

Arts-based Reflection in Co-curricular Spaces for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract: This paper introduces a newly implemented arts-based space for reflection and identity development for students with disabilities (SWDs) in a disability services office in the American Southeast. This project aimed to help students make sense of their disability through creating a three-panel art project and an accompanying written description. While the primary aim was to create a space for reflection for SWDs, the secondary benefit is the use of their work for advocacy on campus. The project also brings art-based makerspaces into a co-curricular space for reflection, community building, and advocacy. After introducing the project, the paper will discuss the research findings and lessons for future research.

Keywords: disability identity, critical reflection, arts-based reflection, makerspaces, co-curricular learning

The number of college students who identify as having a disability rose dramatically over the past decade, in large part a result of federal guidance changes on what constitutes a disability. The *Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act of 2008* (2008) identified common conditions — such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and major depressive disorder — as federally-protected disabilities that can be accommodated if they impact academic ability. However, seeking accommodations requires some acknowledgement of having a disability by individuals and brings stigma. Disability identity is personal and highly individualized. In my experience as a disability service provider, I have worked with many students struggling with shifts in self perception. Students’ prior experiences — if they had accommodations in high school; if their disability was present at birth or recently acquired; or if their disability is visible or invisible — impact their disability identity construction (Forber-Pratt et al., 2021). For traditional-aged college students, disability identity is just one piece of identity they are exploring. This project aimed to facilitate identity exploration through art by a group of students with disabilities (SWDs) and study the art they created.

Conceptual Framework

While the project’s aim was to offer a glimpse into disability identity of SWDs, I felt it necessary to stress this is just one facet of their identity. Our student group has students with visible disabilities who have no choice whether their disability is observable and students with invisible disabilities who often “pass” as non-disabled (Gill, 1997). That said, these distinctions are often oversimplified into broad categories that are themselves oversimplified within the literature on disability identity. Having a visible disability has been compared to having other visible minority statuses based on race or gender, while invisible disabilities are compared to LGBTQ+ identities that necessitate “coming out” (Buggie-Hunt, 2007). Nonetheless, both analogies are much too clear-cut: passing and coming out is highly context-specific for all minoritized identities.

Similarly, conversations about disability often center on the medical model, which focuses on deficits and difference, and the social model, which views disability as a component of identity to be embraced. These categories can create a false dichotomy between receiving a medical diagnosis and celebrating difference. More than anything, living with a disability is a journey with highs and lows.

To avoid oversimplifications of disability identity and experience, I relied on Clark/Keefe's (2014) theory of student identity development based on Braidotti's (2011a, 2011b) nomadic identity. Rather than center disability-specific theories, Clark/Keefe (2014) focused on identity exploration through art. My aim is for the research exercise was to provide an environment for freer expression by participating students. Even though the space and context called for reflection on their disabilities, their multifaceted and fluid experiences were honored.

Literature Review

I began the literature review with a Google Scholar search for “disability identity development student.” From there, I reviewed the top results and their cited works as a type of snowball sampling literature review. I continued this process until I reached a point of saturation where I had a thorough understanding of literature on the topic. This section highlights the literature I deemed most applicable to this study.

Disability identity has been approached from many angles and many disciplines, but no theory is recognized as the standard. Forber-Pratt et al. (2017) conducted a literature review of disability identity development from 1980 to 2017 and found 41 empirical articles, primarily qualitative, addressed the topic. They also provided a helpful review of disability identity development models, although most empirical articles reviewed did not apply a theoretical model to their study. Also of note, Buggie-Hunt (2007) surveyed 127 SWDs, comparing their psychosocial development to a normed sample of college students, and found no significant differences between the groups. Buggie-Hunt did find some differences between SWDs, depending on whether their disability was visible or invisible, likely due to those with invisible disabilities' ability to pass as non-disabled.

Forber-Pratt et al. (2021) conducted a study on disability identity development in middle and high school students and found their identity development was multifaceted and impacted by environmental and social factors. While my study focused on traditional-aged college students, this finding is relevant: both groups are at ages where identity formation is occurring in relation to a school environment and close peer connections.

And finally, Allen (2019) incorporated reflexive writing and multiple types of visual art into their own journey toward disability identity development as part of their dissertation, concluding with the insight that “disability doesn't happen *to* you, it *is* you” (p. 78, italics in original). As of the time of this literature review, no studies located used arts-based methods to study disability identity formation in college students.

Research Design

The population for this study was sampled from students with disabilities at a land grant university in the Southeastern United States, narrowed to a specific student group within the disability services office. Participants self-identified as having a disability, sought accommodations, qualified for accommodations, and voluntarily joined a student group to work with other SWDs to advocate for disability rights around campus. Participants shared their experiences as SWDs with campus audiences. The art panel project, loosely based on photovoice (Macdonald et al., 2019; Wang & Burris, 1997), offered another way to express their perspectives and experiences while providing the time and space to create disability-related art with other SWDs.

The study took place in a newly implemented arts-based makerspace (Figure 1). Makerspaces, much like student identity and disability status, are multifaceted and can come in many different configurations (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014). This one focuses on open-ended art prompts and community building.

Figure 1.

Arts-based Makerspace



While no monetary incentives for participation were offered, the disability services office provided food for the event. I led the session while also taking field notes and asking probing questions of the participants about their artwork. After students completed their artworks, I photographed the pieces and collected participants' written statements to accompany their works. This project was exploratory, and the findings will be used as a basis for future studies. The guiding research questions were:

- How does the disability identity of college students with disabilities change based on audience?
- How do SWDs represent those differences through art?

Data Collection Activity

The intent of this project was to gather information on how SWDs represent their disability identity through art aimed at different audiences: however, the twelve student participants had different ideas. This project showcased a disconnect between plan and reality. Approximately half the student participants stated before the study they *don't do art* or they are bad at art, indicating they were present for the pizza and information session happening at the meeting. In my analysis afterward, I dubbed these students *reluctant artists*. The remaining participants were enthusiastic about making art as advocacy. I categorized them *eager artists*. Quite a contrast existed between the two groups, as I explain below.

At the beginning of the session, I distributed and explained the prompt which asked them to create three pieces of art for different audiences: themselves, other students with disabilities, and the broader university community. I observed reluctant artists were even more averse toward making not one but three art pieces. Therefore, I was intentional about telling participants they did not have to follow the prompt at all. They could make something to take home, or they could make something to for the advocacy display with or without an artist statement. The eager artists happily dove into watercolors or collages, while the reluctant artists, who arrived in pairs and I seated together, chatted with each other.

After approximately twenty minutes waiting on the pizza to arrive, the reluctant artists, perhaps driven by a mix of boredom and curiosity, started to engage with art supplies. The results of their reluctant art included some powerful pieces (see Figures 2 and 3). Another theme emerged among eager artists: three students asked to take their artwork home to work on it more. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate sample results from these students.

Findings

The major theme for both eager and reluctant artists was rejection of one of the core ideas of my research design. All of the students, both verbally and in their artist statements, rejected the idea of making art for other audiences. The participants made pieces for themselves and were happy to have those viewed by others as a form of advocacy; however, no participant made art explicitly for the other two audiences mentioned in the prompt. The totality of those participants' rejection was striking. While the prompt was not adhered to, students still mulled over the idea of creating art as advocacy and the spirit of the prompt came through.

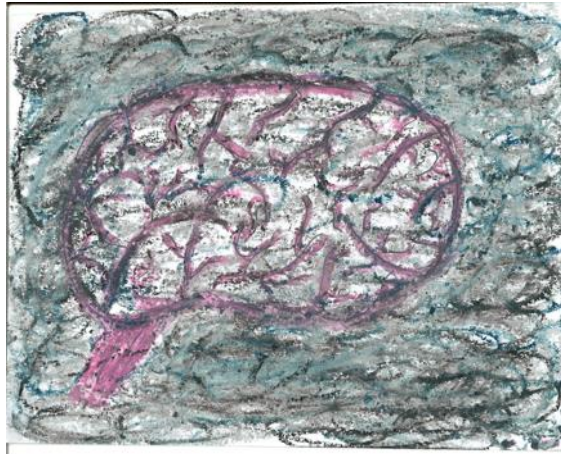
Figures 2 and 3, created by reluctant artists, used darker colors and focused on their experience of their disability. In contrast, the art made by the eager artists (figures 4 and 5) is bright and colorful. The eager artists featured below both took their work home to spend more time on it and wrote artist statements whereas the reluctant artists finished their pieces during the session. Through these examples we can see that perhaps the reluctant artists were reluctant because their outlook of their disability is not as positive as the eager artists.

Figure 2.

Student artwork: dyslexia

**Figure 3.**

Student artwork: Brainfog

**Figure 4**

Student artwork: Perhaps our Differences Make us Beautiful

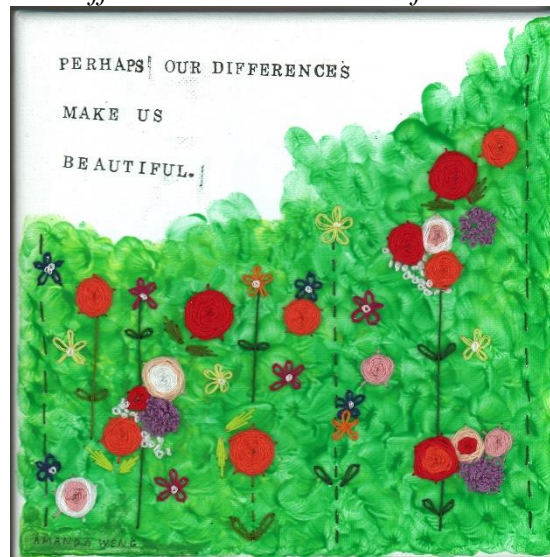


Figure 5.

Student artwork: a reflection on disability and identity

**Discussion**

This paper discusses the initial results from an arts-based makerspace at a university's disability services office. Initial findings indicate a population of students are eager to engage with art as a medium for exploring their disability identity and advocacy work. While other participants were reluctant to take part, the project provided them an opportunity to engage with other SWDs; in the end, their art was quite powerful. As this is a co-curricular space rather than something related to a graded course, perhaps participants felt comfortable rejecting the prompt and interpreting the charge in their own way. I did not analyze the art as initially planned because students' strongly opposed making art for external audiences. I included some examples in this report so some artists' thoughts about their disability identities can speak through their works. While this project did not yield results I expected, it provided an opportunity to reflect on planning versus reality. In the future, I will not use such a rigid approach to the research and perhaps take a more participatory action research approach.

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