

Teaching To Trouble: Critical Book Reviews as Pedagogy to Interrogate Education Praxis

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Abstract: How might education professors disrupt traditional curriculum and teaching practices that teach future teachers to label, segregate, and marginalize students with disabilities? The Disability Studies in Education (DSE) approach grounds practice on the perspectives of people with disabilities and challenges practices that isolate and de-humanize individuals. The pedagogy for eliciting critical book reviews using a DSE perspective is described.

DSE is an interdisciplinary field which unites critical inquiry, political advocacy, and approaches from the arts, humanities, and humanistic/post-humanistic social sciences to improve the lives of people with disabilities based on their expressed wishes (Gabel, 2005). A disabilities studies in education (DSE) theoretical framework relies on the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities to challenge actions that maintain the *status quo* (Danforth & Gabel, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to document the pedagogy of writing book reviews that use a DSE perspective to critique the work.

Theoretical Framework

The instructional pedagogy is based on Paulo Freire's (1985) notions of critiquing and was co-created over the course of 2 semesters by one professor and 13 graduate students (6 in 2009 and 7 in 2010) and the author. Freire (1998) posited that critiquing the reading "before anything else, [is] a critical, creative, recreating activity" (p. 18). It is naturally occurring by virtue of the curiosity of the one who is studying. Studying what other people have written sets us up in a special way so that we are "Reading the word [which] enables us to read a previous reading of the world" (Freire, 1998, p. 18). That world may no longer be pertinent, but the word has captured it for us to read and ponder.

A Brief History of DSE

According to Danforth and Gabel (2006), a DSE approach relies on intellectual and practical tools as well as forms of thought and action that (a) nurture a deeper awareness among educators about disability rights, (b) lead to more inclusive participation, and (c) reveal the uniqueness and importance of disability identity. DSE is a relatively new field of study (Connor, Gabel, & Peters, 2006), beginning with the influences of the 1960s-1970s. The field was spurred into action during the Civil Rights era in the United States and the worldwide Independent Living movement.

Methods

In this section, we describe the participants, the elements of the critical book review, the criteria for a critical book review using DSE principles, and the instructional methods or interactions that elicited the reviews. We refer to key resources that support the pedagogy.

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Participants

During Fall 2009 and 2010, a total of 13 doctoral students (11 females) and one professor conducted critical reviews of current books in the area of special education and related services. Many of the doctoral students were members of under-represented populations seeking doctoral degrees. All participants had completed three years of preparation for the Ph. D. and were positioned to prepare their dissertation proposals. All participants were career special educators (i.e., speech/language pathologist working with adults recovering from stroke, education program specialists, a director of curriculum development, or high school teacher of students with disabilities). Four of the participants taught in pre-service special educators at local universities or colleges while all participants conducted workshops and training sessions at their respective work sites.

Elements of the Critical Book Review

In this section, the elements of the assignment and the instructional methods for generating the critical review are described. The assignment focused on revealing to readers the content of the book by applying the intellectual tools of a DSE perspective. Danforth and Gabek (2006) posit that DSE intellectual tools include (a) interrogating the underlying foundation of phenomena, (b) engaging in a dialectic where two seemingly opposing statements can be held in mind in order to understand the Other, (c) including people with disabilities in the conversations.

The goal of the critical book review was not to summarize what the author said. Instead, book reviewers were encouraged to identify the central purpose in writing the book and analyze the significance of the book in terms of how it adds to an understanding of the subject of disability studies in education. Related purposes included: to identify and analyze the significance of important arguments made in the book, evaluate the extent to which the author succeeded in fulfilling the purpose for writing the book, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the book with regard to how it adds to an understanding of the subject of disability studies in education.

Instructional Methods

We agreed to use a collaborative approach in teaching and evaluating outcomes. We co-developed a rubric that encompassed the following points in the written critique: (a) give full bibliographic information on the book, (b) state whether or not the author made his/her own perspective clear and whether or not the perspective adds or detracts from the value of the book, (c) explain your own relationship to the subject content of the book, (d) describe what is valuable about the content, and (e) explain why you would or would not recommend the book to someone who wants to understand the subject of disability studies. A key to successful critiques was to justify the decision to criticize or to commend the author and explain why by citing evidence from the work to support the stance. Each reviewer set his/her own deadlines with respect to submitting drafts to be critiqued by a peer and/or the instructor.

Participants selected a recently published book that they wanted to read and interpret with a DSE lens. The books often reflected their intended dissertation topics (e.g., studies of people with disabilities that focused on eliciting their voices and perspectives, leadership advances in international disability studies). The books that were selected for the critical reviews are shown in the Appendix.

Applying principles from critical pedagogy. Three principles from critical pedagogy formed the basis for this instructional method to elicit critical book reviews: dialogue, conscientization, and praxis. As explained by Darder (1995), dialogue creates a psychological space for learners to know what their views are; conscientization occurs when

learners become aware that they have a voice and that they can influence others' views; praxis is the learning cycle of taking action, reflecting on outcomes, taking a new action or adopting a different belief that leads to new perspectives.

Identifying and selecting a book review process. By the end of the second week of classes, all participants had selected a book to review, clarified key terms, participated in class discussions to critique selective examples of a DSE lens, and, by the fourteenth week of the semester, all had targeted at least one publication venue as a possible dissemination outlet. Our first step was to identify and read two alternative examples of instruction for writing a critical review (e.g., Fulwiler, 1990). We also deconstructed and critiqued Hatcher and McDonald (2011) article on how to write editorials and book reviews. These documents provided a context for collaboratively selecting the critical pedagogy approach. First, it aligned with a disabilities studies in education perspective and the professor's collaborative approach to teaching and learning. Second, the doctoral program at this university aimed to prepare stewards of the discipline and public intellectuals who were capable of critiquing (Golde & Walker, 2006).

We used an iterative cycle to prepare the critical review included submitting drafts of the review to a peer for guided feedback on writing style and cohesiveness as well as the presence (or absence) of key concepts and arguments reflecting a DSE perspective. In addition, the instructor provided substantive written feedback prior to publication of the completed reviews in a Class Big Book of Book Reviews. Because we were co-creating the class and had permission to co-author the critical book reviews, we searched the literature on teaching writing at the graduate level, notably models to explain the collaborative writing process (Isenberg, Jalongo, & Bromley, 1987; Nevin, Thousand, & Villa, 2011; Plakhotnik & Shuck, 2011). Hatcher and Rocco (2011) co-edited a handbook that showcases best practices in preparing graduate students to write for various dissemination venues (e.g., critiques, research publications, and book reviews). We read and analyzed how to create and publish non-refereed manuscripts such as editorials and book reviews (Hatcher & McDonald, 2011).

Deconstructing/Critiquing publications that used a DSE approach. The professor, in consultation with participants, used modeling, peer review, and feedback to guide the completion of the critical book reviews. Publications were deconstructed in order to reveal key components of successful critiques using a DSE lens (Cherland 2006; Gabel 2001; Kleege 2009; Newman 2009). For example, in her critical review, University of Regina professor Cherland (2006) offered important insights for teacher educators and K-12 school personnel who wish to decrease the impact of racism in schooling practices. Cherland makes transparent the interplay between race and disability to show how teachers interacted unconsciously bringing such consciousness to awareness serves as a stimulant for those of us who are not accustomed to seeing how our varied cultures shape our lives.

Gabel (2001) is a teacher education professor who interrogates her profession. She raises our awareness of how teacher educators can begin to apply disability studies principles to their work. Reflective practice and the value of reflexivity between personal experience and pedagogy are common research themes. However, teacher candidates often report a lack of encouragement to be reflective of their experiences with disability and the ways those experiences can inform pedagogy. In the article entitled "I wash my face with dirty water", Gabel reports the results of a year of inquiry involving three novice teachers with disabilities. The impact of their experiences is discussed in light of their developing pedagogical knowledge. For these teachers, teaching is an encounter with the self but their encounters are an untapped resource with rich potential for the construction of pedagogical knowledge. Gabel argues that

teacher educators must facilitate reflection on experiences with disability just as we do with gender, race/ethnicity, and other identity markers or lived experiences.

Another article provided a model for understanding how the historical context influences one's life. Kleege (2009) critiqued the Kim Nielsen's biography, *Beyond the Miracle Worker: The Remarkable Story of Anne Sullivan Macy and Her Extraordinary Friendship with Helen Keller*. Kleege (2009) concludes her detailed review,

The book serves as an example to other historians of disability to mine the records of institutions like Tewksbury for other untold stories of disabled lives. Even while Sullivan's was a singular life, Nielsen puts it in the context of nineteenth and early twentieth century American culture, highlighting the intricate interplay between gender, class and disability that shaped it. (para 15)

A DSE approach to policy is provided by Sarah Newman (2009). She applied a linguistic analysis to definitions of one disability category which had not yet been defined in the mandates. Newman examines a recent policy debate by means of a particular rhetorical approach. That approach, based on the strategic use of word definitions and repetition, is applied to the deliberative process underlying attempts to provide appropriate special education accommodations for students with Tourette Syndrome in the U.S. public school system. Newman applied an explicit model for arguing and advocating with definitions. Along the way, she examined how an advocacy organization participated in civic deliberations about disability law in the public schools.

Exchanging roles was another instructional tool utilized by the participants and instructor. During each class (whether face-to-face or in the discussion forum online), the participants served as leaders and moderators of the discussions along with the professor. This appeared to help convince us that we could speak the language of DSE. We also maintained a Word Wall, to keep track of the specific language of a DSE approach. For example, two reviewers challenged the concepts of ableism and resistance induction.

In addition, the professor and participants practiced a constructivist process in providing feedback on various drafts of the reviews. We served as coaches to each other and critiqued each other's work. We identified and used six tips that helped in giving and receiving feedback including (a) summarize the author's argument and show integrity by attesting to strengths and weaknesses, (b) ask questions to clarify positions, (c) reflect on what the authors are trying to say especially if the point is unclear, and (d) make suggestions on how to address the gaps or the problems that have been identified. We agreed that each author retained "author's privilege" of following or ignoring the reviewers' feedback.

Results

Results must be cautiously interpreted as generalizations beyond these two particular groups of doctoral students; however, the findings appear to be robust in that the same pedagogy was used by 2 different groups of doctoral students. Moreover, several of the critiques from both groups have been accepted for publication in peer reviewed journals, showing a type of external validation that the outcomes yielded publishable papers.

The process yielded a total of 14 critical book reviews: 6 in 2010 and 8 in 2009. All were submitted for publication in a respected journal, carefully selected to influence social services practitioners to read the book and to appreciate a DSE perspective. To date, four have been published (e. g., in *Issues in Teacher Education*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, and *Disabilities Studies Quarterly*).

The content analysis of the critical book reviews revealed that two DSE principles were

used-- *disability identity and forms of thought/action to nurture deeper awareness among educators about disability rights*. An example of the application of disability identity was offered by Hagge (2011), a medical-based speech-language pathologist who works in an urban multicultural area with adults who are recovering from stroke. Her interests are in feminist theory and supporting socially just practices for adults with neurological impairment and their families/partners. In her review of a three-volume collection of essays about *Disabilities: Insights from across fields and around the world* by Marshall, Kendall, Banks, and Gover, she noted, "A significant limitation to this three volume collection is the predominate voice of the professional. Those individuals and families who are living with disabilities are not represented in this collection" (Hagge, 2011, p. 9).

In her critique, Nishimura (2011) noted that the authors showed a profound empathy with people with disabilities and raise the issue of disability silence. Teachers can address disability silence by showing and discussing documentary films that interpret disability as just another "way of being, not as a deficit, disorder or dysfunction" (Valle & Connor, 2010, p. 21). An example of the application of thought and action to nurture deeper awareness among educators about disability rights can be found in Draxton's (2011) review, "The content [of the book] ... shows the fallacy of subscribing to a medical model to address students' educational needs" (p. 7).

Moreover, all reviewers used the intellectual tools of *posing troubling questions* and *calling for increased dialogue*. For example, Murphy (2011) noted in her review of Deborah Creamer's *Disability and Christian Theology*, "The social construction of disability by society and education are tantamount with work in disability studies. Yet, the intersection of disability and theology is missing in current scholarship" (p. 11). New questions were posed as well as a call for increased dialogue. A third theme referred to disrupting the ideas that underlie current educational practices that result in labeling and segregation of those with disabilities. Taniform (2011) critiqued *Disability and International Development* by MacLachlan and Swartz. He noted, "Problems faced by people with disabilities in developing nations have traditionally been ignored in plans for economic development and empowerment. This much-needed book fills that void" (p. 24). Radley (2011) critiqued Susan Schweik's *The Ugly Laws*, noting "This book leaves no stone unturned and looks at every avenue that may perpetuate the cycle of the ideologies that promote and maintain segregation of those who are different" (p. 22).

Discussion

Freire's ideas helped authors to study texts within a critical approach. By studying what other people have written, we could enter other people's worlds. As Freire (1985) notes, "Reading the word enables us to read a previous reading of the world" (p. 18). This world may no longer be pertinent, but the word has captured it for us to read within the context of our world. Beth Ferri's (2006) concept of "teaching to trouble" helped us formulate our approaches to using a DSE lens to conduct the book reviews. Ferri (2006), a teacher educator at Syracuse University, explains that she purposefully troubles her students so as to challenge their prevailing unconscious assumptions about disability. Her purpose is to show them that the notions of ability and disability are constructed. In her words,

Dislodging dominant paradigms requires a critical rethinking of foundational assumptions. For example, any advocates of disability studies in education, myself included, identify as being pro-inclusion. Yet, because even in inclusive models the dominant group retains the power to include or exclude, inclusion in and of itself does not automatically dislodge the privilege maintained by the dominant

group. (Ferri, 2006, p. 292)

Other Insights

Other insights occurred in the process of learning a DSE approach in order to apply it to the critical book reviews. During class discussions, both in face-to-face sessions and online discourse, all participants raised the issue of how to apply a DSE perspective to their work as advocates in their professional roles. Several participants addressed this directly in the critical book reviews by choosing books related to policy. Others shared dilemmas they were facing in their respective professional practice. In summary, all participants were able to show they had gained new insights for how a DSE perspective might be applied in their roles as researchers, practitioners, and advocates. Based on our experiences, we believe that teacher education professors at all levels (preservice, graduate, and doctoral studies) can easily and beneficially incorporate the development of critical review skills by assigning similar tasks in their teacher education courses. In both groups, we analyzed (interactively through face-to-face and online dialogue) who is and is not allowed access to resources and opportunities, and how access is allowed or denied.

Contributions of the Study

Gabel (2001) uses the phrase “encounters with the self” to describe the internal dialogue that can arise when reading with a critical consciousness. This stance required us to *interrogate the status quo* rather than taking it as given. We began to “complicate our ideas about disability” (Gabel, 2001) as well as our own professions. We learned to ask, “Who is the author and why is the author writing ‘this’ book? Who is the publisher? Who benefits from these perspectives?” As we probed our own foundational beliefs in order to critique the authors and content of the books, we experienced cognitive dissonance, confusion, and uncomfortable feelings about our own foundational knowledge bases. Freire (1970/1990) insisted that dialogical encounters can lead to a critical consciousness of social, political, and economic contradictions so that new actions may be taken against them. This process (known as *conscientization* in Freire's terms) is an important skill for 21st century educators (*all educators*) who must teach in today's diverse classrooms.

Even though we might resonate with the anguish that our educational system perpetuates through sorting, labeling, segregating those who are different, we may prefer to avoid a deeper examination because it highlights the more profound alienation of our general educational and special educational practices. We argue that teacher educators can guide their teacher candidates to challenge prevailing paradigms, policies, and practices that lead to presumptions of failure. Educators who are empowered to this challenge are more likely to advocate for changes that result in correcting socially unjust practices and policies. The authors of the books we reviewed agreed on the power of engaging in dialogue to facilitate the conversations out of which participants acquire more language to name themselves and their experiences.

Conclusion

The process of critiquing others' views and probing our own views, we began to change. Freire (1985) writes, “Only when the people of a dependent society break out of the culture of silences and with their right to speak —only, that is when radical structural changes transform the dependent society— can such a society as a whole cease to be silent toward the director society” (p. 73). We suggest that this is what it means to practice a *liberating pedagogy*. The processes we followed in writing book reviews using a DSE perspective helped us each to achieve that kind of liberating pedagogy.

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Appendix

List of Books Reviewed with a Critical DSE Lens Fall 2010 Book Selections

- Creamer, D. B. (2009). *Disability and Christian theology: Embodied limits and constructive possibilities*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. [Accepted for publication in *Disabilities Studies Quarterly*]
- Schweik, S. (2010). *The ugly laws: Disability in public (The history of disability)*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Valle, Jan V., & Connor, D. J. (2010). *Rethinking disability: A disability studies approach to inclusive practices*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill. [Published in *Issues in Teacher Education*]
- MacLachlan, M., & Swartz, L. (2009). *Disability and international development: Towards inclusive global health*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Steinberg, S. (Ed. 2009). *Diversity and multiculturalism: A reader*. New York, NY: Peter Lang. [Accepted for publication, *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*]

Fall 2009 Book Selection

- Normore, A. (Ed. 2008). *Leadership for social justice: Promoting equity and excellence through inquiry and reflective -practice*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Howard-Hamilton, M. et al. (Eds. 2009). *Standing on the outside looking in: Under-represented students' experiences in advanced degree programs*. Herndon, VA: Stylus Press. [Published in *Journal of Educational Administration*]
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