
The Possibility of a Disability Studies in Education Continuing Education Course: A Deleuzoguattarian Stratoanalysis

KAI RANDS

National Coalition of Independent Scholars

JAMES SHELDON

University of Arizona

DISABILITY STUDIES IN EDUCATION (DSE) calls into question deficit-based views of folks with impairments, the notion that disability resides within individuals, and commonplace technologies of disablement in schools and the broader educational arena. As teacher educators, the authors wanted to investigate the feasibility of teaching a DSE-based continuing education course for inservice teachers using a particular online platform. Researchers in DSE view disablement as a process situated within historical, cultural, social, and political contexts. The purpose of education shifts from a singular focus on enhancing individual performance to more of a focus on transforming existing environmental limitations in place for students (Baglieri, Vale, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). Moving beyond the mere application of interventions to remedy student deficiencies, DSE scholars seek to have teachers reflect on their decisions as educational agents (Baglieri et al., 2011). If teachers are to work toward social justice in this way, it is imperative that teachers have access to disability studies perspectives. Platforms such as ForeverEd (a pseudonym) could be one way in which teacher educators could more widely disseminate DSE perspectives.

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which a particular continuing education platform, ForeverEd, and its infrastructure enable and constrain the possibility of teaching a DSE-based continuing education class. Specifically, we investigated the following questions: 1) To what extent do the current disability-related courses available on the online platform express ideas that align with and/or contrast with DSE perspectives? and 2) To what extent does the infrastructure of the platform enable and/or constrain the possibility of teaching a DSE-based course? In order to investigate these questions, we used document analysis of documents found on the ForeverEd website. The constant comparison method of data analysis led to the emergence of several key

themes. We found that the work of Deleuze and Guattari and of Michael Warner served as a helpful lens through which to interpret the findings.

Online professional development is an emerging area of research, with concerns being raised about the often random selection of topics, with little attention paid to quality and appropriateness of content (Ginsburg, Grey, & Levin, 2004). Looking at online training in general, researchers have expressed qualms about the focus on financial return on investment at the expense of pedagogy and learner experience (Homan & MacPherson, 2005). Despite these concerns, there remains considerable potential, especially in regard to providing professional development to teachers in rural areas (Erickson, Noonan, & McCall, 2012). What has not yet been studied is the ways in which online course platforms constrain acceptable topics of professional development and privilege certain educational discourses over others.

Methodological Approach

The method used in this study was qualitative document analysis. Document analysis “is the systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The documents used as data sources were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to generate emerging qualitative codes. The constant comparative method is “based on an inductive approach geared toward identifying patterns” (Bowen, 2009, p. 37). The first author began by coding sections of the data sources into themes. Following the constant comparative method, the researcher compared the sections of text coded with a particular theme with previous sections already coded with the same theme in an ongoing process. In a similar manner to the process described by Bowen (2009), the author “constantly checked and rechecked the elemental codes and concepts...scrutinized and compared [document] data with data and with codes in order to [organize] ideas and pinpoint concepts that seemed to cluster together” (p. 37). As themes emerged, sections of documents were compared with the “accumulated knowledge” (Glaser, 1965, p. 440) related to relevant themes. Like Bowen (2009), the author continuously asked, “How is this text similar to, or different from, preceding text?” (p. 37). The data were interpreted in order to explore the ways in which ForeverEd enable and constrain the possibility of teaching a DSE-based continuing education class.

The data sources used for this study consisted of online documents available to the public related to continuing education courses on a particular online continuing education platform, ForeverEd. The platform includes continuing education courses across a variety of disciplines, including education. ForeverEd is recognized by school districts, and the process of receiving continuing education credits from the courses is simple. ForeverEd partners with community colleges to make it convenient to find and take the classes. For example, a selection of currently offered ForeverEd courses is available to teachers through a network of over 2,100 colleges throughout the United States. Teachers can sign up for the online classes through the community colleges’ websites or on the ForeverEd website itself. The price at the time of writing is \$70 -\$100 per course. In the mid-2000s, ForeverEd was purchased by a major, for-profit, educational publishing company.

To choose courses for analysis for this study, the following selection process was used. First, the authors examined the titles of all of the courses listed under education and selected all of the courses whose titles referenced dis/ability in some way. The courses were categorized as follows: 1) general courses about disability, 2) courses about specific conditions, and 3) courses

about differentiated teaching and learning. The first category, general courses about disability, best matches the scope of a DSE-based course; therefore, the two courses from the first category were selected for inclusion in the study. These were the only two courses that met this criterion.

Online documents for each class were systematically analyzed and coded for emergent themes. Specifically, the online system included the following documents for each course: “About This Course,” “About This Instructor,” “Syllabus,” and “Related Courses.” Each of these documents was analyzed for each of the courses.

In addition to the course documents, two online documents related to the infrastructure of the ForeverEd platform teaching processes were analyzed. The first was the application to teach for ForeverEd. The second was the FAQ page related to teaching for ForeverEd.

Theoretical Framework

The work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari served as a lens for interpreting the findings in the study. Their work provides ways to critique curriculum and create new modes of engagement. In this study, we use Deleuzoguattarian stratoanalysis along with Michael Warner’s elaboration on the concepts of publics and counterpublics to examine the material and ideological difficulty one of the authors encountered when attempting to propose a disability-studies based class for teachers that would carry continuing education credits. Specifically, we use the notions of common sense from Deleuze’s (1968/1994) *Difference and Repetition* and double articulation and lines of flight from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/1987) *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Stratoanalysis and Double Articulation

Deleuzoguattarian stratoanalysis involves looking for locations of stratification and destratification. Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) describe stratification in the following way: “Strata...consist of...imprisoning intensities or locking singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy.... Strata are acts of capture” (p. 40). In other words, stratification locks a particular organization of reality that does not allow for other ways of organizing reality. On strata are points of structuration, which Deleuze and Guattari call “assemblages.” Assemblages link two heterogeneous elements. The first element is linguistic in nature (broadly speaking) and is a “form of expression.” The second element is material (broadly speaking) and takes on a “form of content.” Stratoanalysis poses the following questions: “Which forms of content have come to be linked with which forms of expression? How can pressure be applied to this link to open it up, to force it to become something other than it is” (Rands, 2011, p. 36). Double articulation involves the linking up of a form of content with a form of expression to form an assemblage. A key example of double articulation is Foucault’s (1977) linking of the the prison (a form of content) with “delinquency” (a form of expression).

Learning and Common Sense

According to Deleuze (1968/1994), “learning takes place not in the relation between a representation and an action (reproduction of the Same) but in the relation between a sign and a

response (encounter with the Other)” (p. 22). Such encounters interrupt assumptions of the form “Everybody knows...” (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 129) or reveal the ways in which “givens” are often “takens” (Semetsky, 2006, p. 82). Kumashiro (2004) points out that what comes to be seen as common sense is often comforting and familiar but is also often oppressive. Both Deleuze (1968/1994) and Kumashiro (2004) conceptualize learning as involving working against common sense. Deleuze (1968/1994) argues that people have an investment in making claims about what “everybody” knows or recognizes. The person who refuses to know something that “everybody” knows, that refuses to be represented or represent anything (Deleuze, 1968/1994), introduces a crisis (Kumashiro, 2004) into a “dogmatic, orthodox or moral image” of thought (Deleuze, 1968/1994, p. 131). Working toward social justice entails inserting these refusals into oppressive strata—or, in other words, learning.

Publics and Counterpublics

Michael Warner (2002) distinguishes the public from a public; the public is a social totality whereas a public has certain specific characteristics. A public is self-organized. In other words, it comes into being through the very process of being addressed and of paying attention. The creation of a public is a circular process in which the speaker or writer addresses a public imagined already to exist. This address then creates that very public through the act of attending to what is said or written. In Warner’s conception, a public is a social and discursive space, rather than a physical one. Addressing a public differs from other modes of address because it entails addressing presumed strangers.

Counterpublics are publics that purposefully do not present themselves as the public. Instead they have a conflictual relation to the general public, which is marked as not just general but also dominant. Like all publics, a counterpublic’s ontology depends on addressing indefinite strangers. However, the counterpublic is marked in a particular way: it is assumed that ordinary people would not want to talk or write in this way.

Lines of Flight

Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) present following lines of flight as a strategy for escaping the strata, for breaking out of realities that seem like the only possible reality. Their directions for doing so are to “lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers...find potential movements...possible lines of flight, experience them.... It is through meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight” (p. 161). Embarking on lines of flight allow the creation of new ways of being.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which a particular continuing education platform and its infrastructure enabled and constrained the possibility of teaching a DSE-based continuing education class. Specifically, the study investigated 1) the extent to which the ideas expressed in the current disability-studies related courses available on the online platform

align with and/or contrast with DSE perspectives, and 2) the extent to which the infrastructure of the platform enables and/or constrains the possibility of teaching a DSE-based course. Examining the findings through a Deleuzoguattarian lens, we suggest that expressive and material double articulation embedded in the process of proposing a DSE-based continuing education course on the platform analyzed creates a public with certain common sense assumptions that preclude a DSE-based class proposal.

The Form of Expression in Disability-Related Courses

Stratoanalysis of documents from two ForeverEd courses related to disabilities illuminated the form of expression in the courses. Overall, rather than taking on a form of expression that aligns with DSE-based views of disablement, we found that the course documents reinforce oppressive, dominant views of disability. The form of expression addresses, and in the process of addressing also creates, an audience that is presumed non-disabled and ableist. Although both courses addressed the topic of disabilities, overall the courses contrasted with DSE perspectives in key ways. Here we will use one class session description as an example to illustrate several themes that served as forms of expression that arose throughout the data. One of the class sessions of one of the classes addressed “Speech and Language Disorders,” a title that already expresses a deficit view. The class session overview reads as follows:

Imagine how frustrating it would be if you couldn’t speak clearly, understand other people, or express your thoughts and feelings well. That’s what life is like for children with speech or language disorders, a topic we’ll investigate today. In addition to learning what it’s like to have these disorders, we’ll explore simple tricks that can beef up your students’ communication skills.

Several themes that contrast with DSE perspectives are evident in the class session description. First, the class description does not address the social and political process of disablement, instead locating disability within individuals and ignoring the connection between the process of disablement and oppression and/or privilege. Along with the individual focus, the description pathologizes speech and language diversity, focusing on what these students cannot do instead of what they can do. Second, the class session description expresses the assumption that the course attendees are nondisabled; instead of asking attendees to reflect on their own experiences, it asks them to imagine others’ experiences. While DSE would privilege disabled people’s experiences, this class instead allows presumably nondisabled teachers to dwell on their own stereotypes and preconceptions. Third, the course description denies the complexity of addressing the ways in which systems of oppression disable students and instead offers “simple tricks” to teachers, tricks that from a DSE perspective would be seen as coercing students into speaking in normative ways. Overall, the class description and the courses as a whole reinforce oppressive dominant views of disability rather than taking on a form of expression that would align with a DSE-based perspective. The documents analyzed produce a public that is assumed to be nondisabled, to be ableist, and that views disability as an individual deficit.

Infrastructure of the Online Platform (Form of Content)

The infrastructure of the ForeverEd platform serves as a material form of content that is doubly articulated with the form of expression. Two documents related to the infrastructure were analyzed to determine the extent to which the infrastructure of ForeverEd enables and/or constrains the possibility of teaching a DSE-based course on the platform. The documents revealed several constraining aspects of the infrastructure that, in combination, made the possibility of teaching a DSE-based class using the ForeverEd platform unlikely. First, the application to teach for ForeverEd revealed that the teacher's role was that of author, and courses were structured as written content on the website. This feature alone does not constrain developing a DSE-based course. However, a second aspect of the behind-the-scenes infrastructure revealed in the application was the expectation that those hired as teachers would "develop courses that are consistent with all of our other courses in tone, style, and length" and would be willing to "make corrections" to their courses according to ForeverEd's editor's "informed opinions." Taken together, these two aspects require teachers to follow expectations such as providing quick-fix "tips and tricks," which are not conducive to the difficult transformational work required by a DSE perspective. Finally, ForeverEd encourages teacher educators to view their course attendees as customers. Such a view, again, deters teacher educators from including perspectives that would encourage course attendees to grapple with ideas that challenge their assumptions about disability in the ways that a DSE-based class would. The infrastructure or form of content of the ForeverEd platform combines elements that are, then, doubly articulated with the form of expression to prevent teachers from teaching a DSE-based course.

Summary

The course pages work together as the form of expression, expressing individualistic, deficit, ableist views on disability. The infrastructure of the course serves as the form of content, shaping the courses into containers of the same style, tone, and length with a presumed public of customers who have similar views on disability. Together these two aspects are doubly articulated to form a stratum, a reality in which DSE-based courses are not feasible on the ForeverEd platform at this time.

Significance: Lines of Flight, Counterpublics, and Learning

In contrast to Ginsburg, Grey, and Levin's (2004) observation about the haphazard nature of available professional development courses, our study found a unifying ideology that underpinned the courses on disability: the idea that students have deficits that can be easily remedied by a teacher who has taken one of ForeverEd's classes. The teacher is conceptualized more as a technician who administers quick fixes rather than a professional making complex judgments and decisions. Furthermore, reminiscent of the fears expressed by Homan and MacPherson (2005), ForeverEd seems more interested in the number of paying enrollees than in the depth of experience offered to the participating teachers. Further research should examine other

ideologies underlying online professional developments; what appears haphazard on the surface may in fact represent an implicit ideological consensus.

Although there is considerable potential in these virtual platforms for reaching teachers who do not have access to traditional university-based resources for professional development, this study offers a cautionary note to teacher educators seeking to partner with third-party companies to offer professional development. We found that the form of expression embedded within the course pages, paired with the form of content consisting of the infrastructure, made the feasibility of teaching a DSE-based class unlikely. Rather than supporting the transformational pedagogy involved in a DSE-based class, the double articulation between the form of expression and the form of content reinforce the status quo. Future research might explore other platform options to determine the feasibility of teaching DSE-based courses in other spaces.

This study also offers inspiration for those seeking to develop professional development opportunities that take into account DSE perspectives; by seeing the problematic nature of ForeverEd's course descriptions—that is, engaging with the stratum—it is possible to embark on lines of flight and design courses that do not reflect those deficit-oriented assumptions. Such courses call into being counterpublics whose views contrast with that of the dominant societal views of disability. DSE assumes that disablement is a complex social, cultural, and political process (Ashby, 2012; Kafer, 2013; Taylor, Shulz, & Wallker, 2003). Hence, disability is a socially and culturally defined construct (Ashby, 2012). The process of disablement is a form of oppression/privilege in which social and political contexts “create and perpetuate hierarchies of ability and disability” (Ashby, 2012, p. 92; also see Barnes, Oliver, & Barton, 2002; Davis, 1997; Hahn, 1997). In these hierarchies, certain people gain unearned advantages that others are denied. DSE assumes that it is the social and physical environment that must change in response to disablement. DSE also challenges discourses of normalcy and ableism. Like racism, classism, and heterosexism, ableism privileges certain worldviews and ways of being in the world and, thus, constructs them as “normal,” while other worldviews and ways of being in the world are constructed as “abnormal” (Artiles in Chamberlain, 2006; Ashby, 2012; Kafer, 2013). Creating courses that reflect these perspectives produce a counterpublic and allow for lines of flight from the dominant stratum. DSE-based continuing education courses for teachers involve learning in Deleuze's and Guattari's sense. Such courses challenge what presumably “everybody knows” about disability (according to dominant views) and center paradigms based on DSE research, such as the social model and the social/political model.

References

- Ashby, C. (2012). Disability studies and inclusive teacher preparation: A socially just path for teacher education. *Research and Practice for People with Severe Disabilities*, 37(2), 89-99.
- Baglieri, S., Valle, J. W., Connor, D. J., & Gallagher, D. J. (2011). Disability studies in education: The need for a plurality of perspectives on disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, 32(4), 267-278.
- Barnes, C., Oliver, M., & Barton, L. (2002). *Disability studies today*. Cambridge, UK: Policy Press.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27-40.

- Chamberlain, S. P. (2006). Alfredo Artiles and Beth Harry: Issues of overrepresentation and educational equity for culturally and linguistically diverse students. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 41*(4), 228-232.
- Davis, L. (1997). Constructing normalcy: The bell curve, the novel, and the invention of the disabled body in the nineteenth century. In L. Davis (Ed.), *The disability studies reader* (pp. 9-28). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and repetition*. (P. Patton, Trans.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1968)
- Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. (B. Massumi, Trans.). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1980)
- Erickson, A. S. G., Noonan, P. M., & McCall, Z. (2012). Effectiveness of online professional development for rural special educators. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 31*(1), 22–32. doi.org/10.1177/875687051203100104
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Ginsburg, A., Gray, T., & Levin, D. (2004). *Online professional development for mathematics teachers: A strategic analysis*. The American Institutes for Research. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED492927>
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social problems, 12*(4), 436-445.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Hahn, H. (1997). New trends in disability studies: Implications for educational policy. In D. K. Lipsky & A. Gartner (Eds.), *Inclusion and school reform: Transforming America's classrooms* (pp. 315-328). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Homan, G., & Macpherson, A. (2005). E-learning in the corporate university. *Journal of European Industrial Training, 29*(1), 75–90. doi.org/10.1108/03090590510576226
- Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, queer, crip*. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Kumashiro, K. (2004). *Against common sense: Teaching and learning toward social justice*. New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Rands, K. (2011). *Affirming difference, generating problems, and becoming-democratic in mathematics education*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.
- Semetsky, I. (2006). *Deleuze, education and becoming*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.
- Taylor, S. T., Shulz, B., & Walker, P. (Eds.). (2003). *Disability studies: Information and resources*. Retrieved from http://thechp.syr.edu/Disability_Studies_2003_current.html
- Warner, M. (2002). Publics and counterpublics. *Public Culture, 14*(1), 49-90.

