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“Any sort of assessment that does not contain writing a multiple-page APA style essay, count me in”: Reflections on the use of playwriting assignment in a critical disability studies classroom

« Vous pouvez compter sur moi pour toute évaluation qui ne demande pas de rédiger un essai de plusieurs pages dans le style APA » : Réflexions sur l’utilisation de la dramaturgie comme devoir dans un cours en études critiques sur le handicap

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Abstract

The use of art-based approaches in teaching critical disability studies can provide students with the opportunity and space to take creative risks and advance their critical thinking skills in ways that go beyond the traditional assignment. Anchored in a critical disability studies perspective, in this paper, instructors and students in a third-year level critical disability studies course share our reflections on a playwriting assignment aimed at highlighting the intersectional complexities and social processes of inequality embedded into older adults' experiences of disability.

Résumé

L’utilisation d’approches artistiques pour enseigner les études critiques sur le handicap peut permettre davantage aux étudiantes et étudiants de prendre des risques créatifs et de développer leur pensée critique que les travaux traditionnels. Nous, le corps professoral et les étudiantes et étudiants de troisième année d’un cours en études critiques sur le handicap, partageons nos réflexions, ancrées dans une perspective d’études critiques sur le handicap, au sujet d’un devoir d’écriture dramatique afin de mettre en évidence que les complexités intersectionnelles et les processus sociaux d’inégalité sont au cœur des expériences du handicap des personnes âgées.

Keywords: Disability, Aging, Arts-Based Teaching, Playwriting

Mots-clés : Handicap, vieillissement, enseignement fondé sur l'art, dramaturgie

Introduction

Scholars have advocated for the incorporation of art forms, including playwriting, into educational curriculums as important tools for students learning (Gardiner, 2017; Gardiner & Anderson, 2015). Playwriting has been used outside of traditional pedagogical tools in art-related fields to explore knowledge and content (Gardiner, 2017). Outside of arts-related fields, previous studies have shown, for example, how playwriting techniques can be used in medical and counselling education (see Beckman & Larimer, 2022; Rattani & Kaakour, 2021). Less attention, however, has been paid to the use of this strategy for teaching critical disability studies courses. In his approach to teaching critical disability studies, the first author has consistently tried to engage undergraduate students by using more creative, art-based assignments (e.g., comic strips, newsletters, sculptures) with the belief that these assignments provide students opportunities to channel their creativity and critical thinking, as well as improve their writing and communication skills. In the fall semester of 2022, he and the teaching assistant decided to include a playwriting assignment in an undergraduate disability studies course focused on the intersections of disability and aging.

This article is the result of a collaboration between multiple authors, including the first author (the course instructor), second author (course's teaching assistant), third author (one of the course's students), as well as a group of 14 students who took the course. In this article, we share our collective reflections regarding this playwriting assignment. We have found that using

playwriting in the classroom, even in fields outside of the arts, can serve as a fruitful tool for engagement, learning, and inspiring creativity.

Art-based Approaches to Teaching Critical Disability Studies

Historically, discourses of disability in art practices have focused on issues related to teaching students with/labeled with disabilities (Eisenhauer, 2007). In this sense, art practices can be seen to foster the inclusion of students with/labeled with disabilities in ways that the traditional assignment cannot, which can help to enhance participation (Kallio-Tavin, 2020). Yet, the inclusion in art practices is not restricted to the physical, mental, cognitive, and/or intellectual accommodation of students with/labeled with disabilities (Blandy, 1999). Art practices are the “accommodation of the cultural expression” of students with and without disabilities (p. 4). Art practices are a tool for emancipation and support the freedom of expression for both students with/without disabilities when learning about disability studies.

There is a growing body of literature that highlights the value of connecting art education with disability studies (Kallio-Tavin, 2020, Allen, 2019; Penketh, 2014; Derby, 2012; Eisenhauer, 2007). For example, Eisenhauer (2010) explored the representations of motherhood of women who have bipolar disorder in the television shows *ER* and *Dr. Phil* using a performative and autoethnographic narrative approach. By adopting an art-based approach, the author could integrate her own lived experiences with bipolar disorder into her exploration of this topic, contributing to disability and education discourses about representations of motherhood in relation to experiences with disability. Watt (2020) examined the perspective of parents of children with dyslexia using art-based focus groups and in-depth interviews. As part of the research study, parents created provoking images about the issues facing them or the families. By

using an art-based approach, this project raised awareness of the needs of parents who are parenting children with dyslexia and reinforced the value of using art to make visible the complex life experiences of people and family members with dyslexia. Madrid-Manrique (2020) used comic art to capture and discuss the complexities associated with taking responsibility for (non)participation during a participatory animation workshop for children and young people with disabilities. The comic art titled *Lorena's story* encouraged a reflective process that questioned why and how empowerment may or may not occur in the story. Madrid-Manrique (2020) suggested that employing art-based approaches to research can aid in the exploration of (non) participation and the process of empowerment in ways that cannot be achieved through traditional research methods. Through these research articles, it is evident that art-based practices foster multiple opportunities to “explore disability cultures and their representations and scrutinize them in creative and critical ways, ultimately imagining alternative non-ableist futures” (Kallio-Tavin, 2020, p. 4). Building on this idea and action, we see a space and an opportunity for students with and without disabilities to learn about and engage with disability studies using art-based approaches. For example, in following a disability studies lens, Toland (2021) integrated the use of a biography, *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller* by Kim E. Nielsen into a secondary United States History classroom. In doing so, Toland (2021) provided the students with the opportunity to explore and challenge preconceived ideas about disability culture, history, and disability activism, which in turn, helped transform the students’ perceptions of disability within American history. While Toland (2021) uses a biography to encourage exploration and learning of disability in the classroom, the current paper focuses on a disability and aging classroom playwriting assignment. The study aims to understand the benefits and

potential areas for growth from both a student and professor perspective in using this creative course assignment when teaching critical disability studies.

Active Learning Through a Playwriting Assignment

The idea behind this playwriting assignment was grounded in the belief that art forms can facilitate opportunities for more active learning. Active learning offers an effective strategy for student engagement, inviting students to take ownership over their own learning process and make more meaningful connections with course content (Quinlan & Fogel, 2014). In this approach, students take on a knowledge producer role rather than merely passive recipients of information, which allows them to gain a deeper course content learning (Wright, 2015). Active learning strategies also allow students to learn from one another while placing the instructor in a facilitative role throughout the process (Auerbach et al., 2018)). The opportunity to work in smaller groups can also provide students with a safer space to explore new ideas and check their understanding of course material (Stanberry, 2018).

Playwriting Assignment Description

This playwriting assignment was part of an undergraduate-level course focused on the complex intersections of disability and aging. The overall course's intention was to highlight the need to "grey" critical disability studies in order to better understand the experiences the older disabled people (Yoshizaki-Gibbons). Topics addressed in the course included, for example, social theories of aging, the nuances of aging into and with a disability, and intersectional experiences of aging in relation to societal factors such as social, political, economic, culture,

gender, and race. Furthermore, the content addressed ethical issues and social justice for aging communities. The course included both more “traditional” assignments (i.e., critical research essay, online-based quizzes) and more creative ones (i.e., newsletters about aging-related topics, playwriting assignment). The course was delivered online via live weekly Zoom meetings. In total, 90 students were enrolled in the course with only one student having had prior experience with acting and playwriting.

Students were assigned into small groups (4-5 students) for the entire semester. For the purposes of this assignment, groups developed a 3-to-4-page, single-spaced script and provided an additional 350-word reflection regarding the process of co-creating their scripts. The short reflection was not included in the 3-page minimum script. In terms of structuring the course the playwriting assignment deadline was a few weeks after the halfway point of the course. This allowed students to have a sense of familiarity with the topic while ensuring there was adequate time dedicated to presenting and dissecting the material in class. The assignment description stated that viewing this assignment from a lived experience perspective works to uncover the social process of inequality. The scene should include some aspect of intersection of ableism and ageism. Perspectives highlighting intersectional views were encouraged. Students were expected to provide information about the setting and primary characters. Screenplays often contain key features of storytelling, including primary and secondary characters, a particular setting, a conflict or ethical dilemma, and some form of resolution. They are dialogue heavy and may contain various details including information about the space in which characters find themselves in, tone of voice, or other forms of communication and expression. Screenplays can vary in terms of length, but in this assignment, students were expected to produce one or more complete scenes following a cohesive narrative with beginning, middle, and ending. Scenes had to contain at least

two characters, and thus, monologues were not allowed. Students were also given script templates and information about script formatting specifics. We met with some groups to provide additional feedback on storylines, writing, and storyline structure, and reassure them that they were on the right path. Students were also tasked with performing a section of their scripts as a team to the rest of the class during class time. Each group was given 5 minutes maximum for their oral presentation. The assignments rubric was assessed based on four primary areas of evaluation: (1) quality of playwriting/script (2) group scene presentation (3) write up (4) use of language, accessibility, word count, and APA citations. In terms of structure for the rubric the scoring categories were separated into 4 groups based on how many points you received from the evaluator: 0, 1-6, 7-8, and 9-10. The lowest category (0) was evident from a lack of creativity, coherence, present for class presentation, failure to submit and multiple grammatical or APA mistakes. The second category (1-6) provided more minimal effort as opposed to the first category. Evaluation category 3 provided as more satisfactory level of effort exceeded. The highest category (9-10) demonstrates a higher level of creatively, coherence, originality in all aspects of their work.

Learning from Students' Perspectives and Reflections

In total, 15 students volunteered to share their reflections about the playwriting assignment through an online qualitative survey emailed to all 89 students following completion of the course. Participation in the survey and the development of this paper was completely voluntary. To avoid conflicts of interest, the instructor waited until the end of the term when final grade submissions had been completed to then approach students about the paper. We wanted to ensure that none of the students felt pressured to share their reflections or participate in the

development of this article. The brief online survey consisted of six open-ended questions (100 to 250 words each) surrounding students' perceptions, experiences, and reflections throughout the process of completing the playwriting assignment. Students' reflections were analyzed by a student in the course using a thematic inductive approach and a participant authenticity check was conducted by providing the final paper to participating students and incorporating that feedback into the final draft of the manuscript. The student meticulously reviewed students' responses multiple times while taking diligent notes regarding preliminary themes. To perform the formal coding of the data, the student utilized NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. In the initial phase, the student engaged in open coding, as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008), resulting in the creation of a preliminary list of overarching codes. Subsequently, the student conducted a thorough 'line-by-line' coding process, ensuring comprehensive coverage by assigning a code to every portion, and in some cases, multiple codes, as suggested by Charmaz (2008). The first author also looked through the data to ensure agreement in terms of the coding.

Given the importance of collaborative research, which makes space for more active participation of informants, all students who volunteered to complete the survey were included as co-authors and given the opportunity to review the paper prior to submission, provide feedback, and propose changes. Moreover, the third author who was a student in the course took a leadership role in performing the analysis of students' feedback and developing the students' reflections by writing the reflections from students section of the paper. The preceding section titled "reflections from students" analysis and commentary were provided by this third student to provide context to the quotes. The student who did the analysis has continually advocated for disability within her research and course work. Through the current paper the student came forward as inquiring about taking a more active role in the analysis as they wished to support the

analysis of the unique assignment. All names included in the reflections from students' section are their real names. These were used with the consent of each student. This article was deemed exempt by the University of Calgary's Institutional Ethics Review Board.

Reflections from Students

Preconceived Perceptions of the Playwriting Assignment

Students' perceptions upon learning about the playwriting assignment were highly variable, ranging from excitement, to anxiety, to outright dismissiveness regarding the relevance of the assignment. Of the students who found the assignment intriguing, most of them cited the divergence from typical assignments (i.e., critical reflection papers, literature reviews, research proposals, etc.) as being a breath of fresh air. Maeve expressed "any sort of assessment that does not contain writing a multiple-page APA style essay, count me in" and Ruby echoed this sentiment, stating "when I first learned about the playwriting assignment I was fascinated because my image of university was that all the assignments I would have to do were going to be in essay format." While I enjoy writing papers, I agree that evaluations typical in our courses, such as long-form academic writing, can become repetitive and often do not give students the opportunity to explore their ideas in ways that expresses the reality of day-to-day life. As a creative person, I was also curious about the opportunity to explore course concepts using a medium which allowed me to temporarily occupy the perspectives and experiences of the people involved in ableist and ageist narratives that inform the disabled experience. Destiny emphasized the novelty of the creative nature of this assignment writing, "it's rare that we get an opportunity to be creative in the way that we were able to while doing this assignment".

Despite the relief of avoiding yet another term paper, this was the first time most students had developed an art-based assignment and it was regularly labelled as “intimidating” and “anxiety inducing”. Many students were apprehensive about the grading process, citing that, as Crystal puts it, “my only concern was that the grading could be very subjective”, and others were unfamiliar with how to approach creating a script as Molly recalls, “I had questions about how to write a screenplay, I had never written one before and I initially did not know where to start.” To pre-emptively combat this uncertainty, the instructor devoted class time to describing the steps required in writing a script, which several other students and I found helpful. Several students also reported feeling concern when learning that their group was required to present their script to the class; however, the option to opt out of presenting if there were fewer roles than group members was appreciated as Kim recalls:

The reason why I felt this way was because we had to act out our scripts in front of the class, and I have poor public speaking skills; it's at a point where you can hear me shake as I speak. I was honestly relieved to find out that not everyone in the group would act/speak in front of the class.

Given the complex and often sensitive nature of the course content, students expressed concern over being able to meaningfully, accurately, and respectfully explore the disabled experience; Molly writes, “I was concerned about writing a script and making sure that the script covered and highlighted intersectionality in a meaningful way” and Nihal recalls, “some concerns I had with this, however, were trying to think of a scenario that would accurately reflect these forms of discrimination and the realities of people who may experience them, rather than my perception of their experiences”. As such, while most students were excited and welcomed an assignment format that was not another academic paper, they were uncertain about how to

create a script, how it would be graded, and how to authentically capture ableist narratives in everyday discourse, resulting in considerable anxiety.

Experiences Creating the Playwriting Assignment

Topic Selection

Students did not shy away from unconventional or taboo topics, and instead chose to tackle many of them head-on. Topics were highly intersectional including addressing how colonialism and intergenerational trauma influence older Indigenous people, reluctance to accept older individuals who wanted to explore their sexual orientation, infantilization and stripping older people of their autonomy, attitudes surrounding sexual health for older adults, and exploring economic safety nets and intergenerational wealth. Students explored these concepts by conveying these dynamics in group homes, employment, and interactions with grandchildren and adult children. For example, Ruby describes her group's script:

“The topic we chose for the playwriting assignment was to highlight the impacts of intersectional identities on aging and disability from an Indigenous perspective in Canada. It was to showcase the cumulative disadvantages that come from colonialism, assimilation, and cultural identity distortion that the Indigenous community has to endure. This was combined with the medical image of aging in our society and how this also added to the discrimination against elders in the indigenous community.”

Following the assignment guidelines outlined by the course instructor, students embedded the theories they covered throughout the course to showcase the ways in which higher-order theories get played out in interpersonal dynamics. For example, Kim describes her group's script:

“Our group focused on two critical discourses on activity and disengagement theory that we covered in class. Activity theory is displayed through our character Bob, who values the idea that remaining active is critical to having life satisfaction in old age. The disengagement theory framework is shown through another character Kelli, who understands aging as a natural way to withdraw from life roles in exchange for life

satisfaction in old age. This character, throughout the script, would often display her ableist and ageist perspectives to discredit Bob's capabilities."

Minimal restrictions were placed on students regarding the topics we were permitted to cover, so defining a specific topic was a challenge for many of us students; Maeve speaks to the chaotic feeling of settling on a topic, "we had so many ideas swirling, but it was hard to choose which route we wanted to take." However, as adult learners, I think that it is critical that we take initiative over our education and having to define a specific topic with minimal guidelines promoted that. Moreover, critical disability studies is such an expansive and intersectional discipline that it is impossible for instructors to cover it all. The open-ended nature of the playwriting assignment facilitated exploration into niche interactions that students typically must veer away from when writing papers due to a lack of literature on the topics.

Collaboration

Given the novelty of this assignment, groups approached creating their scripts in a wide variety of ways. Most groups divided the creation of their script into two stages: 1) developing characters, a setting, and a central conflict; and 2) writing dialogue. Most groups chose to schedule virtual meetings to accomplish both components together; however, many students took a different approach and, after an initial brainstorming session, chose to assign group members to either create the characters and story arch or to write the actual dialogue; this strategy was highly successful and efficient, although all students agreed that this assignment could be completed relatively quickly once initial details had been established. Regardless of the approach groups took to creating their scripts, authentic, respectful, and continual communication was pivotal to success.

Students struggled to create meaningful, authentic, and natural dialogue, which is understandable considering the uniqueness of this assignment; Sorochi recalled,

I started out by making up the story, then assigning characters and making up the dialogue. Just when I thought that was enough, I realized that the play was missing life elements such as time and space. The picture I had created was just people standing in a blank space reading a script.

Moreover, truly inhabiting the perspectives of characters and translating their lived experiences into dialogue was new, and often a difficult skill students had to acquire to successfully write their scripts. For example, Nihal stated that “the most challenging part of this was to put myself in the character's position and express the appropriate emotions and dialect.” To address this obstacle, students drew from personal experiences with ableism and ageism, which facilitated a raw exploration into the emotionality behind their characters. Students also felt that explicitly incorporating course content into the scripts made it more challenging to produce natural conversations. As Crystal noted:

To include specific class themes was the most challenging because our group wanted the ideas to be clear and to be understood by all readers and since writing is subjective the imagery, we felt, had to be specific so the reader was seeing what we wanted them to as they read.

However, this aspect of the assignment was critical to identifying theory in day-to-day life, which was one of the primary goals. Therefore, what the scripts lacked in conversational flow, they gained in achieving learning outcomes; Eleni described the impact creating a script had on her learning, writing that “while these [traditional] forms of assessment work well for many courses, I was able to understand the content to a greater extent in working through a script method.”

While the general trials and tribulations of group projects were still present (e.g., having equal participation between group members, finding time to meet, etc.), creating a script

produced its own host of challenges. Creating continuity between group members' writing styles was particularly challenging in this assignment as, unlike with academic writing, students were less confident of the rules, structure, and flow used in scripts; Ruby recalled that "one problem was being able to meld all our unique writing styles into a script. It was particularly challenging to do, as we would have opposing views on how the characters would express their emotions." However, overall students had better group work experiences in this assignment than most others, because their peers fundamentally enjoyed and were challenged by the assignment. As Maeve put it, "this assignment was the perfect amount of challenge as well as enjoyability." stating that group members were largely respectful, understanding, collaborative, and passionate; Kim also reflected, "I genuinely found the script creation process so fun to do. I got to see a very creative side of my group members; adding minor yet funny details to the characters' personalities and deciding on their names was so fun." This speaks to how the assignment structure itself can promote group cohesion.

Presentations

Groups were required to read their script during class time for up to five minutes and were graded on this component of the assignment. Reading the scripts in class gave students the opportunity to share their work through its intended medium and allowed the stories to be brought to life. Students were amazed by the creativity and variety of topics their peers explored, and having the opportunity to learn from their peers in this way was a highlight. Destiny articulated this saying, "it was also great to see what other groups had been working on for their scripts. Everyone was super creative. I enjoyed being able to watch people perform their scripts as opposed to just reading them." I echo this sentiment as the flexible topic selection created a

wide breadth of scripts and being able to hear that diversity in thought from my peers was engaging and inspiring. However, the presentation element came with anxieties for students who felt that they were not embodying the complex and nuanced experiences of their characters sufficiently as Crystal stated, “acting is not something I “can do”. I felt that my acting and reading of the script may have taken away from the impact instead of having the participants read it on their own.”

Students’ feelings on the opportunity to present were strong, but mixed. Several students were excited to present and were confident they could bring their scripts to life. Angelica reflected, “this was my favorite part of the project, I really like doing presentations and presenting in class especially for fun assignments such as this one” and Eleni echoed this saying, “I enjoyed the experience of performing the script for the class. Public speaking and presentations are an aspect of education which I enjoy.” I was one of these excited students and felt that presenting would help improve the impact of our script. However, even students who were confident presenters noted that presenting a script would require a unique skillset, as Sorochi reflected:

Performing the play was an insightful experience. I had been very confident with class presentations, and I assumed that this would be no different, but I was wrong. I was playing a character, so I had to embody the character that I had written. Embodying the character required me to understand the character and to do that, I drew references from people I have encountered in my environments.

Conversely, some students felt extremely nervous to speak in front of the class and welcomed the option to not present. To alleviate anxieties related to presenting, groups practiced their scripts several times. Additionally, in many cases there were more group members than characters in their script making opting out of presenting feasible, as it did not overly burden other group members who were willing to present. Melissa speaks to this negotiation, stating that

“there were enough group members that anyone who wanted to act got to and anyone who was uncomfortable didn't have to perform.” Interestingly, given the non-judgmental and encouraging classroom environment generated by the instructor and the teaching assistant, some students found presenting uplifting; Kim recalled watching her group members present, stating that, “after they had performed our script in front the class, you can definitely see the confidence boost they had through the screen; even more so to one particular member who also had shared the same struggles I had with public speaking.” Overall, reactions to presenting the script varied, but all of us students felt well supported and found it to be a fulfilling and enjoyable learning experience.

Reflections on the Challenges and Strengths of the Playwriting Assignment

Students reflected on the challenges they faced while creating their scripts, specifically critiquing the short assignment length, the large groups, and length of presentations. The entire script had to be a maximum of 3 to 4 pages with an additional 350-word commentary on the connection to class topics. Multiple students expressed that the four-page limit impeded their capacity to explore topics with greater nuance and develop characters the audience could connect to; Kim encapsulated many of the critiques levied by us students:

What I found a bit challenging (maybe the rest of my members had felt it too) about the scriptwriting process was trying hard not to exceed the maximum length of the assignment. There were just so many things that we had wanted to add to the script; whether that may be something funny, sarcastic, or serious, we constantly had to remind ourselves about the length. In the end, we had to sacrifice a few dialogues to avoid losing marks.

However, Erin and I argued that, while the script length was a challenge, permitting longer scripts would require more complex stories, which may quickly become convoluted when written by students who are not trained in playwriting.

In general, students liked working in groups as it significantly alleviated the stress of tackling a novel assignment; Destiny articulated this by saying, “I liked that we got to work in groups for this assignment, this was helpful because it can be intimidating when you’re told “okay, go write a script” when you have never done that before. By being in groups we were able to brainstorm together and share ideas as a group, so it was a lot less intimidating.” However, several students brought up that the groups were too large for each student to fully engage in the creation and presentation components of the assignment, with Sehar suggesting groups of 2 or 3 instead.

A critique of the presentation component of this assignment that many students had was that, as Erin put it, “I would've loved to have heard everyone's full scripts, as opposed to just the first 5 minutes all groups were allowed.” The short time frame meant that groups could not finish their script, which often resulted in missing the meaningful takeaways or changes in attitudes that came later in the script. For example, my group explored the ways in which healthcare workers can perpetuate ableist and ageist narratives surrounding sexual activity for the older adults; only towards the end were healthcare workers educated on the ways in which their language was harmful or corrosive to the dignity of elderly people, meaning that the only portion of the script we had time to present was the initial harmful attitudes. This left me feeling uncomfortable at the idea of inadvertently introducing my peers to harmful narratives without explicitly having the opportunity to express that they are problematic.

An Overwhelmingly Positive Response from Students

Creating a script was a uniquely fulfilling assignment. Students reported that they gained skills surrounding the technical components of developing a script (e.g., building characters,

structuring a plot, writing dialogue, etc.). However, the knowledge acquisition did not stop there. Students recognized this assignment to be outstandingly effective at allowing them to apply knowledge to practice, and in my opinion, this was the single best assignment I have done during my degree in that regard; Maeve articulated that, “I believe the intended outcome of assignment was to challenge how we viewed and understood the theories we were learning in class as well as interpret how they affect different communities.” The creative and flexible parameters of this assignment facilitated deeper engagement with content than typical papers, as Melissa outlined:

I feel I was able to work on collaborating and negotiating ideas in a more creative way than the usual shared research essay. It was nice to work on an open-ended project where there wasn't as much focus on formatting and citations, so it gave more time to come up with ideas and brainstorm before and during the writing process. I find in traditional group essays often only one or two people do the bulk of the work and other people just pick citations and put them in close to the deadline to meet requirements. I thought the exploration of our topic was genuine and more in depth because we all had to workshop the topic in real time requiring everyone to give ideas and feedback.

I saw this assignment as a compelling medium to focus on identifying ableism and aging narratives in everyday life, which my fellow peers agreed with. For example, Kim states, “the skills I gained from this assignment were enhancing my critical thinking abilities by actively conceptualizing and applying theories of aging into practice through a creative process.” Moreover, because students were required to create characters and dialogue to demonstrate the problematic narratives that plagued their scenes, they were also required to “distinguish and be made aware of different perspectives given the same scenario,” as Nihal puts it.

Students also frequently discussed the fact that writing a script improved their knowledge translation skills as Ruby noted, “one is being able to summarize giant and complex issues into a form of communication that is easier to digest” and goes on to say that “it is frustrating to think that the work that we have done for these essays is not going to be understood by those who read

them. So, I am glad we were able to learn new ways to communicate complex issues.”

Knowledge translation is a pivotal component of producing meaningful research, however it is rarely explored in the classroom, so assignments like writing a script is an accessible and engaging way to practice those skills as a student. For example, Crystal highlighted that this assignment facilitated the development of her plain language skills. As a result, students also found this assignment more personally relevant to their future or current community work as Nihal wrote, “I was also able to develop a better understanding of the realities of ableism and ageism, which I believe will assist me in my own work and practicums”, which Sorochi agreed with, “I think that the instructor also intended for students to explore a career path that combines film/playwriting and disability studies.”

Nearly all students agreed that our communication, teamwork, and leadership skills increased because of the playwriting assignment. This was, in part, because consensus was required for a uniform script in a way that it is not in typical papers, which may allow individual students to explore different ideas within a given topic; Sehar recalled, “a skill that was enhanced through this assignment was teamwork and communication. It definitely took a lot of consensus when coming up with the idea and dialogue for the characters.” Students learned to be more understanding of their group members’ varying perspectives and came to realize that those perspectives produced a nuanced script. Moreover, given that students were required to complete three projects with the same group, I believe that the creative format of this assignment provided a setting for valuable bonding and camaraderie between group members, which was beneficial in future assignments. This sentiment is reinforced by students such as Erin who reflected on the group nature of the playwriting assignment saying, “had this been an assignment that was done individually, I don't think it would have been as enjoyable for me.”

Although students were initially worried about being pushed outside of their comfort zone and the creative freedom of this assignment, ultimately, they all found those elements to be beneficial and refreshing. Eleni's comment eloquently points to the transformative and impactful nature of the assignment:

When first encountering the project, I wondered why we needed to write a screenplay. After completing the assignment, I can see how much more deeply I understand aging. Many of these concepts discussed in class occur around us daily, and we have become numb to the barriers as they are persistently a part of our lives. Having the opportunity to act out some points of intersectionality within the topic of aging will allow me to remember and notice these barriers in my practice for years to come.

Reflections from the Instructor and the Course's Teaching Assistant

Our aim in this paper was to collectively reflect our experience navigating a playwriting assignment within the context of a disability studies course focused on aging. As course instructors, we were particularly curious about students' perspectives on the assignment and its learning goals and their overall experience navigating this assignment. Based on students' reflections shared in this paper, we concluded that the assignment was successful, despite initial hesitation. From our standpoint, as instructors, our foremost concern was to allow students to feel comfortable leaving their comfort zone and "exercising a different muscle" without the concern of being "punished" for it. We know that many students today face significant pressures to "succeed" in their higher education, primarily by maximizing their grade point average. This is, of course, unfortunate because it can discourage some students from taking intellectual risks and engaging in more "out-the-box" forms of assignments. Perhaps, in recognition of those pressures and to make space for exploration, we were a bit more generous than usual when grading the assignment. We also tried to keep our expectations about the assignment outcomes realistic. Our intention, especially in a disability studies program, was not to train future

playwriters but to use playwriting as a venue for students to apply course concepts, empathize with people with lived experiences, and even draw and reflect on their own lived experiences and positionality. To our surprise, most students exceeded our expectations both in terms of their written material and the live performances to the rest of the class. Some shared experiences regarding their complex relations of care with older family members. Some went above and beyond by developing character sheets with detailed backstories of each character. We also appreciated the thoughtfulness and respectful way students engaged in this exercise.

Throughout the process, students raised some interesting questions about the assignment. For example, one group raised important questions about representation in the scripts, more precisely, about who gets to write about the lives and experiences of disabled people and people of color. What does it mean for non-disabled and young people to write scripts about aging and disability? We used these opportunities to discuss politics of representation and highlight forms of more collaborative approaches that make space for people with lived experiences to serve as a co-creator in this type of work. Some students raised important questions about the (often expected) linear structure of storylines, be well-aware that sometimes lived experiences and storytelling do not unfold in such manner. Finally, students demonstrated through their writeups that they had reflected about their own positionality and relationships to aging and disability.

Because this type of assignment was new to almost every student in class, it required classroom time to discuss the assignment in detail, clarify our expectations to students, and go through helpful resources and examples. In class, students were given certain prompts to assist with the first steps in the playwriting process, such as: “who are the characters in the story?” “where is the scene taking place?” The course instructor asked a colleague, a screen writer, to develop a presentation sharing the common steps in developing a script, which was shared with

the students. We strategically timed this assignment for later in the term to allow students to gain confidence about the course content and be more comfortable working with one another. Being able to work on this assignment as a group allowed students to support each other in navigating this type of assignment and to further comprehend the course material in the process. Both in their written documents and performances to the rest of the class, we were able to assess students' understandings of the course material.

We were particularly impressed with how students were able to *translate* complex theoretical concepts into real world situations, putting theories into *practice* to address a range of topics. Apart from one group which explicitly mentioned the term “aging successfully” in one of their scenes, most students refrained from spelling out concepts directly. Instead, they *showed* us what dis/ableism, ageism, and other course concepts could look like in everyday life. Importantly, with the encouragement from the course instructor, students consistently used an intersectional lens to their work to shine a light on often-neglected intersections. We appreciated how students did not shy away from addressing “tricky” topics related to aging. The scripts addressed a variety of topics, such as sexual expression among people aging into disability, power relations within the negotiation of care relations within families, and forms of oppression in institutionalized care.

Of course, no assignment is perfect and, moving forward, we are taking into account the feedback we received from the students about the assignment. For instance, students consistently noted that they wished they had had more time to perform their full scripts to their peers instead of just sections of the scripts. To us, it suggests that students were proud of their work and wanted to share a more full and contextualized representation of their work. We also wish we had dedicated more time to talk to each group after their presentations, considering how there

was lots to unpack in their scenes. However, in a larger class like ours with 90 students (divided into 20 groups), a detailed debriefing could be quite time consuming. We learned that, in the future, students could, for example, pre-record their full scenes, thus allowing for more space for conversations about their scripts. We also wish we had spent more time in class for discussion about ethical questions related to the representation of disabled and older people in playwriting. We believe the assignment would also have been strengthened by providing students with more ongoing feedback on their actual scripts and have an opportunity to re-write them. We know that multiple rounds of revision are a common expectation in the playwriting process.

All in all, we learned important lessons. To foster and boost creativity inside the classroom (whether it be in-person or virtual), it is important to create a safe space for learning and teaching that allows for risk-taking. As educators, we worked to meet the students where they were. We found that creating space, at different points in the term, for students to express their concerns and to ask questions allowed them to feel safer and more comfortable in engaging in the assignment. We also explicitly told students that they would not be “punished” for this giving this assignment a try. We did our best to explain our expectations and ease their potential hesitations. This assignment also reinforced to us how incorporating more creative assignments in critical disability studies courses can open up new pathways for the expression of ideas and learning beyond the traditional assignment formats. In the Community Rehabilitation and Disability Studies program, we place particular emphasis on teaching students that there are various modes of communication (beyond simply writing and oral means, for example) that should be equally celebrated. We appreciated how, without any prompting, as each group performed their scripts to the rest of the class, students took it upon themselves to start writing supportive comments to each other as presentations went along. Despite this being an online

course, we noticed how students still used the “comment area” of Zoom to compliment each other and ignite side conversations about the scenes.

Conclusion

Although initially worried about being pushed outside of their comfort zone, most students who shared their reflections ultimately found the assignment to be beneficial and refreshing. As the course instructor and the teaching assistant, we felt encouraged by the feedback we received from students and hope to continue making improvements to the assignment. Importantly, this experience reinforced the value of offering students encouragement, guidance, and gentle reminders to reassure students that they can be successful and that it is a safe space to take risks and attempt something new. Our reflections shared in this paper confirm the potential of bringing different art forms to the classroom to allow students with different strengths to express themselves and their ideas in more imaginative ways and beyond just writing. It is evident that sometimes taking a risk pays off, and surprises you with fantastic scenes that make us laugh, cry, and angry, makes you connect theory and practice, and makes you embody critical disability studies and its spirit. We hope that the reflections we shared in this paper will serve as a resource and source of inspiration to other educators in critical disability studies. Also, we suggest the use of playwriting to inspire critical exploration and creative approaches to knowledge translation. As disabled director Neil Marcus once stated, “Disability is [itself] an art. It's an ingenious way to live” (as cited in Siebers, 2010, para. 26). So, why not use art forms to educate our next generation of critical disability studies thinkers and activists?

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