

## Research Articles

### Questions, Questions: Using Problem-Based Learning to Infuse Disability Studies into an Introductory Secondary Special Education Course

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**Abstract:** This essay describes how an introductory special education course for future high school general education teachers became disability studies friendly through problem-based learning. Course structure and content are described, including opportunities for introducing disability studies concepts. Instructional challenges related to problem-based learning and maintaining a dual content focus are considered.

**Keywords:** Disability Studies Pedagogy, Special Education, Problem-Based-Learning

For many years our higher education institution did not require secondary education majors to learn about students with disabilities or special education. When the state introduced that requirement, the first author was given the task of developing a single introductory course that would be taken by all secondary education majors. The course would serve 20 different secondary education programs housed in three different colleges – each outside the college of education and human development where the new course would be located. Also, the course would serve undergraduates, some graduate students, and teachers in an “alternate routes to certification” program. In any one class there would always be students from multiple majors and different levels of school experience.

Concurrently, our institution offered professional development on problem-based learning (PBL) and the first author began developing the new special education course around PBL principles. This approach, which capitalizes on the interests and questions of students by engaging them in exploring authentic issues, seemed like a good fit for acknowledging the diversity of backgrounds and disciplines that students would bring to the course. The course was positioned as an introductory one that would not teach students everything they needed to know, but would provide them with language, concepts, and principles they would need to navigate the current landscape of U.S. schools, support the learning of diverse students, help them locate professional resources for future use, and give them practice with collaborative learning approaches. The overarching goal was to support their acquisition and application of knowledge about working with academically diverse student populations. In line with a situated case approach to PBL (Jonassen & Hung, 2015), students would engage collaboratively across

disciplines to make educational decisions related to realistic scenarios involving students who had been identified for special education services.

### **What is Problem-Based Learning?**

Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a sociocultural approach to learning in which the instructor acts as a facilitator of a student-centered learning process (Savery, 2015). The PBL learning cycle (Duch, Groh, & Allen, 2001) supports students in learning how to approach problem-setting, thinking critically, and determining how to acquire knowledge. Problem-setting asks students to examine complex, authentic scenarios, identify what they know (or think they know) about the situation, frame problems, and identify specific issues to investigate. Then students research what is known about their identified issues and possible solutions. The instructor selects an overarching “problem” and provides an instructional framework to support students’ learning of critical concepts, with questions and contributions from each student also determining the focus of learning activities. PBL capitalizes on the power of collaboration through small groups working to synthesize what they have learned from their research in order to construct new knowledge and understanding. Finally, students present their solutions to a larger audience. They highlight critical principles and practices, and reflect upon their learning as well as any unanswered questions.

### **Why Disability Studies?**

Although it was not an explicit goal at the time, the course design opened up instructional space for critique and engagement with disability studies ideas about disability and special education. Initially, the course design purposefully up-ended a more traditional approach to introductory special education courses, which often focus on learning about the characteristics of children within each of the federal special education disability categories and the major trends in services. Instead, the course designers adopted a socio-ecological perspective, nesting questions about individuals and teaching practices within questions about classrooms and school communities influenced by historical practices and cultural values. Students would be expected to learn about adolescents with disabilities and the major features of the current special education system and its practices, but also to understand that special education as they might know it is not a given; it is a structure created in response to particular concerns at a particular time, wedded to a larger education system that positions disability in particular ways, and subject to further change in response to new questions and knowledge about teaching and learning.

This socio-ecological and sociocultural framing of the course created an alignment that we characterized as “disability studies friendly.” Operating within the constraints of state and professional mandates to deliver a special education course, we still determined ways to infuse

disability studies concepts. Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, and Morton (2008) identified one of the primary tenets of disability studies in education (DSE) as “contextualizing disability within political and social spheres” (p.448), which was explicit in the course design. Further, the course introduced students to foundational concepts of “equitable and inclusive education opportunities and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society” (p. 448). Although students in the course would learn about special education categories of disability and characteristics typically ascribed to people with disability labels, the course also problematized disability and normality (Baglieri et al 2011; Lawrence-Brown, 2014).

### **Course Structure**

The course was built around four overarching questions, one per unit. Composite cases of middle and high school students with disabilities served as anchors for problem-setting. Instructor objectives and student questions were examined through a combination of whole class, small group, and individual work that engaged students in investigations, discussions, and reflections. Several types of learning assessments allowed students to present what they were learning while also prompting them to identify additional questions as they moved through the units.

#### **Course (Unit) Questions**

1. Who are adolescents with exceptional learning needs?
2. Which instructional principles and practices should teachers employ in academically diverse classrooms?
3. How can classroom and school communities be shaped to support the success of adolescents with exceptional learning needs?
4. How do historical, legal, and values frameworks influence educational decisions regarding delivery of services and supports to exceptional adolescents?

A potential conflict between the special education focus of the course and alignment with a disability studies perspective is immediately apparent in the use of the special education terminology of “exceptional,” which is the phrase commonly used in the state. This reflects the ongoing tension in the course between helping students to become familiar with the lingo of the profession in which they would be immersed while also opening up discussion around such words. In fact, the word “exceptional” becomes the subject of discussion quite quickly in the process as students begin to synthesize information related to their first investigations about who “exceptional” adolescents are.

The order of the questions (units) is intended to situate adolescents who have been identified for special education services within an unfolding socio-ecological model of interactions involving characteristics of individual students, teaching practices, classrooms and school communities, and historical, cultural, and legal frames. We flipped this from more traditional approaches that often start with law and history and then walk students through the IDEA categories of disability. In this course, we wanted to focus first on students with disabilities themselves, in the hope that the student cases would serve as more personalized anchors when later discussing abstract legal principles and cultural practices.

### **Cases**

Central to this approach is the use of composite cases of adolescents with various disability labels. Elements of each case are revealed in each unit. For example, in the first unit only the student's name and IDEA funding label are revealed. In the second unit, more details about the students and their lives are shared, such as ethnicity/race, socio-economic situation, family context, and present levels of academic performance. Unit three places the student in a problematic scenario at the school, and the fourth unit centers on decision-making meetings such as the student's IEP or a manifestation determination meeting. Cases rotate across groups; each unit and group members stay together. In a typical class of 25-35 students with small groups of five, there are always more cases than units. This means that each group will work closely on only four cases. However, because the final learning assessments for each unit involve presentations by each group to the whole class, all cases become the subject of discussion across groups. And, what is learned in each unit can build upon previous groups' work.

### **Don't Let This Happen to You!**

The class is organized into heterogeneous groups by major to increase the likelihood that students will raise different questions and perspectives about what they think they know, do not know, or want to learn. Group work is not always easy and some students have had little practice collaborating. This issue is tackled early in the course by sharing a graphic of a pie chart (uncredited source, <http://i.imgur.com/zXGrx.jpg>) that humorously suggests the majority of "what I learn from group projects" is more likely to be about how much I hate people and how to do entire projects on my own, instead of how to work with others to learn information. Students are encouraged to discuss examples of how group work can go wrong and consider proactive strategies for successful group work in response to three questions:

- What can we do to ensure equitable distribution of effort?
- How can we create opportunities to learn from each other during discussions?

- How can we ensure that our final products are more than the sum of individual parts?

Each group creates its own “code of conduct.” This code becomes the basis for peer evaluations throughout the semester.

### **Unit Objectives**

As each unit is launched, the instructor shares learning objectives, which includes students identifying their own questions. For example, the content learning objectives presented to students in unit 1 are:

- Learn characteristics of exceptional youth including their strengths, needs, concerns;
- Introduce some core concepts (e.g., self-determination, transition); and
- Identify your questions to investigate.

Also, students are reminded of ongoing “process” objectives related to improving oral and written communication skills, practicing collaboration skills, and becoming familiar with professional resources.

### **Problem-Setting**

Students are given a handout at the beginning of each unit particular to their assigned case and the focus of that unit. After reading, they note experiences or questions they think are relevant for learning more about the case and discuss these with their group. Before leaving class, each group member claims a unique question to investigate. The questions should complement each other and address what the group members think is most important to know (at least at that point in time).

The process of problem-setting is sometimes difficult for students who are used to being told what they need to learn. Students may struggle to come up with questions – or don’t realize that they are asking legitimate questions. For example, a student may say, “I don’t even know what a learning disability is so how can I ask a good question?” and the instructor might reply “One possible question is –What IS a learning disability? Who decides a student will be given a label of LD? Or, how is a learning disability different from other disabilities?” Some students who are more familiar with disabilities may argue that all kids are different – and the instructor might say “True! So your question might be “what is the range of characteristics typically associated with a label such as LD?” The students may also struggle identifying a question that aligns with the unit theme. As current and future teachers, students seem to gravitate toward “how to” questions about pedagogy and less often ask “why” or “in what context” questions.

The instructor also takes time in the first unit to identify some resources students can use to locate answers to their questions. Students are encouraged to use multiple sources of information to answer their questions, including a traditional textbook, journal articles, educational databases, and professional and advocacy websites. The instructor provides links to online assigned readings for the unit and supplementary resources on related topics for students who want background information or to explore other aspects of a topic.

### **More Questions**

Often at the beginning or end of a session, the instructor will introduce a quote or graphic that is intended to provoke further discussion. For example, in the first unit, a chart illustrating risk ratios for being identified in one of three IDEA disability categories (specific learning disability, intellectual disability, emotional/behavior disorder) based on one's ethnicity or race is shown. Students are asked to consider what issues the graphs highlight and what might explain these differences. This begins a conversation about the role of professional judgment and other factors involved in formal identification of disability. These extra questions open up spaces for socio-culturally-focused discussions about disability, with students examining their previous assumptions.

The instructor also may pose questions intended to prompt students to consolidate ideas and make connections to new concepts. For example, at the beginning of unit 2 on instructional principles and practices the class is presented with the following quote: "Barriers to learning are not, in fact, inherent in the capacities of learners, but instead arise in learners' interactions with inflexible educational goals, materials, methods, and assessments" (Rose & Meyer, 2002, p. vi). Each group is asked to discuss: What is the message here? How does this connect to what we learned in unit 1?

### **Learning Assessments**

There are three types of assignments that occur in each unit. Posts are individual students' written summaries of what they learned through their brief investigations into their selected questions. The summaries are shared with group members and become a foundation for the end-of-unit Group Presentations, which vary in format by unit. In unit 1 groups prepare an oral presentation about characteristics of adolescents with the disability label they researched. For unit 2, groups prepare a skit that demonstrates instructional practices that could be used in a secondary academic classroom to support learning for their case study student as well as other students. At the end of unit 3 each group creates a conference-style poster to present how they have framed the problem scenario involving their case student, the classroom, schoolwide, and community options they identified for responding to the scenario, considerations to be weighed

about implementing those options, and their group’s recommendations. In unit 4 students participate in a role play of an educational decision-making meeting involving their case student.

This role play is not graded, but is the basis for a final case analysis that is completed individually. The analysis is an opportunity for students to demonstrate what they have learned across the course by explaining what could or should have been done to promote a student-focused decision-making process. All of the unit presentations have an important formative purpose. The class learns about each of the cases by listening, observing, and asking questions of their peers while also permitting the instructor to clarify ideas, point out important themes, or introduce new ideas that may be relevant.

The third type of unit assessment is a Participation/Peer Evaluation, in which group members’ give feedback about the preparation, contribution, and communication of each member of their group. In addition to the recurring learning assessments, midterm and end-of-semester exams requiring multiple choice and brief essay responses are given as a way to hold students individually accountable for learning core special education content and demonstrate insights about that content.

**More Framing Questions and Concepts**

In addition to the overarching questions, questions generated by the students, and incidental discussion questions, other smaller questions and related concepts that are intended to frame each class session are inserted throughout the syllabus. Table 1 shows examples of framing questions that the instructor might use to introduce syllabus session topics and guide students’ engagement with the readings for each unit.

**Table 1. Examples of Framing Questions Posed by the Instructor for Sessions and to Guide Reading**

Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3	Unit 4
<p><u>Sessions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Course Introduction</li> <li>● Congratulations!                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What Do You Know?</li> <li>○ Problem-Based Learning Expectations</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Meet Your First Case Student</li> </ul>	<p><u>Sessions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Accessing the General Curriculum                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What’s That Mean?</li> <li>○ Leveling the Playing Field vs. Changing the Game</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><u>Sessions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Taking a Schoolwide Perspective                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What is SWIFT?</li> <li>○ What is SWPBS?</li> <li>○ What is “culturally</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><u>Sessions</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How Did We Get Here?                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Why Does "Special" Education Even Exist?</li> <li>○ Why Do We Do It This Way?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Who Are You?</li> <li>○ Getting to Know All About You</li> <li>● A Transition Perspective             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Who Will I Become?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Other Perspectives             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Who is Asking?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Reading</u> What is the difference between "people first" and "identity first" language? When is it appropriate to use each?</p> <p>How do cultural factors complicate the idea of "disability" or "exceptionality"?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 2 Big Ideas About Instruction             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Differentiating</li> <li>○ Universal Design</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Rethinking Special &amp; General Education             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What's "Special"?</li> <li>○ A New Continuum?</li> <li>○ What Works?</li> <li>○ What Does That Look Like?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Reading</u> What does "access to the general curriculum" have to do with being inclusive?</p> <p>Which of these evidence-based teaching techniques would be valuable in a general education setting? And, why?</p>	<p>relevant" SWPBS?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Meet Your Student             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What's Going on Here?</li> <li>○ Let's Play POCR (problems, options, considerations, recommendations)</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Classroom Management             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What Does This Mean for Your Student?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Reading</u> Why are schoolwide practices important to the success of students with disabilities?</p> <p>What school practices encourage family involvement?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Meet Your New Student             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ You Are Invited (to an important meeting)!</li> <li>○ What Do We Need to Consider?</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Cultural Reciprocity             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What Do We Value?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><u>Reading</u> What values do these laws and principles represent?</p> <p>How can an IEP become more than a compliance document?</p>
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### Ideas and Openings

Certain ideas commonly arise in response to all of these questions and openings for introducing disability studies perspectives can be anticipated. Some of these occur in every semester; others are unique to cohorts. Within the first unit, which asks "Who are adolescents with exceptional learning needs?" students quickly determine there are a variety of definitions for each disability, and the variability within and across categories of disability requires a teacher to "get to know" individual students. Discussions ensue about the intersections of adolescent



identities as students transition to new roles beyond school, how the fixed or growth mindsets of teachers and students influence learning opportunities, and how teachers support promoting self-determination. Occasionally, students who identify with particular disability labels (e.g., Asperger syndrome, learning disability) have shared their personal experiences in class discussions and presentations.

In unit 2, which focuses on instructional principles and practices, concepts of interest to students include differences between accommodations and modifications along with the practices associated with differentiation and universal design for learning. Students sometimes struggle with the idea of special education as a spectrum of instructional services and supports that vary in intensity and by context rather than a continuum of more or less restrictive placements. This seems to be especially true for students with limited experiences in inclusive high school settings. The counter to this conceptual barrier is helping students to develop an understanding that many of the instructional practices that teachers can use to engage students with disabilities in learning (e.g., graphic organizers, learning strategies) work well for students without disability labels, too. Upon reflection, some students have suggested that using practices that work for a wide variety of students is “just common sense.”

In unit 3, which is about creating classroom and school communities, we introduce the concept of culture by thinking about the necessary ingredients for implementing school-wide approaches that support belonging and learning for all students, such as the SWIFT model (McCart, Sailor, Bezdek, & Satter, 2014) and school-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS) (Nocera, Whitbread, & Nocera, 2014). Students are generally comfortable with these concepts even as they recognize barriers to implementation that relate to school structures and teacher mindsets about discipline. For example, some students have had experience in schools where SWPBS was poorly implemented with a misguided or inconsistent emphasis on tangible rewards for student behavior rather than pro-actively cultivating a culture of positive, learning-focused supports. Learning about disproportionate use of punitive disciplinary measures (e.g., restraint, seclusion) on students from ethnic/racial minority groups, especially those with disabilities is often a troubling issue. Students are not typically aware of this issue, which leads to further discussions about why particular categories of students experience discrimination.

Finally, in unit 4 we examine the historical, legal, and values frameworks that influence educational decisions about individual students. Class lecture and discussion focus on the continuing influence of eugenics and historical schooling practices, the role of disability advocacy and rights, legal principles of major disability laws, especially IDEA, and student roles in decision-making. Role plays can lead to discussion about the tensions inherent in making student-centered educational decisions given a schooling system that historically has been

structured to sort students by ability and presumed destination (e.g., “college-bound”). Unit 4 also provides an opportunity to examine cultural practices as learned, shared and embodied. Coupling this idea with Kalyanpur and Harry’s (2012) model of cultural reciprocity prompts students to consider how their own values influence their interactions in educational decision-making with students, families, and other professionals.

### **More Problems, More Questions (for the Instructors)**

Adopting a PBL approach and dual curricular focus on special education and disability studies has presented challenges related to implementation of the PBL model, instructor knowledge of special education and disability studies concepts, and constraints of a single introductory course. As noted in reviews of PBL literature (e.g., Strobel & Van Barnevedl, 2015), students may be uncomfortable if their expectations about their role in class do not align with those inherent in a PBL course. For example, an undergraduate once commented to the first author (in an early course evaluation) that the instructor should just tell students what they need to know instead of making them do so much work to find information. As a result, the instructor learned to engage students at the beginning of the course in conversation about the rationale for using a learning process focused on more than just the “right answer.” Other students have reflected at the end of the course that they were initially uneasy, but became appreciative when recognizing that they had opportunities to participate more actively in learning about issues of importance to them and encounter different perspectives on those issues. Similarly, novice instructors such as the second author may find that it takes some practice to become a facilitator. Leading discussions and determining when and how to push students’ thinking can be more challenging than lecturing. This can be especially true when exploring topics, such as the intersection of disability and race, that students may have had limited previous opportunities to discuss openly. Further, a diversity of students across majors, ages, degree programs, and experiences with disability and teaching, amplifies the need for the instructor to scaffold students’ collaborative work.

Another important challenge to consider is that maintaining a dual focus in the course on special education and disability studies is dependent upon the goals of the instructor. The course can be taught as it was originally designed - an introduction to special education without explicit attention to disability studies concepts – and this has been the case at our institution where different instructors have taught the course over time. The course structure creates opportunities for, but does not guarantee engagement with disability studies perspectives. Also, the instructor’s prior experiences may influence the learning opportunities in the course. For example, the second author had limited experiences with inclusive schooling practices and initially struggled to offer authentic examples of such practices when pressed by students. The first author had

experiences in community-based programs for adults with developmental disabilities as well as researching an inclusive high school and working with in-service teachers for several years, which facilitated sharing a range of examples for students to consider. While having “real life” experiences is helpful, the primary issue given the PBL framework is the instructor’s use of those examples in ways that encourage students to ask meaningful questions and explore issues more deeply. Thus, even an instructor with limited personal experience on a particular topic can promote inquiry by using videos, guest lectures, and other sources to supplement discussions.

In our context, a major constraint is the fact that the work occurs within a limited number of instructional hours. Students will move on to their discipline-related methods courses, where there may be more or less attention to disability and diversity. Also, The “alternate routes to certification” (non-degree) students who are currently teaching may report to the class that they struggle with implementing some practices in their classrooms, which then impacts the undergraduates’ views of course concepts. In response, the instructor may remind students of the introductory nature of the course and the reality that novice teachers will develop practices over time within a supportive context. There is also tension between moving conversations forward and letting students dig into particular points. The instructors exercise judgment throughout the course about what content must be covered and what content can fall by the wayside while pursuing an unexpected issue raised by students’ questions. One course is unlikely to provide sufficient time to engage in the critical reflection and practices that would lead to inclusive practices, but can be an opportunity to disrupt dominant understandings of disability and special education.

### **Conclusion**

PBL is not the only way to encourage students to think critically about special education and disability. Engaging students in discussions about realistic cases using questions framed from multiple perspectives are featured approaches in books such as *Disability and Teaching* (Gabel & Connor, 2014) and *Cases in Special Education* (Danforth & Boyle, 2000). Using a situated case-based PBL approach that emphasizes student engagement in problem-setting and question development has been valuable in our context. It has allowed us to address the institutional goal of introducing students to special education while also creating space for the instructors’ goal of helping students to problematize special education and disability. Based upon end-of-semester course evaluations and reflective discussions with other instructors who have taught the course over the last several years, we have noted a few common ideas students take away. Many seem to recognize that they have a bigger responsibility for teaching students with a wide variety of differences, including those with disabilities, than they initially thought. They also identify practices they can incorporate into their teaching repertoire, permitting them to fulfill their

commitment to reaching as many learners as they can. They also have a better appreciation for the complexities of schools and special education; realizing that what had seemed to be a “given” is in fact open to inquiry and sometimes responsive to advocacy. Some persist in wanting clear parameters for defining disability as a set of individual characteristics while others become more comfortable with the idea that the social context of disability must be considered.

As with any single course, there are limits to what can be accomplished. We have not conducted follow-up activities with graduates to determine what ideas and practices travel with them as they become established in schools. In alignment with Danforth and Naraian (2015, p. 82), it is our hope that:

“...When teachers recognize the significance of working through competing knowledge bases that pervade a community at any point in time and draw on a range of instructional options to serve their students, they are enacting a differential consciousness. They are simultaneously exercising a form of collective agency that has greater transformative potential than a polarized response based on abstract ideals of social justice.”

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