and upsetting right answers to challenge devaluation that upholds and perpetuates the status quo.

To explore student learning in this complex and often counter-intuitive environment, representative of many academic disciplines, this pilot project has been used to analyze six student papers about prominent topics in our field surrounding a site visit, children with autism and institutionalization. We were able to identify, that student reports regularly provided thorough information about the stated purposes and practices of the site, but that the reports did not address the social complexities or implications of residential treatment of the children, or the assumptions and values that accompany such practices. In order to enhance student confidence and competence in applying the kinds of critical analysis that we had previously assumed students were achieving around their critical questioning, we have created a tool to enhance such competencies for students, and to aid instructors in the planning and analysis of student work. A set of guided questions has been developed around the *Six Facets of Understanding* (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005) to lay the groundwork to analyze fundamental elements of student learning about a community program, to produce scholarly reflections and implement practice. This tool, we believe is easily adapted to other course material or disciplinary programs of study.

1 INTRODUCTION

Disability Studies (DS) is a discipline without a traditional or common pedagogical home. It is poised in a contentious position amidst advocacy and activism, service provision and theoretical interpretation (Goodley, 2010, Jarman & Kafer, 2014). This polarizing context invites examination of the role of the undergraduate learner as a central piece in the future of this discipline and in their contributions in the unsettling of notions of disability and the re-imaging of people with disabilities in increasingly valued roles (O’Driscoll, 2012). Reflecting the contradictory nature of many post-secondary disciplines, this pilot project explores student learning in complex and often counter-intuitive environments using Wiggins and McTighe’s (2005) *Six Facets of Understanding*. For this analysis, we have used six student reports of a site-visit and have sought to gain a fuller understanding of the gap between the application of theory into practice and student application of disruptive thinking. By identifying these gaps, we seek to recognize ways to enhance student learning in the application of the values, which underpin DS as well as the confidence and competence to use critical questioning in interpreting the realities of community services.

The inclusive principles foundational to DS resonate with Barr & Tagg’s (1995) *Learning Paradigm*. While DS and SoTL differ in overall purpose, aspects of each reflect parallel objectives. Where SoTL, speaks of “producing learning with every student by whatever works best” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, 13), DS argues for universal design and inclusivity (Scott, McGuire & Foley, 2003). The critical engagement and reflection on teaching and learning practices in post-secondary (Bernstein, 1996; Felten, 2013) replicate DS goals, which support critical thinking, and reflective practice (Swain et al., 2014). SoTL confronts the deep-seated roots of teaching-based practices, likewise DS challenges social constructions, which create and maintain societal barriers for people with disabilities. Both perspectives query positions of privilege and seek to honour the voice of the disempowered. The “big tent” (Huber & Hutchings, 2005), of SoTL, which is inclusive and open (Chick, 2014) and the

diversity of voices, theories, methods and questions prevalent in SoTL, reflect the challenging of socially constructed world views, diversity of expertise, legitimation of authority and privilege and the democracy of voices sought in the field of DS.

1.1 Disability Studies Contextualized

To contextualize teaching and learning research within this discipline, it is imperative to emphasize the role of students engaged in learning complex social phenomena. The harm and exclusion that exists at both individual and structural levels is foundational to disability scholarship. Concurrently, students in a Bachelor of Community Rehabilitation (BCR), study in a school of medicine facing a dual orientation to disability, to fix, cure and treat individuals while also seeking to change societal structures, and to accept and value multiplicity and variation. To teach discernment of competing ideologies and to engage students to be inquisitive and analytical as they prepare to work in various roles and systems we seek to actively respond to the gap between theory and action. The small undergraduate program, (300 students) and faculty engage with some of the confusion, incoherence, and contradictions of practice through a balancing of theoretical and practical course content. The inter-disciplinary faculty bring a variety of social and disciplinary realities, like those found across the placement sites visited by students.

SoTL has not been widely explored by DS scholars to-date. This project aims to promote the on-going, long-lasting and transformative learning goals for all students as identified in SoTL (Hutchings, Babb, & Bjork, 2002). This pilot project marks the beginning of a teaching and evaluation by a process of building a set of practical tools to reflect the reconstituted learning interpreted by SoTL and its foundation practices (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011). As two emerging disciplinary practices, DS and SoTL offer promise beyond a single classroom, and invite an opportunity for further collaboration and contribution to the wider teaching commons.

The application of SoTL practices has generated our key questions:

- How do students learn to apply critical thinking skills in both university and community settings?
- How can enhanced teaching and learning improve student confidence to think and competence to act coherently in applying theory and practice?

2 METHODS

The course *Understanding Children with Autism*, an upper level undergraduate course asks students to choose an agency that provides services for children with autism in order to complete a site visit report. The assignment requires students to write an overview of services, conduct interviews and reflect on impressions of the visit. While not explicitly requested in this assignment, the course syllabus highlighted the expectation that student reflections should be “based on critical analysis of the assigned material”. Six of twenty-four students, visited a residential treatment centre, which emphasized questions in three significant areas in our field: children with autism, institutionalization and the use of “segregation” rooms. This selection of reports describing this centre served as our sample.

Based on Wiggins & McTighe’s (2005) *Six Facets of Understanding*, we developed a preliminary tool to help us identify student’s use of critical analyses in their reports. Each paper was read and coded based on a series of questions developed by instructors to identify the capability of students to explain, interpret, apply, bring perspective to, empathize and have self-knowledge around the site they had visited and reported on. Student reports were anonymized and given code numbers and all identifying information was removed. Grades and instructor feedback was initially included, but was later removed as we felt it was influencing our interpretation of the reports.

3 RESULTS

Student responses generally lacked the depth of critical analysis that we anticipated, especially given the centrality of such issues in DS. Where students for the most part, noted that both institutionalization and segregation were “wrong”, they consistently wrote about their acceptance of these practices when site staff briefly explained the positive uses of these methods.

Through our initial review, we were able to identify, that student reports regularly provided information on the stated purpose of the program, the day-to-day operations, sources of funding, medical and staff duties and responsibilities, and therapeutic models used. They described the environment, the location and the physical space. With the exception of one student, reports did not address the social complexities or implications of residential treatment of the children, or the assumptions and values that accompany such practices. Reports describe the need for “intensive-support models” for “children severely afflicted by their autism” (Student 01-16, 4), and describe children in terms of “over-stimulation”, “aggressive” and “poor” behavior (Student 02-16, 6). Treatment is described as encouraging “appropriate behavior and skills” (Student 04-16, 5) without questioning roles of power, conformity or social structures and deviance.

The anti-institutionalization movement is a hallmark of DS. These reports however described this location as beneficial for “families...unable to support their child from home...” The decision to use this service is viewed as a “conscientious choice” (Student 01-16, 8). While students discussed their discomfort with the use of segregation rooms initially, this too was quickly re-interpreted through staff explanation of benefits of this treatment. One illustrative report states “I questioned this method of intervention, but was told that the staff and therapists saw great benefit from it and many children appreciate this room as they often volunteer to use it” (Student 04-16, 6).

Overall student reports reflected a new realization of the positive aspects of residential treatment remarking “It saddens me that there is a long weight [sic] list to get into the program... it broadened my perspective on autism and alternative treatment programs.” (Student 05-16, 7) while another concludes, “This visit also opened my eyes to the high needs of children with severe autism and gave me a better understanding of the professional support that is accessible.” (Student 04-16, 7).

Our program and instructors have a responsibility to ensure that student’s learning reflects both social and political understanding of disability and to enhance their capacity to critically examine systemic conditions and their roles and responsibilities in perpetuating the harm of devaluation of disabled people. In this context, critical theory and the ability to critically examine societal practices and beliefs is fundamental. The reports demonstrate a distinctive gap between the learning outcomes that we as faculty assume students are achieving around the critical questioning of disability and students demonstrated application of these theories.

Approaching these findings with initial disappointment while preserving in our desire for students to be able to apply the critical foundations of their classroom education to the community, we have identified guided questions to assist students to reflect on aspects of their learning. Based on Wiggins & McTighe’s (2005) *Six Facets of Understanding*, we have developed a tool to enhance understanding, to use, explain and defend critical thinking around disability and to have competence and confidence to pursue further analyses of professional disagreements. We determined that the use of guided questions in each of these facets, would give students the opportunity to analyze fundamental elements of their learning about community programs when they are asked to produce scholarly reflections and implement practice. This tool, we believe is easily adapted to other course material or disciplinary programs of study.

The development of this tool evolved through several iterations of the specific questions generated from the facets of understanding themes to trigger reflective responses that examine potential theory and practice tensions. Firstly, we needed to think more clearly about the kinds of responses that we hoped students would produce in this context and the types of queries that would engage students more critically. Considering some of the key debates in our local context and in DS more, broadly we focused assignment questions around social issues of devaluation disparity and segregation, institutional living, poverty, and power. The initial set of guided questions contained up to twelve questions around each facet. We quickly came to realize that the tool was too complex and needed to be abbreviated to effectively involve future student co-researchers. The tool, in its current form has refined pointed questions to allow for analysis of the content of assignments more effectively and can be used by students in future course modules to develop their critical reflections.

Facets	Guided Questions: Six Facets Tool
Facet 1: Explain	a) Compare and contrast the stated purpose of the site with models of disability, societal values and theories of treatment which you have learned about in your classes b) What life events, values, assumptions and circumstances influenced the family/guardian to place their relative in this site? (think about individual reasons and societal reasons i.e. SES, education, relationship status) c) Based on your observation and interviews, what did staff demonstrate about the purpose of treatment and outcomes of these children? How does this compare to current theories about autism? d) What ethical implications arise for you observing in a community setting, conducting interviews and drawing conclusions?
Facet 2: Interpret	a) What does it mean to operate a program that controls, regulates and manages the “abnormal” behaviour of people in the community? b) Why does it matter that this type of program is viewed as appropriate for people with disabilities? c) What do you think the future will look like for these individuals – short term; long-term; and how does the vision of this future compare to you understanding of the reality of adults with disabilities? d) How does this community program reflect your understanding about the human need for conformity and social order?
Facet 3: Apply	a) What did I learn from this visit that will influence my professional practice when I graduate? b) How have I changed my thinking and actions because of the site experience? c) How has this experience influenced my understanding of the connections between theory and practice in the treatment of autism?
Facet 4: Perspective	a) In what ways do the program staff identify success/effectiveness? b) What are the points of view of various disciplinary approaches as described/implemented by the team? Why is this important? c) From the perspective of this residential program, how is it decided that institutionalization is the preferred choice and segregation rooms are the preferred treatment option? d) How does the treatment reflect the staff view of the person? Governmental budget constraints?
Facet 5: Empathy	a) What were the program staff trying to help me understand, feel and see about the person in the program? b) What did the program tell me that I needed to know to understand an individual with a disability and their ability for success? c) How did this experience change your understanding of institutionalization? d) Who did you empathize with most in your visit and why?
Facet 6: Self-Knowledge	e) How does who I am (education, SES, ethnicity, experience with disability etc) shape my view of this program? a) How does my experience with disability shape my understanding of individuals in the program and service providers? b) What is my gut feeling/perspective about this lived experience of people with disabilities? c) If I did this observation/interview again what would I do differently? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o What went well? o What did not? o As a student, how did your interaction with a staff member influence your consideration of individuals in the program? o How did information collected uphold/challenge the theories/values about people with disabilities that you are aware of?

Table 1.

4 REFLECTIONS

The review of these assignments identified a gap in student’s application of critical and theoretical learning in a practical setting. Students demonstrated the ease with which they are persuaded by service providers of the merit of practices that stand in opposition to the DS philosophies that have been taught throughout their degree program. The lack of demonstrated critical analysis by students have served as a beacon. The recognition about students’ ability to disrupt the status quo has shed light

on a wider need for disruption in methods of instruction that needs to occur to understand the harm they could perpetuate in maintaining the status quo. The bigger project is firstly to disrupt our own teaching and practices as instructors. The confidence and competence that we seek in mentoring students critical abilities needs to be built in the classroom in ways which do not separate theory and practice, but that connects them and builds increasing critical capacities throughout classroom learning and intersections with professional practice.

In preparing to move this pilot project to a larger SoTL project, we have anticipated several areas, which will allow us to review our own assumptions about student learning and help us to engage students further in their learning journey. This includes:

- Hiring student co-researchers to assist in the analysis of student works and to bring an additional lens to problematize the identified gaps in teaching and learning
- Apply principles of backwards design to redevelop course with goals of critical analysis in mind
- Redevelop course content for this class, which breaks down the various parts of this assignment throughout the semester allowing students to build this capacity throughout the semester. Including:
 - Open the classroom to new ways of learning including more regular practice with using critical skills and tools
 - Using additional tools such as narrative or experiential learning to gain a better understanding of the concepts being studied

5 CONCLUSION

We commenced this project by questioning student's ability to successfully exist as both "good" students and disrupters. Noting a significant gap in student's ability to apply critical analysis to a community setting, we questioned the capacity of students to bridge the theory practice divide. Digging further, we have concluded that the problem with transformative student learning exists in our own failure to disrupt the way that we have taught. We have not taught students in a way that allows them to build confidence in their thinking and the competence of their actions to apply these skills more practically. Moving forward to address this continuing challenge, we will apply the principles of backward design to re-create this course with the anticipation of engaging and building on the skills we hope to foster, commit to engaging in another analyses of the backward design and repeat the process in collaboration with students and faculty.

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