

The Critical Book Review: How, Why, and When?

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Abstract

Disability Studies in Education (DSE) offers a framework that (a) grounds policy / practice in the experiences ‘ perspectives of people with disabilities, (c) challenges practices/ policy that isolate, de-humanize individuals, and (c) leads to new questions to pose. In this session, pedagogy for critical book reviews from a DSE perspective is described. In writing a critical book review, we posed the following questions to guide the process.

What is a DSE perspective?

Why is this theoretical lens important for 21st century teacher educators?

What is a critical book review from a DSE perspective?

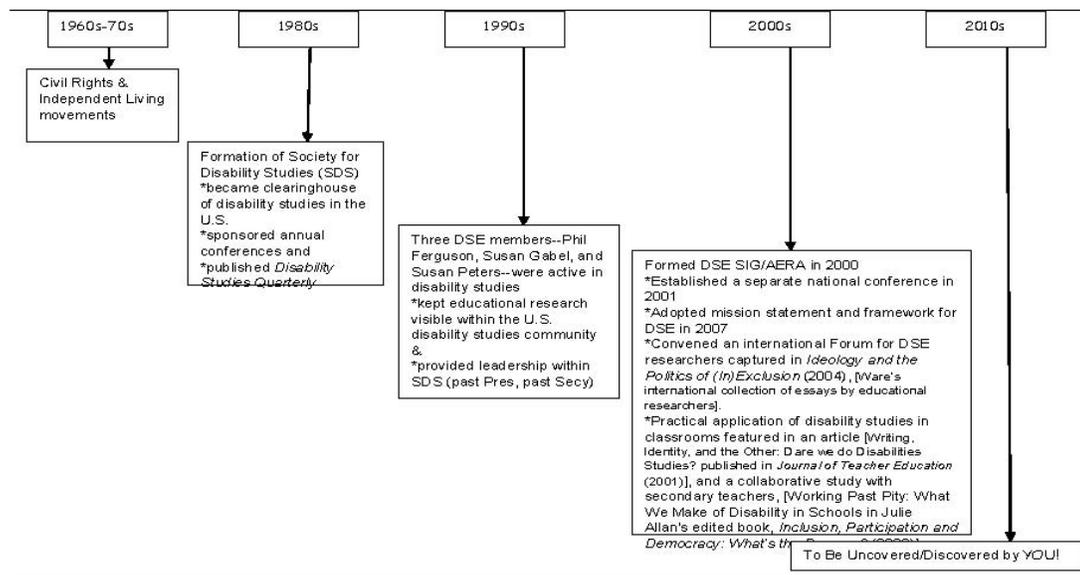
What did we discover?

Rationale and Background

As shown in Table 1, DSE is a relatively new field of study.

Table 1. A Beginning History of Disabilities Studies in Education

A Beginning History



Invitation—add events that become significant to you as you delve into the readings.

A disabilities studies in education (DSE) theoretical framework seeks to ground policy and practice in the experiences and perspectives of people with disabilities, challenges practices and policy that isolate and de-humanize individuals, and leads to new questions to pose (Danforth & Gabel, 2006). The purpose of a DSE approach is to use 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. We agreed to adopt the definition of DSE posted by Gabel (2005): **DSE** is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship that unites critical inquiry with political advocacy by using approaches from the arts and humanities and humanistic and post-humanistic social sciences to improve the lives of disabled people on the basis of their self-expressed needs and desires.

An example of how a DSE lens leads us to challenge the status quo is provided by Reid and McKnight (2006). They describe how the phenomenon of *ableism* which is intertwined with the ideology of normalcy is rooted in eugenics. This ideology promotes the idea that it is better to be as “normal” as possible rather than be disabled. Reid & McKnight (2006) argue that current special education systems reflect a deficit-oriented perspective—basically, an ableist perspective where disability is considered a personal condition to correct or cure through

accommodations, interventions, segregation, etc. In contrast, DSE consider disability in the oppression of a given culture and historical period rather than in impairments per se.

Participants

Seven doctoral students (6 females) in an advanced graduate course conducted critical reviews of current books in the areas of special education and disabilities studies. All participants had completed 3 years of preparation for the Ph. D., and were positioned to prepare their dissertation proposals. All participants were career special educators (e.g., speech/language pathologists, sign language instructor, special education program specialist, preschool/early childhood special education specialist, high school teacher of students with autism. Two had administrative responsibilities as well. Brief biographical sketches of the reviewers can be found on p. 8.

Method

Using a narrative approach, the methods are described as a timeline. By the end of the 2nd week of classes in the Fall, 2009, all participants had selected a book to review and by the 14th week of the semester, all had targeted at least one publication venue as a possible dissemination outlet. The method to prepare the critical review included submitting drafts of the review to a peer for guided feedback. In addition, the instructor provided substantive feedback prior to publication as a Class Big Book of Book Reviews. The instructor participated in the process of writing a critical book review, also demonstrating the collaborative process. Two participants decided to collaborate to write their review of the same book that they had read.

The Critical Book Review Elements

The Assignment: As shown in Table 2, the assignment focused on revealing to readers the content of the book.

Table 2: The Critical Book Review Assignment

	The goal of this assignment is not to just summarize what the book says, but to:
1	Identify the author's 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.
2	Identify and analyze the significance of important arguments made in the book.
3	Evaluate the extent to which the author succeeded in fulfilling the purpose for writing the book.
4	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

Address (at least) the following points in your written critique:
*Give full bibliographic information on the book at the top of the 1st page.
*State whether or not the author make his/her own perspective clear and does this add or detract from the value of the book?

- *What is your own relationship to the subject of the book and how does this affect your understanding of the book?
- *What in particular is valuable about the book?
- *Would you recommend the book to someone who wants to understand the subject of disability studies? Why or why not?

In writing this review, please justify your analysis. Whether you criticize or commend the author, you need to say why you do so and you need to give evidence to support what you say.

Web Accessible Resources

“Writing Book Reviews”: <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/wts/bookreview.html>

“How to Write a Book Review”: http://stauffer.queensu.ca/inforef/bookreview/write_review.htm

“How to Write a Book Review”: <http://legacy.bluegrass.kctcs.edu/LCC/HIS/review.html>

The critique was to focus on applying the intellectual tools of a DSE perspective. Table 3 lists the books that were selected for the critical review.

Table 3. List of Books Reviewed with a Critical DSE Lens

- Collard, J., & Normore, A. (Eds. 2009). *Leadership and Intercultural Dynamics*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing,
- Connor, D. J. (2009). *Urban Narratives: Portraits in progress. Life at the intersection of learning disability, race, and social class*. NY: Peter Lang.
- Deloria, V., & Wildcat, D. (2001). *Power and Place: Indian Education in America*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing.
- Howard-Hamilton, M. et al. (Eds. 2009). *Standing on the Outside Looking In: Underrepresented Students' Experiences in Advanced Degree Programs*. Herndon, VA: Stylus Press
- Mooney, J. (2008). *The Short Bus: A Journey Beyond Normal*. NY: Macmillan. Normore, A. (Ed. 2008). *Leadership for Social Justice: Promoting Equity and Excellence Through Inquiry and Reflective Practice*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Ong-Dean, Colin. (2009). *Distinguishing Disability: Parents, privilege, and special education*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Instructional Methods

We used modeling and peer review/feedback to complete the assignment. Several published examples of book reviews were deconstructed in order to reveal key components of successful critiques. For example, in her critical review, Meredith Rogers Cherland (University of Regina) offers important insights for teacher educators and K-12 school personnel who wish to decrease the impact of racism in schooling practices. In addition, we agreed to practice a constructive process in providing the critiques. Listed in Table 4 are the 6 tips we followed.

Table 4: Tips for Critiquing

- 1 Summarize the author(s)' argument. This can reveal any gaps in the argument. Summarizing also 'validates' that you have read the material.
 - 2 Show integrity. If you assess the strengths and weaknesses of the author(s) argument, this provides a balanced review.
 - 3 Ask questions. Critiques can be framed by asking questions about parts that are hard to understand, or about the origins of the framework, or the authors' intention at a particular juncture.
 - 4 Reflect what the authors are trying to say. If a particular point is unclear, it can be useful to try to reflect that point back to the writer: "What you seem to be saying here is..." The author then can decide if the writer's feedback warrants further refinement of his/her manuscript.
 - 5 Make suggestions. Help the author(s) with ideas on how to address the gaps or the problems you've identified.
 - 6 Give and receive feedback responsibly. Use the reviewer feedback to improve your manuscript! Critiquers often discover that they should follow their own advice!)
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Results

The process yielded eight critical book reviews. All have been submitted for publication in a respected journal, carefully selected to argue persuasively for practitioners to read the book and to appreciate a DSE perspective. Two have been accepted for publication in 2010. Journals included *Urban Education*, *Journal of Educational Administration*, *Issues in Teacher Education*, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, and *Remedial and Special Education*. Upon review of the critical book reviews, we noted that the DSE principles most frequently used in the book reviews focused on disability identity, and forms of thought/action to nurture deeper awareness among educators about disability rights. All reviewers used the intellectual tools of posing troubling questions, and calling for increased dialogue. We learned to respect and apply Freire's method of studying as "a critical, creative, re-creating activity" which is naturally occurring by virtue of the curiosity of the one who is studying. We agreed that studying what other people have written sets us up in a special way. As Freire 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.

Discussion

Results must be cautiously interpreted as generalizations beyond this particular group of doctoral students are not warranted. Nevertheless, 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. Applying the DSE lens led us to discover that in the process of coming to critical consciousness (*conscientization*), we were required to analyze (interactively and through dialogue) who is and is not allowed access to resources and opportunities, and how access is allowed or denied.

Critical consciousness ultimately requires *questioning the status quo* rather than taking it as given – often creating an uncomfortable feeling. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire insisted that dialogical encounters can help students to develop critical consciousness of social, political, and economic contradictions so that they can take action against them (1970/1990, p. 43). This is an important awareness for 21st century educators (*all educators*) who must teach in new ways so as to include students with and without disabilities in their classrooms.

We believe that Freire’s views illuminated our understandings of applying a DSE perspective. When the voices of those with disabilities are heard, when DSE researchers and educators join forces *with* people with disabilities, then we become conscious of the injustices that manifest in our current educational practices. This critical consciousness can then lead to more emancipatory praxis. The anguish expressed by those who are marginalized can become the motivation for us to face the “system” and move forward in constructing more socially just systems. 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 noticed that the authors of the books we reviewed agree on the power of engaging in dialogue to facilitate the conversations out of which participants acquire more language to name themselves and their experiences. The process of finding “my” voice and naming myself, for example, as oppressed and outraged rather than slow, strange, weird, or different is in itself liberating. 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). This is what it means to be a liberating pedagogy and what we think a DSE perspective helps us to achieve.

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