
DISABILITY AND AMERICAN EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

Disability and American Education is a two-credit, in-person, undergraduate course offered at a public liberal arts university. Being a teacher educator in an education licensure program, most of my courses directly serve licensure requirements for teacher candidates. However, this course is unmoored from those requirements and is meant for future educators and non-future educators alike. The course fulfills a general education requirement related to human diversity, but beyond this, it plays no central role in any academic major or minor at our institution. As a result, I have been afforded considerable latitude in designing and delivering the course.

Prior to developing this course, occasionally, students not studying education would request to join a section of my course Strategies for Inclusive Schooling, a course designed to help educators meet the needs of students with disabilities. This course is closed to students outside of our licensure program because we run our licensure programs as cohorts. Due to the demand, I decided to use an opportunity to develop an elective course to create a complementary course on disability that would be open to all students, including education students that would later take Strategies for Inclusive Schooling. I decided to use the topic of disability and education to create a discussion-based course rooted in deliberative democracy (Gutmann, 1999; Chappel, 2012) and liberal arts. I sensed that this would be a rich subject because everyone has their own experiences with schooling, most people know some people that experience disabilities, and, perhaps most importantly, policy, practice, and data on disability and education is readily available, but unexamined by most of our society. Beyond deliberating about the rich topics and questions involved in education and disability, I wanted to create a course that required students to be reflective and critical about their own experiences. For these reasons, in each unit of the course, I have created activities that require students to ask difficult questions about their schooling and the institutions that have educated them.

To complement my existing course and increase the potential students interested in the course, I decided to look at American education broadly. I divided the class into three distinct units on K12 education, higher education, and teaching about disability in educational settings. In addition to analyzing history, court cases, and policy documents, this structure also provided the opportunity to look at representation of people with disabilities in films, children's literature, and curricular materials.

The first unit of this course focuses on special education within the context of K-12 public education in the United States. As a former special education teacher, I provide my students with many concrete stories from my own practice. I help them grasp how our system of educating students with disabilities works. I begin this unit of the course by examining data on students with disabilities from the school districts my students graduated from. For instance, we look at graduation rates, assessment scores, discipline referrals, and post-school outcomes for students with disabilities and compare them to typically developing students from the same school districts. For public school districts, this data is widely available in part thanks to No Child Left Behind (Yell, Katsiyannas, & Shiner, 2006), federal legislation that requires

schools to document the achievement of students with disabilities. This data is linked to a discussion about their own experiences in schools concerning students with disabilities.

After activating their reflections on their schooling and providing some data, we begin to look at the history leading up to the adoption of federal special education law in 1975. Throughout his part of the unit, we examine litigation and legislation that effects people with disabilities (Huerta, 2006; Yell, Rodgers, and Rodgers, 1998). The goal of this is for them to understand where the six principles of special education arose before being codified in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (federal special education law). At this point, we jump back to the present day and spend the unit's duration examining how special education operates in public schools today. To do this, we look at documents related to the referral process and actual Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of students with disabilities. Finally, at this point in the unit, a parent of a child with a disability joins us to discuss their experiences with the system and answer student questions. We conclude this unit with a discussion of race and disability status by examining data related to the disproportionality of students of color in special education (Artiles, 2013; Blanchett, 2006; Sullivan & Bal, 2013).

The second unit of this course focuses on opportunities for students with disabilities in higher education. I designed this unit because it goes beyond the scope of my other courses. Higher education policy can be contrasted with K12 policy in ways that help students understand how the different systems operate in practice. Beyond this, being at an institution of higher education ourselves, this unit allows us to be introspective about our institution and understand our systems in relation to the legal system and federal law. Continuing with our earlier historical investigation, we look at several influential court cases pertaining to higher education and disability and trace the adoption of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the primary law governing how accommodations are made for university students with disabilities (Myers, Lindburg, and Nied, 2014).

After tracing this history, we are then joined by the director of our campus's Disability Resource Center, the office on our campus charged with ensuring equal working and learning opportunities for people with disabilities. He explains to the students the process by which disabilities are identified and how accommodations are developed under the law. Finally, we conclude the unit with a discussion of educational services for students with significant disabilities. In the year prior to my first year teaching this course, the state legislature dedicated money for our university to complete a feasibility study on developing a program to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Students in the course read the feasibility study, and we discuss the potential benefits and challenges of offering such a program at our small, public liberal arts university. Because this document is centered on our institution, we can keep our focus on the concrete realities of providing educational opportunities to students with significant disabilities.

Beyond the focus of policy and history, I wanted to preserve a unit of the course to talk about how we teach about disability. Like the prior unit of higher education, this topic requires us to reflect on this course itself and think about how we have been approaching the topics. This also provides us with an opportunity to discuss issues related to representation (Style, 1988). During this unit, students write an essay on a film that depicts people with disabilities. This assignment requires them to critique the movie and think about how to facilitate a discussion informed by the content we have been engaging within the course up to this point. We also read the young adult novel *Stuck in Neutral* by Terry Trueman, a person without a disability. This novel tells the story of Shawn, a boy with cerebral palsy who cannot communicate or reliably control his body. Despite his disability, Shawn has a rich inner life and acts as the narrator of the book. Like many young adult novels, *Stuck in Neutral* attempts to engage readers through discussion of controversial issues. In this novel, Shawn is convinced that his father is trying to kill him to end his assumed suffering. As was the novel's intent, we use the story as a jumping off point to discuss issues of euthanasia, pity, and

the benefits of making the "least dangerous assumption" (Donnellan, 1984) when thinking about our treatment of people with disabilities. We then use the text to have a secondary conversation about representation in literature and benefits and pitfalls of using a book like this in a school setting. Finally, the unit ends with investigating disability simulations as a method for teaching people about disability. We examine the arguments for and against using simulative techniques, explore concrete examples of disability simulations, and engage with the meanings people with disability ascribe to disability simulations as pedagogical tools (Leo & Goodwin, 2016).

As the course draws to an end, I broaden the discussion once more to prompt further reflection. As a group, we watch the film *Who Cares about Kelsey?* by filmmaker and advocate Dan Habib. This film follows the senior year of a high school student with challenging behavior that is at risk of not graduating. This provides us with an opportunity to examine the connection between disability and behavior and reflect upon and share our own responses to frustration, anger, and trauma. In my experience, this discussion is open and quite vulnerable because of the classroom community that we have established over the previous seven weeks. During the last course session, we break the into small groups and discuss a series of case studies related to educating students with disabilities (Gorski & Pothini, 2018, pp 69 – 74). Like all good teaching cases, the ones I use to conclude the class are concrete, specific, and challenging to resolve. I find it is a fitting way to conclude a course that has required students to think, reflect, and wrestle with difficult moral questions.

REFERENCES

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SYLLABUS: DISABILITY AND AMERICAN EDUCATION (2 CREDITS)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Disability and American Education is designed to introduce students to issues related to disability in the context of American schools, both P-12 and post-secondary. In addition to introducing students to classroom practice, the course focuses on important theory in Disability Studies and the social and political history that has led to our systems of special education.

Education courses have a built-in reflective component that can be harnessed for a great positive effect. Everyone in the course arrives with their own experiences being educated. Unlike most other professions, we witness the act of teaching for thousands of hours by the time we arrive in the college classroom. This is what Dan C. Lortie has called "the apprenticeship of observation" (1971). For these reasons, most students relate course material in education classes to their own experiences and often have strong opinions about educational issues. This is a wonderful resource that we will harness together this semester. Throughout this course, I will ask you to reflect on your own educational experiences, share stories from your childhood, and listen intently to your peers. As we engage with the course material, we will use your experiences in schools as a backdrop against which to understand disability issues in the American education system.

This is not a course that rewards passive reception of information. In each class session, we will be engaging with challenging issues, some of which might be wholly unfamiliar to you. It is my goal to create a classroom environment that promotes deep deliberation and inclusive classroom culture.

While this is an education course, it is not a course designed only for students interested in teaching careers. This course meets the general education requirement Global Village – Human Diversity. Students pursuing either elementary or secondary education licensure will find this course pairs nicely with ED4121 – Strategies for Inclusive Schooling.

INSTRUCTIONAL METHODS AND COURSE DESIGN

This course will be taught using lecture, discussions, group work, and regular reading assignments. The class will meet twice weekly for the first half of the semester. It is expected that you will spend two hours out-of-class for every hour of in-class time on course readings and written assignments.

During class sessions, we often use the assigned reading as a jumping off point to engage with other materials. These include videos, legal documents, instructional materials, historical accounts, personal

narratives, and materials from my practice as a special education teacher. To get the maximum benefit out of each class session, you must complete the reading and any assigned reflections **before** you arrive in class. The importance of completing the reading assignments, attending class, and participating in course activities is reflected in the course grade breakdown (see below).

COURSE GOALS

This course aims to introduce students to a broad range of issues related to disability and the American educational system. Students in this course will understand critical elements of policy and practice related to educating students with disabilities in P12 classrooms as well as post-secondary educational institutions. Beyond this, students will engage with critical issues related to teaching *about* disability.

This course is organized around beginning to answer a series of essential questions. There are no simple answers to these questions, but thoughtful and ongoing consideration provides a pathway to understanding course content.

- What is disability? How is it defined in the context of our educational systems?**
- Where do our systems of educating students with disabilities come from?**
- What social and political events shaped our policies and practices?**
- How is disability socially constructed?**
- How do schools reproduce or interrupt the social construction of disability?**
- How should teachers address issues of disability in their teaching?**

REQUIRED COURSE TEXTS

Lawrence-Brown, D., & Sapon-Shevin, M. (2013). *Condition critical: key principles for equitable and inclusive education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Trueman, T. (2001). *Stuck in Neutral*. New York, NY: HarperTeen.

We will also have additional readings and resources made available via the course Canvas page. These readings and resources are indicated on the course schedule (see below).

STUDENT SUPPORT

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:

Course materials are available to persons with disabilities in alternate formats upon request. It is University policy to provide, on a flexible and individualized basis, reasonable accommodations to students who have disabilities that may affect their ability to participate in course activities or to meet course requirements. Students with disabilities are encouraged to contact their instructors and Disability Services to discuss their individual accommodation needs.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

ATTENDANCE is expected and essential to successful completion of this course. If you must miss a class, please notify me in advance through e-mail. *Please manage your schedule so that you attend each scheduled class session.*

Important classroom considerations:

PLEASE BE TO CLASS ON TIME. One of the most valuable professional attributes one can have is promptness. Please manage your time so that you are present and ready to begin class on the hour. Many of our planned activities require prudent use of time in order to fit within the confines of a single class session.

PARTICIPATION: Learning, by its very nature, is participatory. You should come to class prepared and with the mindset that you will contribute to your own learning and others' learning. Your positive contributions will make the class a better learning experience for all.

COMMUNICATION: Educators are communicators, and effective communication is at the core of a successful educational experience. Please communicate with me, as needed and/or desired, your successes and challenges in the course. One-on-one conversations between you and me are the best way to communicate effectively. I pride myself on being accessible to my students. Please take advantage of my availability.

ACADEMIC DISHONESTY: Academic integrity is essential to a positive teaching and learning environment. All students enrolled in University courses are expected to complete coursework responsibilities with fairness and honesty. Failure to do so by seeking an unfair advantage over others or misrepresenting someone else's work as your own can result in disciplinary action. Please consult the university student conduct code for a detailed description of scholastic dishonesty.

ASSIGNMENTS

READING RESPONSES: 25%

Ten reading responses will be assigned and collected for grading during the course of the semester. Make-ups will be allowed only for University approved and/or sponsored events with proper documentation.

READING ASSIGNMENT GRADING:

For full credit: An electronic copy must be submitted to the appropriate Canvas dropbox before class on the due date indicated on the course schedule. Full credit assignments are thoughtfully crafted responses that demonstrate quality reflection and engagement with the reading.

Partial credit: An electronic copy submitted to the appropriate Canvas dropbox during the week it is assigned, but late (Credit will vary depending upon level of thought and care taken in doing the assignment). Reading assignments will not be accepted for credit after the week of the assigned reading unless prior arrangement has been made.

PARTICIPATION AND ATTENDANCE: 10%

Attendance at all class sessions is mandatory and active participation is central to maximum learning. If you must be absent, notify me as soon as possible and make-up work may be assigned. Tardies and missed classes will impact learning and will be reflected in grades for the course. Participation entails preparing for class, engaging with classmates in discussion, listening attentively to classmates, completing in-class writings and other class activities, and displaying intellectual curiosity about the course content.

FILM RESPONSE PAPER: 25%

For this assignment, each student will be required to select a film that represents some aspect of disability. After viewing the film, students will write a response paper about how an educational discussion about

the film could be organized to ensure viewers are engaging with important issues related to disability. For this assignment, there is the possibility of collaborating with a classmate. A detailed assignment description and a list of possible film titles will be provided on the date the assignment is introduced in class (see below).

MIDTERM EXAM: 15%

During the first week of February, we will have a short midterm exam. This exam will focus on the history of special education, the referral process in special education, and the basic principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The exam format will be short essay response.

FINAL PAPER: 25%

Students will write a final paper for this course. This paper will require students to examine an issue related to the course content in greater depth and will require some outside library research. This is an opportunity for you to inquire deeper into an issue we discussed during the semester. A detailed assignment description and example topics will be provided on the date the assignment is introduced in class (see below).

GRADING POLICY

A final course grade will be calculated from the percentage of total points earned in the course.

% of points earned	Letter Grade	What this grade means
93-100%	A	Achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements
90-92	A-	
87-89	B+	
84-86	B	Achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements
80-83	B-	
77-79	C+	
74-76	C	Achievement that meets the course requirements in every respect
70-73	C-	
67-69	D+	
62-66	D	Achievement that is worthy of credit even though it fails to meet fully the course requirements

0-61	F	Represents failure (or no credit) and signifies that the work was completed but at a level of achievement not worthy of credit or was not completed at all.
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SEMESTER SCHEDULE

Please note that this schedule is a general plan for how we will proceed through the course material. There may be changes made to enhance our learning experience; students will be notified of any changes in advance. Additional readings will be posted to the Canvas site periodically, and students will be notified in advance of their due dates.

CC = Condition Critical (required text)

WEEK 1				
During the first week of this course, we will discuss the syllabus and expectations for the semester. Beyond this, we will watch a few short videos of people with disabilities being educated in different ways. This will be the basis for a reflection discussion about our own educational experiences. On Thursday, we will look at best practices for providing an inclusive education. Each student will receive a data digest with curated information about the educational outcomes for students with disabilities in your home school district.				
Week 1 Reading & Assignments	Tuesday	Course Overview	Introduction - CC	
	Thursday	Principles of Inclusive Education	Chapters 1 & 2 – CC	Reading response 1
WEEK 2				
During the second week of this course, we will begin to examine the history of special education in the United States. Litigation, legislation, and activism pertaining to disability will be discussed. As we will be examining historical documents, please be aware that some of this material employs outdated and offensive language to describe people with disabilities.				
Week 2 Reading & Assignments	Tuesday	History	Chapters 5 & 6 - CC	Reading response 2
	Thursday	History	See Canvas; Yell, Rogers & Rogers, 1998	Reading response 3

WEEK 3				
<p>During the third week of this course, we will continue to examine the history of special education policy and practice. Our historical journey will conclude with the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1975. We will link the six principles of this law to the court cases discussed last week. On Thursday, we will begin to examine the law in practice today. We will investigate the referral process and examine authentic Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).</p>				
Week 3 Reading & Assignments	Tuesday	History	See Canvas; Huerta, 2008	Reading response 4
	Thursday	Referral Process and IEPs	Chapter 8 - CC	
WEEK 4				
<p>During the fourth week of this course, we will examine materials designed to support parents and guardians of students with disabilities as they navigate the special education system. We will have a parent guest to discuss their experiences interacting with the school system. On Thursday we will complete the Midterm Exam in class.</p> <p>Week four concludes our unit on special education and the P12 education system.</p>				
Week 4 Reading & Assignments	Tuesday	Parents and Special Education	See Canvas; PACER handout for parents	Reading response 5
	Thursday	To Be Determined – based on class interests	See Canvas	Midterm Exam
WEEK 5				
<p>Week five will begin our second unit of the course. We will transition into an investigation of educational policy and practice for educating students with disabilities in higher education. On Tuesday, we will be joined by the head of the Disability Resource Center on campus. They will help us tease out the differences of policy and practice between P12 education and higher education.</p> <p>On Thursday, in a jigsaw format, we will engage with several consequential court cases impacting higher education for students with disabilities. Beyond this, we will also be exploring a feasibility study to create a program to provide educational services to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities on this campus.</p> <p>The unit on higher education is only one week long.</p>				

Week 5 Reading & Assignments	Tuesday	Disability in Higher Education	See Canvas; Selections from <i>Allies for Inclusion</i>	Reading response 6
	Thursday	Disability in Higher Education	Feasibility Study & Section from <i>Allies for Inclusion</i> – See Canvas	Reading response 7
WEEK 6				
<p>During the sixth week of this course, we will begin our final unit of the course. This unit focuses on teaching <i>about</i> disability. Various classroom materials will be examined. On Tuesday, the film reflection assignment will be introduced.</p> <p>On Thursday, we will take a look at the controversial practice of employing simulations as a way to teach about disability. We will be looking at many different simulative activities that are employed to teach about myriad disabilities in the classroom. The final paper assignment will be introduced in class on Thursday.</p>				
Week 6 Reading & Assignments	Tuesday	Teaching about disability	Chapter 4 – CC	Reading response 8
	Thursday	Disability simulations	See Canvas; Leo & Goodwin, 2016	Reading response 9
WEEK 7				
<p>During the seventh week of the course, we will continue our unit on teaching <i>about</i> disability. We will be discussing the young adult novel <i>Stuck in Neutral</i>. We will generate questions about the text and employ a fishbowl discussion technique on Tuesday. On Thursday, we will continue our discussion of the book and evaluate it against various criteria meant to evaluate materials featuring people with disabilities.</p> <p>This will conclude our third and final unit of the course.</p>				
Week 7 Reading & Assignments	Tuesday	<i>Stuck in Neutral</i> – Fishbowl discussion	<i>Stuck in Neutral</i> (entire book)	Reading response 10
	Thursday	<i>Stuck in Neutral</i> – representation evaluation	See Canvas	Film Reflection due
WEEK 8				

During the **eighth week** of this course, we will be drawing our inquiry to a close and drawing conclusions via some culminating activities. On Tuesday, we will discuss challenging behavior and the links between behavior and disability. During class, we will watch the film *Who Cares about Kelsey* by filmmaker and disability advocate Dan Habib.

On Thursday, we will conclude the course by examining three separate case studies related to educating people with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. Please bring a rough draft of your **final paper** to class as we will reserve some time to provide peer feedback.

Week 8 Reading & Assignments	Tuesday	Challenging Behavior	Chapter 9 CC	Reading response 8
	Thursday	Case Study Discussions	See Canvas; Gorski & Pothini, 2018	

Final papers are due the Tuesday after the last class session. Please submit them via dropbox on the Canvas site.