
Intersecting Arts Based Research and Disability Studies: Suggestions for Art Education Curriculum Centered on Disability Identity Development

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IN AN EFFORT TO DISSUADE THE USE OF DIAGNOSES and symptomology as determining factors of a disability via a medical perspective, disability studies focuses on the social-political and cultural factors that propagate issues of discrimination and subjugation for people with disabilities. Instead of centering on ameliorating one's impairments, disability studies addresses how our understanding of disability has been constructed by a normative society, which has led to issues of institutionalized ableism. Ableism is defined as

A network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability, then, is cast as a diminished state of being human. (Campbell, 2001, p. 44)

Ableism is built upon the notion that people with disabilities do not meet anticipated attributes or normative expectations deemed by the majority, which leads to the perception of people with disabilities to be "deviant." This negative discrepancy between a person's perceived deviant identity and their actual identity is known as stigma (Goffman, 1963).

Issues of ableism and stigma play a very large role in how people with disabilities perceive themselves, which in turn may affect how and if they develop a positive disability identity.

Disability identity refers to possessing a positive sense of self and feelings of connection to, or solidarity with, the disability community. A coherent disability identity is believed to help individuals adapt to disability, including navigating related social stresses and daily hassles. (Dunn & Burcaw, 2013, para. 1)

A positive disability identity encourages disability disclosure, which is particularly important among students with disabilities who may choose to pass or cover their identity to meet the expectations of compulsory ablebodiedness. The concept of compulsory ablebodiedness is built upon the belief that one must be ablebodied to perform in a normative society (McRuer, 2010). By appealing to the notion of compulsory ablebodiedness, students may not find the space to disclose or discuss their disabilities with others, which has the potential to perpetuate ableist perspectives in schools.

In this article, I examine the research that I conducted for my dissertation—using arts based practices for disability identity development—and discuss ways in which the intersection of art and critical disability studies can facilitate disability identity development as a method for integrating social justice practices into an educational setting. Throughout my research, I used both visual and narrative methods of inquiry to generate a series of works with the purpose of countering the notion of compulsory ablebodiedness through acts of uncovering. While promoting the social model of disability through these arts based research practices, my intention was to integrate the reflective ways of knowing oneself through art into current art education curricula, therefore, establishing disability culture in current pedagogical practices. In the following sections, I will focus specifically on my primary research question: How can art be used as a reflective tool for understanding significant aspects of critical disability studies such as identity, embodiment, and agency? This study will conclude with suggestions for implementing an art education curriculum that is centered on disability identity development.

Theoretical Framework

Currently, many educational approaches still implement a medical model of disability in the classroom.

The *individual and medical models of disability*, which perceive and classify disability in terms of a meta-narrative of deviance, lack and tragedy, and assume it to be logically separate from and inferior to “normalcy,” are characteristic of the kinds of epistemologies or knowledge systems generated by modernism. (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p. 2)

Critical disability studies, however, suggests the implementation of the social model of disability, which is rooted in postmodernism as it attempts to critique the individualized or medical model of disability. The social model of disability

makes a conceptual distinction between disability and impairment, similar to the feminist distinction between gender and sex. It sees disability as socially created, or constructed on top of impairment, and places the explanation of its changing character in the social and economic structure and culture of the society in which it is found. (p. 3)

The medical model of disability views disability as an individualized defect that must be cured in order for a person to function as a human being (Siebers, 2011). According to John Derby (2011), “the implication of the medical model for schools is that disabled learners are positioned as helpless dependents requiring unusual services from nondisabled educators, paraprofessionals, and peers” (p. 2).

This can be particularly problematic for the field of art education because the medical model is still being practiced in current art education pedagogy as it applies to integrated students with disabilities (Blandy, 1989). Yarmol (2013) also states

Within this model, goals and objectives of art education which are art oriented are replaced, suppressed, de-emphasized, or become secondary to educational goals that prescribe measures to compensate for, or eradicate negatively-valued behaviors or characteristics associated with disability and deviancy. (p. 9)

The social model of disability, however, is far better suited for art education curriculum. Eisenhauer (2007) states that the implementation of the social model of disability encourages students to think critically about their own cultural understanding of disability. Additionally, Derby (2011) suggests that, “disability studies can advance the field of art education’s perspectives and policies about disability” (p. 3).

Similarly, Disability Studies in Education (DSE) “offers much to the traditional field of special education, providing various lenses through which to view disability that, in turn, influence how we conduct research, the ways that we teach, and the place of students with disabilities in schools” (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011, p. 275). Furthermore, DSE discusses the importance of not using research to exclude the voices of people with disabilities. My research complies with this need as I integrate my own voice as a person with disabilities into discourse about the intersection of art and disability studies in education.

This integration of disability studies in art education curriculum is important because students with disabilities are often integrated into art classrooms as a means of complying with facets of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). There is a great deal of research supporting the role of arts and how it is beneficial for students with disabilities.

Role of the Arts

Art has long since been recognized as a very beneficial tool for students with disabilities (Dodd, 1980). Art based programs have been integrated into special education classrooms because studies have shown that art can help exceptional students by training and reinforcing deficient perceptual, motor, and academic skills. According to Coleman, Cramer, Park and Bell (2015) “students of all ages and ability levels can benefit from expressing their thoughts, ideas, and emotions through the multiple modes of learning (intuitive, kinesthetic, etc.), creative processes, graphic narratives, and social experiences of an art classroom” (p. 638). Many students with disabilities can demonstrate their understanding of concepts through the use of art more successfully than other methods (Hammel & Fischer, 2014).

Since the implementation of the IDEA, however, art education assumed a therapeutic approach for students with disabilities. “It was generally presumed during this period that art education for disabled students was a remedial effort suitable for building self-esteem and for rehabilitation” (Derby, 2011, p. 2). Therefore, a broader application of art practices and a better understanding of the nature of disability should be implemented into art curricula. Eisenhauer (2007) further supports this notion, claiming “disability in the art classroom is not only about inclusion, defined as appropriately accommodating students with disabilities, but is also about the exploration of disability culture and the sociopolitical issue of ableism in arts curriculum” (p. 10).

By addressing sociopolitical issues that are inherent in disability studies, disabled and non-disabled students are better able to understand what it means to live in a culture of disability.

Agency

Because issues of stigmatization exist, people with disabilities continue to be disenfranchised. Disability studies aims to counter these issues by speaking about, for, and with disabled people (Siebers, 2008). Voice and visibility play a large role in how people with disabilities are represented, so it is increasingly more important for people with disabilities to disclose their own individual experiences. Frank (1988) explores the life histories of three people with impairments and determines that these participants have practiced agency through the visibility of their disabilities by stating,

By insisting on being visible as people with disabilities and exploiting the discourse this disability provokes, they appear to reject the givenness of stigma, making it an open question for society to deal with, and furthering their sense of, as well as actual opportunities for, self-empowerment. (p. 97)

This sense of empowerment is important for people with disabilities because, in this sense, visibility becomes a form of activism. Claiming a disability identity is also considered a form of activism as it allows people with disabilities to understand how they situate themselves within their own communities, as well as with themselves and other nondisabled persons, therefore, empowering them through a sense of belonging. According to Gill (1997), there are four types of integration in disability identity development. These four types are: integrating into society, integrating with the disability community, internally integrating our sameness and differentness, and integrating how we feel with how we present ourselves. These four types are also known as: “coming to feel we belong,” “coming home,” “coming together,” and “coming out.” By integrating in these ways, people with disabilities become active agents of their own lives, therefore, furthering the civic rights movement for themselves and others within the disability community. Throughout my research, arts based practices are used as a way to explore these four types of integration in disability identity development as they apply to my experience as a person with disabilities. By exploring these types of integration through art, I can visualize my disability experience to my non-disabled peers, which allows my research to act as an agent of social change. This study uses art based research methods to explore my own disability identity with the intention of opening up a dialogue about ableism between disabled and nondisabled communities. By articulating intersecting theories of identity development through visual and narrative methods while simultaneously constructing my own disability identity, I provide an alternative method for integrating social justice issues into ordinary discourse.

Methodology

Arts based research has several different methods of application and interpretation, including the use of artistic approaches to address social issues (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Finley (2008) states that arts based inquiry is “a methodology for radical, ethical and revolutionary

research that is futuristic, socially responsible, and useful in addressing social inequities,” and it also “has the potential to facilitate critical race, indigenous, queer, feminist and border theories and research methodologies” (p. 71). Throughout this research, I have combined the method of reflexive journaling, as well as methods of visual inquiry such as drawing, watercolor, and sculpture to explore a heuristic understanding of my own disability experience. These intersecting arts based methods provided a collection of visual art and written narratives that formed an arts based journal that I later used for my data interpretation. During the data collection process, I used Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic approach, which included seven different phases: “Identifying with the focus of inquiry,” “self-dialogue,” “tacit knowing,” “intuition,” “indwelling,” “focusing,” and “the internal frame of reference.” While working through the different phases of this heuristic approach, I considered the nature of how I embody my own disability experience, specifically in relation to relevant concepts in critical disability studies.

The resulting data was then interpreted using the method of arts based reflexivity. Arts-based reflexivity has five steps: summarizing core themes from the raw data, creating an artistic response to these themes, synthesizing these responses into a larger scale artistic creation, reflection upon this artistic creation, and meta-reflection through continued experiencing (Schenstead, 2012). These steps are based off Moustakas’ (1990) six phases of heuristic research, which include: Engagement, Immersion, Incubation, Illumination, Explication, and Creative Synthesis. The raw data for this research was taken from the arts based journal generated in the previous step. Through interpreting the data, I determined emerging themes such as the fluidity of identity, disability as metaphor/deficit, and the complex nature of un/covering. I used these themes to push my artwork further, allowing me to reconsider my disability experience from a multifaceted perspective. From these generated artworks and narratives, I continued to create artwork that synthesizes these ideas in a comprehensive visual manner. Following this step, I reflected upon prior themes from my raw data and reinterpreted them with my growing understanding of the disability experience. The final step was the creation of an exhibition space that allowed for meta-reflection through continued experiencing. This final meta-reflection, in turn, provided implications on how disability identity development could be implemented in current art education pedagogy as a means to disrupt existing ableist hegemonies in an institutionalized setting.

Findings

When I began analyzing the data from my arts based journal, I noticed that many of the images that I was generating represented my disability almost exclusively through metaphor (Figure 1, below). I was leaning heavily on my desire to explain my disabilities to others in a way that I believed would be more easily understood, which in turn represented my disability as a form of deficit. Some of the themes that I found in relation to this were: pain and nakedness (vulnerability), helplessness (carrying the burden with me), medication and feeling abnormal (feeling out of control), medication and academia, and feeling disconnected (internally from externally).



Figure 1. Mental Health

In recognizing that I was representing disability as deficit through metaphor, I began to explore some concepts inherent to critical disability studies that extended beyond this notion of disability. This led me to look at theories that included binaries, borderlands, identity renegotiation, and the performative nature of identity. These theories are particularly important to my research because they frame the disability experience as something that moves beyond the individual and looks at how external perceptions of disability affect the development of my own disability identity. This allowed me to shift toward an abstract method of representation during my second stage of reflection to better show how the interdependence of the mind and body play a role in the disability experience and how embodiment and identity intersect both theoretically and visually (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Borderlands

During the third stage of synthesis, I embraced the notion of complex embodiment and attempted to create three-dimensional artworks that reflected the importance of sociocultural context in relation to disability identity development and visualization of invisible disabilities. As I thought through some of these central concepts to disability studies, I began to recognize various

ways in which disability is a social construction. The theories that I focused on in this step included transitioning identity, performative ablebodiedness, critical moments of disability awareness, and the act of un/covering (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Transitioning Identity

Throughout the fourth stage, I considered the multifaceted and fluid nature of disability by reconsidering previous themes of deficit from the first stage and reapplying them through a critical disabilities perspective of fluidity and inclusivity. This led me to create an installation that represents how I believe the disability experience is truly constructed—disability doesn't happen *to* you, it *is* you—and this thread is what ties together the disability experience and the construction of a disability identity (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Ocean

The final stage led me to curate an exhibition of my works, which allowed me the space to reflect on my artistic journey from a holistic perspective and visualize my development of a positive disability identity over time (Figure 5, below). Furthermore, the exhibition provided me with the realization of “coming out” both as an academic and an artist with disabilities.



Figure 5. Completed Exhibition

My primary research question investigates how art can be used as a reflective tool for understanding significant aspects of critical disability studies such as identity, embodiment, and agency. Throughout this research, I determined that the practice of using arts based research is well suited to engage these key themes in critical disability studies through a complex and multi-dimensional way, which provides insight into aspects of critical disability studies. By thinking through key theories in critical disability studies as they relate to themes of embodiment, identity, and agency, I was able to generate more multifaceted artworks that exemplify the intricate nature of the disability experience.

This process allowed me to understand how arts based research can provide a critical distance, which led me to reflect on concepts central to the field of critical disability studies while simultaneously enabling me to resituate my own understanding of disability. I also determined that the art making process allowed me to make thematic connections between theories, as well as between theory and personal experience. The process of thinking through theory while generating artwork gave me greater insight into the disability experience, therefore, adding nuance to the understanding of critical disability studies, particularly in relation to the malleable nature of identity, embodiment, and agency.

Working through various concepts in critical disability studies through art led me to consider and reconsider all of the various facets of the disability experience, including issues of ableism and normative expectations of compulsory ablebodiedness, which in turn allowed me to shift away from the notion of disability as deficit. Additionally, the process of arts based reflexivity led me away from a medical model of disability and towards a social model of disability, which enabled me to recognize the sociopolitical factors that influenced the development of my own disability identity.

Throughout this process, arts based research provided me with the distance needed in order to critically look at the work I was generating, which enabled me to recognize how I truly understood theories that related to disability studies based on the ways in which I represented them artistically. I would not have discovered my thematic tendency to rely on disability metaphors had I not seen the common thread visually. Furthermore, when my thought process was mapped out visually, I could see where there was a disconnect—or a missing piece in my representation of theories related to identity, embodiment, and agency. By creating artistic representations of my

understanding of these theories, I could see how my pieces were both visually and literally one-dimensional. Seeing that my work was not as complex as the theories I was working though forced me to consider what I could add to each piece to make it more intricate. In doing so, I reconsidered how I was using each artistic method, which deepened my understanding of each theory through interpretation of each artistic choice. This allowed me to understand identity as multifaceted and transitioning, embodiment as complex and interconnected, and agency as something that can be maintained through a stronger understanding of self and, in my case, the acceptance of disabilities as culturally constructed.

As I used reflexivity through art, the subtle differences in the ways that I identified as disabled, as well as the way that I embodied my own disabilities, became visually perceptible. The steps that I used in arts based reflexivity acted as a scaffolding process, in which each step furthered my understanding of the complexity of the disability experience. Each step required me to revisit previous themes and artworks and to reflect how my understanding of the disability experience became more complex through nonrepresentational works.

As my study suggests, arts based research can be used as a way to broaden the understanding of the disability experience by highlighting the nuance between each individual, much like I have highlighted the nuance of my own disability identity through each step of arts based reflexivity. The abstract nature of reflection that I chose to employ opens up an opportunity to address these aspects of identity, embodiment, and agency through a multi-interpretational way. Arts based research, therefore, does not only promote critical thinking through visual methods, but it can also generate work that can be deciphered in whichever way best suits the audience's needs in regard to understanding the experience of having invisible disabilities in a normative society. Furthermore, I have determined that the process of making art allows for a way of thinking through and alongside theory that is exploratory and expansive. Thus, arts based research facilitates the ability to understand and interrogate the disability experience as well as highlight the nuance of the disability experience as it relates to one's disability identity.

Significance

Throughout my research, I have used art as a way to discuss my disability experience, which has led to a sense of agency as I explore my disability identity. One implication of these findings is that art could be used in the classroom to understand facets of students' identities whether or not they are disabled. For students with disabilities, however, art can be used as a form of empowerment as students learn to accept their disabilities as part of what makes them who they are. Derby (2012) states that art addresses identity, which allows people with disabilities to understand a sense of self, which can promote self-awareness. Nevertheless, this may be difficult to do without the guidance of an educator. Derby (2011) also suggests that incorporating disability studies in art education can advance the perspectives of disability. If art educators can facilitate a discussion about the perspectives of disability, it may lead students to feel more comfortable accepting their disabilities, in which case art can also be used as a form of uncovering these disabilities because students would not feel as pressured to pass or cover their disability identities.

The introduction of disability studies into art curricula needs to move beyond inclusion and accommodation and should focus on familiarizing students with disability culture and addressing sociopolitical issues of ableism that occur within the arts curriculum and within other educational settings. Using art as a way to uncover disability identity opens the possibility of introducing

disability culture into the classroom by means of class discussion and critiques based on the work generated through this type of self-reflective practice and work created by other artists. Art can also act as a medium for promoting critical thinking about issues of ableism as they relate to other fields of critical theory, such as critical race theory and gender studies.

Additionally, the arts have been shown to have a number of benefits for people with disabilities, including identity development. Despite knowing the benefits that the arts have for people with disabilities, there is still the tendency to use art as a rehabilitative tool in the classroom because of the institutionalized adoption of the functional limitations model. By intersecting disability studies and art education through the use of the social model of disability, the art classroom can then become a space for disability discourse through self-representation. By merging these two interdisciplinary fields, the disability arts movement can reshape the way disabilities are viewed by both disabled students and their nondisabled peers. Pedagogical practices in art education can then begin to move beyond a medicalized understanding of disability in order to combat the issue of ableism in schools.

This research, in effect, offers an alternative method for employing a disability studies perspective within pedagogical approaches to art education. The process of using arts based reflexivity can be adapted in a way that allows students to think through and alongside disability theory in a method that is critical, meaningful, and expansive. However, the process of identity development is a delicate and intricate process, so introducing complex topics such as passing and uncovering must be done with care. Although the arts have the tendency to remediate some of the tensions that may arise by allowing a person to consider the disability experience without having to tackle it directly, it is important for educators not to push students past their comfort level if they are not prepared to take on such a sizable task. This process takes time, and sometimes it requires one to step away from the process all together as a way to internalize what has been learned. The arts also have the ability to unearth the subconscious, as I discovered in step one of arts based reflexivity. With this in mind, and within the context of creating art curricula that is socially conscious, art could, therefore, become a catalyst for critical introspection by hinting at the way in which one views his or her own disabilities as they pertain to his or her identity, as well as how other nondisabled students view disability culture as a whole.

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