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Addressing the Absence of Disability Justice Through an Online Social Work Course

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Introduction

The absence of disability and disability justice manifest in many ways within social work education across Canada. There are few disabled* people, whether students, staff, instructors, faculty, or administrators, and limited representation of disability communities across schools of social work (Dunn et al., 2008). In established social work journals, there is an overall lack of critical disability-related content and research (Goulden et al., 2023). Contributions and publications by disabled social work students are even more absent (de Bie et al., 2021), as well as the rare inclusion of student voices in the research (Singh & MacDonald, 2022). The absence of disability continues throughout the social work curricula, as courses that center disability and social work are often infrequently offered electives or appear as a module in generalist courses focused on identities and communities experiencing oppression (Carter et al., 2012). Models and approaches that highlight the attitudinal, structural, and systemic barriers related to disability are also often absent (Hanes et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022). Instead, models and approaches emphasizing individualistic, medicalized, tragedy- and deficit-focused understandings (Singh et al., 2022; Slayter & Johnson, 2022) are already embedded within the organizational, institutional, and societal contexts that future social workers learn and current social workers practice within (Goulden, 2020). Further, an absence of disability justice occurs in social work, as mainstream models and approaches dominate.

The Disability Justice Movement began in 2005 by a group of disabled, queer, and racialized activists, including Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Leroy Moore, Stacey Milbern, Eli Clare, and Sebastian Margaret, who formed a framework and principles to guide their collective advocacy (Sins Invalid, 2016, 2019). The ten disability justice principles, as created by the disabled activists who formed Sins Invalid (2019) include "intersectionality, leadership of the most impacted, anti-capitalist politics, cross-movement solidarity, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access [and] collective liberation" (pp. 23–26). Disability justice centers the insights, knowledges, voices, and experiences of the disabled people and communities most oppressed past-to-present (Schalk, 2022).

While disabled and allied social workers and activist-scholars uphold anti-ableism (e.g., Kattari et al., 2020; Sherwood & Kattari, 2021) and disability justice principles (e.g., Berridge et al., 2023; Slayter & Johnson, 2022), Slayter and colleagues (2023) call for the broader social work education and practice communities to bring in anti-ableist and disability justice principles into their work. Even for courses that include disability, there is an absence of disability justice principles and disability justice pedagogy within social work education. This also may, in part, lie with the incongruent aspects of disability justice and the social work profession (Eiler & D'Angelo, 2020). As Shelton (2020) explains, "Building a pedagogy from disability justice means integrating these principles into our teaching and learning spaces, which ultimately means that we must commit to resisting white supremacy and many other systems of power and oppression" (p. 205). Disability justice principles and pedagogy require confronting and challenging all aspects of mainstream social work that maintain white supremacy and perpetuate

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* I use identity-first language to acknowledge the importance of disability identities, disability culture, and disability communities. The American Psychological Association (2022) provides further information on disability, identity-first, and person-first language.

inequities and oppression experienced by disability communities. Putting disability justice pedagogy into practice begins with honoring and embodying the mission, vision, principles, and movement of disability justice as set forth by Sins Invalid (2016, 2019). In this teaching activity, I explain how I delivered an online disability social work course with the intent to address such absences and share how I applied my pedagogical commitment to disability justice.

Rationale

The course was a fully online asynchronous disability social work practice and policy elective course. The course description, already established, included the examination of disability from multiple lenses, of disability history, disability identity in an ableist society, disability policy, and disability social work practice implications (School of Social Work, 2022). Certain course learning objectives were also predetermined by the university.

To the syllabus, I added the course rationale and the learning outcomes. My course rationale included my pedagogical approach, with the recognition that the learning and teaching occurred within often contradictory university policies, restrictions, and settings. Examples of these contradictions are included in the debriefing section later in this piece. In my course rationale, I also included how students were encouraged to direct their learning, lead dialogue, and share their knowledge and experiences, with me—the instructor—viewed as a facilitator instead of an expert. I also included how the design of the assignments was inspired by the universal design for learning framework (i.e., CAST, 2018). These additions of the course rationale and learning objectives created an avenue for me to share my pedagogical approach to addressing these absences as well as the foundation for the subsequent assessments.

Learning Objectives

I developed specific learning outcomes for this course, which were intended to address various aspects of the absences of disability and disability justice within social work education and practice, while still aligning these learning outcomes with the course description and objectives predetermined by the university. These learning outcomes included:

1. Critically reflect and analyze understandings of disability.
2. Gain knowledge of disability history, movements, and resistance.
3. Appreciate and honour disability identities, culture, and communities.
4. Center knowledges, experiences, and stories of disabled people.
5. Critique mainstream models of disability.
6. Explore critical theories in disability studies.
7. Examine the tensions and gaps in disability social work literature.
8. Gain knowledge of disability rights, policy, and legislation.
9. Identify disability organizations, programs, and services.
10. Develop awareness, advocacy, and actions for disability justice.

Explanation

As an introductory and elective disability social work course, course modules were designed to give an overview of areas significant to generalist social work practice with disabled people and communities. Course modules included:

- Introduction to disability, ableism, and social work
- Disability history, movements, and culture

- Models of disability
- Disability and theories
- Disability rights, policy, and legislation
- Additional modules focused on disabled persons and communities, highlighting voices and intersectional lived experiences across disability communities

Integration of lived experience and first-person perspectives (e.g., my own, of students in the class if they were comfortable sharing, of disabled people and communities) was supported with the acknowledgment that personal and collective experiences are valid knowledges (Brown & MacDonald, 2020), though not always recognized in academic spaces (Campbell & Baikie, 2012). Disabled guest speakers offered additional viewpoints on disability and social work. The guest speakers generously shared their insights and time with our online class either through an asynchronous recording or a synchronous live session depending on the guest speaker's preference and availability. I selected course materials with the intent to amplify the work of disability justice advocates and disabled writers and scholars (e.g., Clare, 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Sins Invalid, 2019; Wong, 2020). Further, course materials were included in a variety of formats (i.e., readings, recordings, podcasts, videos, blogs, etc.) to give options to perceive and review information in several ways (Goulden et al., in press; Smith-Carrier et al., 2021).

Assessment

Within the course, assignments focused on collaborative learning, building community, mutual peer support, putting disability justice principles into social work practice, and encouraging learners to share specific ways they would do this (Singh & Ferguson, 2023). I scaffolded assignments to link to one another and build throughout the course. Additionally, assignments included universal design for learning principles, for example, of multiple means of action and expression (CAST, 2018).

Course assignments included journaling, dialogue facilitation with creation of an accessible handout to share with the class, a proposal for the final assignment, with the final assignment centered on awareness, advocacy, and action for disability justice. Throughout the course, an additional self-assessed and self-evaluated assignment centered on the multiple ways to contribute to our course learning community (Singh & Ferguson, 2023). While it is not possible to give explanations of all the assessments in the course in this piece, I offer descriptions of the journaling and final assignments.

Journals

Journaling in the course was an individual assignment, focused on critical thinking, reflection, synthesis, and analysis. It was structured with prompt questions, provided the student was comfortable responding to the questions. The journals could be completed in audio, visual, and/or written formats in the first-person.

The first journal, submitted in the second week of the course, encouraged learners to share the name they use, pronouns, and anything else they wished to share within the journal introductions versus introductions on the online class discussion board. The first journal also included prompt questions pertaining to past, present, and future connections to disability, how learners were implicated or participated in ableism, and, going forward, what they would do to challenge and change any ableist assumptions, beliefs, values, or actions, and what they would

do instead. The first journal also included an invitation for any questions they wished to ask me—the instructor. This first journal provided ways for learners to privately share personal and professional information at the beginning of the course as we started to build connections and our course learning community.

The second journal provided an opportunity for students to critically think, reflect, and analyze their learning before the course closed. The prompt questions included sharing their most significant learnings in the course, offering their own understandings and definitions of disability justice, and specific ways they intended to put disability justice principles into their day-to-day life and/or practice. Journaling at the beginning and closing of the course allowed learners to observe their personal and professional growth related to anti-ableism and the possibilities for disability justice in social work.

Final Assignment

The final assignment was a way for learners to focus on a specific topic related to critical disability social work practice or policy and that centered on awareness, advocacy, and action for disability justice. Learners had the option to select their specific topic, complete the assignment (individually, in pairs, or a small group), and pick a type of assignment they wished to complete based on the information they submitted for their proposal. This process of submitting the proposal allowed learners to receive feedback on their outline and ideas before proceeding to the final assignment. Examples of final assignment types included (but were not limited to): an accessibility or inclusion assessment/audit; artistic expression; autoethnography; digital storytelling; infographics; a hypothetical program, presentation, or project for a social work organization; photovoice; a policy or practice analysis paper; or web or wiki pages. Learners who opted for a non-paper assignment type also submitted a first-person written component. Throughout the process, I emphasized the point that the final assignment was limited to course registrants and could not involve people outside the course, as this would require additional protocols or research ethics approval beyond the scope of the course. Learners were also pointed to follow the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005) *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (i.e., confidentiality, etc.) when preparing their assignment.

An incredible outcome of this final assignment was how learners created practical outputs related to their current or future social work practice. Because of the options built into the final assignment, many learners focused their topic on an area relevant to where they were currently working in the social services field or hoped to in the future. Learners also created potential presentations or programs that could be refined for an actual proposal or grant. Lastly, learners were imaging tangible applications of anti-ableism and disability justice in social work.

Debriefing

It was my first time teaching this specific disability social work elective. As such, there were many critical reflections I had during and after the course. Included here are only some of the many critical reflections I have had.

Given the fully online asynchronous mode of delivery for this course, our communications and presences were text-based or audio-visual. This online environment potentially creates an invisibility of disability (Kent, 2015; Singh & MacDonald, 2022). Our conversations about anti-ableism and dialogue around disability justice may have been much different if we were in a space together in real-time.

Not having marks or grades would have been more aligned with a disability justice pedagogical approach; however, including marked assessments was required as a final grade had to be submitted to the university after completion of the course. Needing to complete learning and the course within the pre-set dates and times of the term also created constraints on members of the course's learning community, recognizing the concept and experience of crip time (Samuels, 2017) and that more time may be needed than given. Further, this course was delivered during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning additional factors were impacting members of the course's learning community.

These predetermined confines of the course contradict disability justice pedagogical approaches, highlighting the importance of identifying these tensions in the syllabus and early in the course. I worked within these tensions through communication, offering flexibility, and creating a supportive course learning community.

Conclusion

The layers of absence of disability in social work education are significant. Addressing the absences of disability and disability justice in an online disability social work course creates opportunities for social work students to also change this. Many future and current social workers either practice within settings, create programs, or influence policy that directly impact disabled people and disability communities (Johnson et al., 2022). In the limited opportunities that exist within social work education to learn about disability and disability communities, centering disability justice principles and pedagogy are crucial. Doing so challenges mainstream models and approaches and reshapes the ways future social workers critically think about and support disability justice principles and act in solidarity with disabled people and communities.

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