

Connecting Theory and Practice: Our Experiences Developing Assignments and Opportunities for Undergraduate Students to Serve Communities

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Abstract

This article explores innovative pedagogical approaches in a Canadian critical disability studies program, showcasing liberatory pedagogy through praxis. It emphasizes integrating community engagement with academic theory, exemplified by diverse assignments empowering students as social change agents. Assignments include collaboratively developed applied outputs (e.g., comic books, board games), involving community leaders' lived experiences, and nontraditional capstone projects (e.g., educational materials, community events) fostering advocacy and inclusion. These initiatives challenge academic boundaries, transforming societal attitudes. The article enriches discussions on higher education best practices, urging educators to embrace critical, community-engaged learning opportunities. These initiatives prepare students to navigate and influence disability and societal dynamics. The authors advocate for an educational paradigm as dynamic as society, ensuring students effect tangible, positive change.

Keywords: critical disability studies, community-engaged pedagogy, praxis in higher education, inclusive curriculum design, knowledge translation in academia



Students demonstrate greater engagement and interest in a subject when they understand its relevance to the real world (Meibert et al., 2020; Wollschleger, 2019). This finding is further supported by the observation that students show a keen interest in assignments with social significance and meaningful content (Layman et al., 2007). Community-based learning initiatives or research projects rooted in community engagement offer students practical experience that complements their academic studies (Kuh, 2008). This method is particularly effective because it integrates active learning through application, an effective practice in enhancing learning outcomes (Roberts, 2002). As Strangfeld (2013) argued, students “become sociologists by doing sociology, not just reading about it” (p. 200). Similarly, the principles of critical disability studies are best acquired through direct engagement and application, as this

field demands an examination of power structures, societal norms, and systemic inequities.

Critical disability studies and community-engaged scholarship share a commitment to rethinking traditional hierarchies of knowledge and recognizing the value of lived experiences. Both fields challenge conventional notions of how we teach, learn, and know, advocating for an educational paradigm that prioritizes collaboration, reflexivity, and social transformation. Community-based learning creates a bridge between academic theory and real-world application, emphasizing the cocreation of knowledge with communities rather than the top-down dissemination of expertise. This approach aligns seamlessly with critical disability studies, which positions disabled individuals as knowers and agents of change rather than passive subjects of study. Together, these approaches foster a reimagining of education as a space for

liberatory praxis, where learning is deeply intertwined with efforts to dismantle ableism and other forms of structural oppression.

As scholars in the field of critical disability studies, we too have observed a compelling trend: An increasing number of our students are driven by the desire to imbue their professional paths with profound societal impact. This inclination toward meaningful career aspirations highlights the need for educational practices that are not only intellectually stimulating but also socially conscious. Assignments, as a core component of teaching in higher education, offer a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between academic theory and real-world application (Wollschleger, 2019). By designing assignments that are socially meaningful, educators can foster a learning environment that encourages students to connect with the material on a deeper level. Moreover, such assignments can serve as a catalyst for students to critically engage with societal issues, promoting a sense of responsibility and empowerment to effect change. In this context, the role of educators extends beyond imparting knowledge; it involves inspiring students to envision and work toward a more equitable and inclusive society.

In embracing the principles of critical disability studies, we recognize the importance of challenging traditional educational norms and advocating for a curriculum that integrates socially meaningful assignments. This article emerges from our collective experiences as educators in developing course assignments that treat knowledge not as a mere abstract concept but as a tool for tangible societal benefit. In this article, we delve into a series of case studies, each showcasing a distinct course assignment that we have integrated into our teaching repertoire. These case studies serve as exemplars of pedagogical innovation, reflecting our commitment to an educational philosophy that is both critical and community engaged. Through a detailed examination of these assignments, we aim to illustrate the practical application of theoretical concepts, the fostering of critical thinking skills, and the enhancement of students' abilities to contribute to meaningful societal discourse. Each case study provides an in-depth look at the objectives, methodologies, and outcomes associated with the respective assignments, offering insights into how they align with and advance the goals of our critical disability studies program. By

sharing these examples, we hope to contribute to the broader conversation on academic best practices and to inspire fellow educators to adopt and adapt approaches that bridge the gap between academic study and social action. Such an approach may not only prepare students for their future careers but also equip them with the critical thinking and empathy necessary to navigate and contribute to a rapidly changing world.

Our Context

The authors are both faculty members within a critical disability studies program in Canada. We are community-based researchers with years of experience working with disabled people, especially people labeled/with intellectual disability, and service providers across various research projects. The first author is a cisgender man, queer tenure-track scholar of color, living with invisible disabilities. The second author is a tenured White woman with invisible disabilities.

Our objective as educators is to immerse our students in a curriculum that offers critical perspectives on disability and disability justice. Although our program is uniquely situated within a faculty of health sciences rather than the social sciences, the majority of our faculty members bring a wealth of expertise from the social sciences, particularly from fields such as sociology and disability studies. This interdisciplinary foundation enriches our program, infusing health sciences with critical social perspectives that challenge traditional biomedical approaches to disability. By bridging these academic realms, our faculty contribute to a nuanced curriculum that interrogates the intersections between health, society, and disability, offering students a comprehensive, multifaceted education that prepares them to address complex issues within both health care and societal contexts. Our program uses an educational model, named Inciting Change Makers (ICM) framework, aimed at supporting students to incite positive social change through critical engagement and disruption, meaningful mentorship, and community action (Edwards & Rankin, 2023). Course curricula are meticulously designed to introduce students to intricate interplays between disability and various social identities, fostering an understanding of the multifaceted experiences of disability across different societal intersections.

Our program in critical disability studies is distinctively characterized by the incorporation of practical experience through community-engaged learning opportunities. This key component of our curriculum bridges theoretical learning with tangible application, ensuring that by the completion of their undergraduate studies, students will have engaged in a minimum of 384 hours of hands-on work in real-world settings. These practicum placements are diverse, ranging from involvement with community organizations, including service providers and advocacy groups, to active collaboration with faculty members on research initiatives.

This melding of academic rigor with societal engagement equips our students with the tools to critically analyze and actively participate in the shaping of their communities. Through such engagement, they are not just observers but become catalysts for change, challenging existing paradigms and contributing to better practices.

Community-Engaged Learning

The field of critical disability studies is fundamentally about the collaborative generation of knowledge, with a strong emphasis on partnership with communities to dismantle systemic inequalities (Yoshida et al., 2016). It is a discipline that actively seeks to amplify the voices of disabled individuals, positioning their experiences and insights at the forefront of scholarly inquiry and policymaking (Reaume, 2014; Yoshida et al., 2016). This approach is not about “giving voice” but about recognizing disabled people as knowers, cocreators of knowledge, and agents of change (Barnes, 2004). By engaging with the lived realities of disability, scholars and community members together interrogate and challenge the structures that perpetuate ableism, exclusion, and marginalization (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical disability studies transcends traditional academic boundaries, advocating for a transformative impact that reshapes societal attitudes and fosters inclusive, community-driven social change (Thomas, 2007).

In the literature on pedagogical approaches within undergraduate education, community-engaged learning stands out as a method that significantly enhances the educational experience (Botchwey & Umemoto, 2020; Rubin et al., 2012). This form of experiential learning involves students in activities that address community-identified needs

while enhancing their academic learning, personal growth, and civic responsibility (Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018; Preston et al., 2013). Studies have shown that assignments performed in collaboration with community partners not only deepen students’ understanding of course content but also increase their skills in applying knowledge to real-life situations (Bandy, 2011; Botchwey & Umemoto, 2020). Such partnerships provide a tangible context for theoretical concepts, fostering a learning environment that encourages critical thinking, problem-solving, and reflection (Grise et al., 2020; Kraft, 2000).

Furthermore, the integration of community-based projects within coursework is highlighted as a key strategy for reinforcing student learning outcomes. These projects often require students to engage directly with different social groups, enabling them to develop a more nuanced perspective on social issues (Donahue & Plaxton-Moore, 2018; Preston et al., 2013). The literature emphasizes that when students are actively involved in the learning process, especially in a way that contributes to the public good, they exhibit enhanced academic motivation, improved interpersonal and communication skills, and a stronger sense of social responsibility (Hatala et al., 2017; Preston et al., 2013). Importantly, such pedagogical models align with the growing demand for higher education institutions to produce graduates who are not only knowledgeable but also socially aware and equipped to contribute meaningfully to society (Chan, 2016; Lapointe, 2022). At the same time, community partners see benefits in these collaborations (Karasik, 2019).

Bridging Theory and Practice Through Meaningful Community Partnerships

As scholars deeply dedicated to the confluence of theory and practice, particularly within the dynamic realm of critical disability studies, we have conscientiously endeavored to craft course assignments that empower students to cocreate resources alongside our community partners. This initiative stems from our conviction that such collaborative engagements serve as an exemplary pedagogical strategy for imparting crucial skills. It is pivotal that our students learn to navigate and incorporate community needs in their work, working in tandem with stakeholders to forge solutions that are both impactful and sustainable. The cultivation of community partnerships

is central to our ethos, as we forge robust connections with local organizations. These alliances are not just theoretical constructs but fertile grounds for students to meaningfully apply their burgeoning knowledge, ensuring a reciprocity that benefits all stakeholders involved.

The nurturing of community partnerships stands as a cornerstone of our ethos, reflecting a deep commitment to building enduring, meaningful connections with local organizations. For us, the development of these relationships is not a transactional process but a collaboration that unfolds over time, characterized by mutual dedication and continuous dialogue. As community-based researchers and educators, we place immense value on these partnerships. These partnerships are far from superficial or “one-off” encounters; they are imbued with a sense of trust and shared purpose, evolving through regular engagement and a shared commitment to addressing community needs. We see these connections as vital to our work, providing a foundation upon which we can collaboratively explore, learn, and enact change. They enable us to bridge the gap between academic research and community action, ensuring that our efforts are grounded in the realities and priorities of those we aim to serve. Moreover, these relationships underscore the importance of reciprocity and respect, guiding principles that inform not only our research methodologies but also our pedagogical approaches. For us, the cultivation of community partnerships is an ongoing process that enriches our work, enhances our students’ learning experiences, and contributes to the broader societal impact of our academic endeavors. Through these collaborations, we are reminded of the value of patience, the importance of listening, and the transformative power of working alongside community partners toward common goals.

In our efforts to cultivate meaningful community partnerships, we employ several strategies to ensure these relationships are collaborative, reciprocal, and deeply integrated into our teaching practices. First, we dedicate time to building trust with partners, often engaging with them through ongoing research projects, community events, or advocacy work long before assignments are conceptualized. For example, our longstanding relationship with the Alzheimer Society was built through mutual collaboration on community programs, enabling

us to design assignments that directly align with their needs and priorities. This foundational trust allows partners to feel confident that their contributions will be respected and valued in the classroom setting. Second, we actively integrate community perspectives throughout the life cycle of assignments. At the outset, we consult with partners to identify pressing issues or resource gaps that could benefit from student contributions. Third, we engage partners in the outcomes of assignments to ensure the final outputs serve their intended purpose. For example, the educational modules created for service providers in the Mad Studies course (described below) were reviewed by community partners, who provided input on their usability and clarity before implementation. Once finalized, these modules were integrated into the training programs of service organizations, amplifying their impact. This process of engaging partners in both the creation and application of assignments not only enhances the relevance of student work but also strengthens the connection between classroom learning and community needs.

Community partners play diverse roles across assignments, ranging from knowledge contributors to cocreators and end users of student outputs. For instance, some partners, like health care providers, serve as content experts during the development phase, whereas others, such as advocacy organizations, use the final products as educational tools within their networks. This flexibility allows us to tailor partnerships to the unique strengths and goals of each collaborator, ensuring a mutually beneficial relationship. By centering community voices and fostering collaborative engagement at every stage, we illustrate how partnerships can transform classroom learning into a shared endeavor that bridges academic study with real-world impact.

Fostering Innovation and Inclusivity

In our course assignments, we also champion the integration of access and accessibility at every stage—from the germination of ideas to the tangible delivery of assignments. This approach instills a mindset that prioritizes inclusivity and fosters innovative communication strategies, thereby enabling our students to transcend traditional paradigms of knowledge dissemination. Central to our pedagogical strategy is the prioritization of inclusivity, where course materials and assignments are meticulously crafted with

accessibility as a cornerstone. This commitment guarantees full engagement for all students, creating a learning environment that is as diverse as the society it mirrors. Hand-in-hand with this inclusivity is our drive to foster innovation in communication. We empower students to convey their research and insights in a multitude of formats, thereby broadening their audience and enhancing the permeability of academic work into the public sphere. We encourage students to “think outside the box,” and by using a nonpunitive pedagogical approach, we attempt to create a space where students feel empowered to take risks in their assignments.

The integration of community-centered assignments within our critical disability studies curriculum has not only enriched the academic experience of our students but also underscored the profound potential for academic programs to enact real-world change. The implications of this pedagogical approach extend far beyond our classrooms, suggesting a roadmap for curriculum development across various academic disciplines. In our latest curriculum review, both current and former students consistently emphasized the significance of integrating theory with practical application. They valued the chance to produce outputs that have the potential to enhance the lives of disabled individuals within our communities. The application of theoretical frameworks to community engagement initiatives can positively shape how critical disability studies knowledge is perceived and utilized. By encouraging students to consider the practical implications of course concepts on individual and societal levels, we can foster a deeper understanding of the structures that govern social interactions and institutions.

We embrace a shift in evaluation methods, moving away from the traditional confines of exams and essays to embrace project-based assessments. This shift is more than a pedagogical preference; it’s a reflection of our dedication to showcasing and nurturing the ability of our students to enact real-world change, thereby encapsulating the very essence of their academic journey. Next in this article, we showcase a suite of assignments that are emblematic of our unwavering dedication to a pedagogy that is deeply rooted in community collaboration. Through these projects, we underscore our belief that the true measure of academic excellence lies in its capacity to contribute constructively and creatively to society at large.

Cocreated Applied Outputs

Board Games for Community Partners

Initially, we focus on the application of board games as an educational resource within two undergraduate courses: (1) Disability and Aging and (2) Women With Disabilities and Reproductive Health. These specific case studies illuminate the potential of board games, when integrated into coursework, to serve as effective instruments for not only imparting knowledge but also fostering empathy and encouraging engagement with societal issues. Through these examples, we demonstrate how board games can transcend their traditional entertainment role, becoming tools for students’ exploration of complex subjects related to disability and health.

Disability and Aging Course. In his disability and aging course, the first author developed an assignment that involved students working in groups to design board games or activities that were specifically tailored for older adults with disabilities. The primary objective of this board game was to support players in maintaining or developing relevant physical and/or cognitive skills. Students were challenged to think creatively, empathetically, and innovatively to create games that promoted inclusivity and enriched the lives of their players. The board game or activity was to be developed with older adults (age 60 and above) with disabilities in mind. To equip our students with practical expertise, Ali Cada, the director of Adult Day and Creative Programs at the Alzheimer Society of Calgary, graciously conducted a session to impart valuable insights and best practices for devising engaging activities for older adults with physical and/or cognitive impairments. The idea was that, after development in class, board games would actually be shared and used by the organization.

The game had to be accessible and easy to understand, accommodating different levels of physical and cognitive capabilities. Students were expected to consider using large, clear fonts, distinct colors, tactile elements, and other accessibility features. The game was to be designed with the intent to maintain or enhance specific physical and/or cognitive skills relevant to older adults. These skills could include memory, problem-solving, fine motor skills, coordination, or balance. Students had to choose an engaging and appropriate theme for the

board game that would resonate with the target audience. The storyline should be interesting and encourage players to immerse themselves in the game world.

The assignment process was structured to foster both the creation and refinement of the students' board game projects. Students first developed an initial draft of their board game, establishing the groundwork for their ideas and designs. This stage was followed by a peer review phase, where they critiqued and provided feedback on the games devised by their classmates. This collaborative evaluation aimed to offer constructive insights, aiding each group in enhancing their game. Concluding the process, students incorporated the feedback they received and submitted the final draft of their board game. Each step in this sequence was given equal weight in the overall assessment, ensuring that students were evaluated on their ability to innovate, engage, and refine effectively.

As a final outcome, students submitted the board game prototype along with a written report explaining the design process, rationale behind the gameplay mechanics, considerations for accessibility, and the ways the game supports physical and/or cognitive skill development in older adults with disabilities. As the semester concluded, the culmination of our students' efforts was the integration of their assignments into the Alzheimer Society's extensive repertoire of activities, thereby enriching their collection with fresh, innovative concepts. Students spoke often about how knowing that the games would go to an actual community partner motivated them to work extra hard in making the board games relevant and attractive to older adults.

Reproductive Health Resources. In an independent study course titled *Women with Disabilities and Reproductive Health*, the first author worked one-on-one with a critical disability studies undergraduate student. The course's learning objectives were ambitious and multifaceted, aiming to cultivate a nuanced understanding of intersectionality, a deep awareness of the stigmatization faced by women with disabilities in reproductive health, and the ability to discern systemic barriers to equitable health care access.

The collaborative efforts of the two instructors of the independent study—one a sociologist (the first author) and the other a professor from the Obstetrics and

Gynecology department—were pivotal. The course's centerpiece was an assignment that tasked the student with the creation of a board game designed to inform women with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities about reproductive health and, potentially, serve as a tool for health care professionals and family members. The development of the board game was informed by a series of consultations with relevant community organizations, health care professionals, and, crucially, women with disabilities who provided extremely important insights. Disabled women's contributions were particularly valuable, guiding the game's design to ensure it conveyed the most pertinent information in an accessible and engaging manner. In addition, experts from Obstetrics and Gynecology ensured the content's scientific accuracy.

Since the assignment's completion, a prototype board game has been developed to assist women with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities in navigating doctor appointments and improving communication regarding reproductive health matters. Additionally, the course featured an assignment where the student crafted a mini social media campaign directed at health care professionals. One notable creation from this campaign was an infographic designed to educate health care providers on making their offices more accessible to disabled women, encompassing a range of disabilities. This multifaceted assignment not only addressed the course's learning objectives but also exemplified the transformative potential of educational projects that incorporate lived experiences, expert knowledge, and community collaboration to effect change in societal norms and health care practices.

Knowledge Mobilization Assignment: Comic Books

For this assignment, students were tasked with producing a mini comic book, a format that merges visual storytelling with text, to explore and communicate issues pertinent to Mad Studies. Mad Studies is an emergent interdisciplinary field that critically examines how society perceives and interacts with the concept of mental health and madness, challenging the prevailing narratives and power dynamics within psychiatric systems (LeFrançois et al., 2013). It advocates for the rights, voices, and epistemologies of those deemed "mad" by societal standards, pushing for a radical shift in

understanding and practice. This assignment required students to distill complex concepts into a 10-page comic book, complete with a cover, accompanied by a write-up of no more than 250 words. The idea was for students to engage creatively with course material, making scholarly ideas both accessible and compelling. Students were encouraged to use digital resources or hand-drawn methods to craft their comic books, focusing on clarity of message over artistic perfection.

Critical questions posed for the assignment guide students in their creative process: They must decide on the central issue of madness they wish to highlight, avoiding sanist or pathologizing narratives and instead adopting a critical Mad Studies perspective. Character development was key, with consideration for protagonists, potential antagonists, and supporting characters, as well as their motivations and emotional journeys that formed the story arc. These questions not only served to frame the assignment but also to deepen the students' engagement with the core themes of the course. The assessment of the comic books was based on several criteria: the extent to which students engaged with and applied readings and concepts from the course; the demonstration of an understanding of Mad Studies perspectives; the overall quality of the comic book; and the clarity, coherence, and originality of both the visual and written narratives.

The invaluable insights provided by our community partners have been instrumental in shaping the pedagogical strategies we employ to disseminate information within the community effectively. Their recommendations have been not only heard but actively integrated into the development of our course assignments. For instance, the idea of using comic books as a medium for knowledge translation emerged directly from discussions with two of our community partners. These partners highlighted comic books' unique ability to convey complex messages through a blend of visual and textual storytelling, making it an especially engaging and accessible format for diverse audiences. In response, we have embraced this approach, recognizing its potential to democratize information and enhance community engagement. By incorporating these methods into our assignments, our aim was to empower our students to think creatively about knowledge dissemination. The comic

book assignment, in particular, exemplifies this ethos, challenging students to distill academic concepts into a format that is not only educational but also resonant with the broader public. It is a testament to our dedication to fostering a reciprocal learning environment, one where the exchange of ideas between academia and community partners fosters mutual growth and a deeper impact on the community we serve.

Educational Modules for Service Providers

In this assignment, in groups, students were tasked with designing an educational module for service providers. This module was to be centered on mental health but reflect the principles of Mad Studies. The modules were meant to inform, engage, and empower community partners. In addition, they aimed to illuminate the complexities surrounding mental health, focusing on societal attitudes, the nuances of language, and the power of personal narratives. The educational tool developed by the students was designed to be a blend of didactic and interactive elements. Students were encouraged to employ a diverse array of media formats, such as videos, infographics, and hands-on activities. This approach was intended to create an inclusive and accessible learning environment, accommodating various learning styles and preferences.

For the format of this module, students were presented with two options. The first option was a PowerPoint presentation with a maximum of 40 slides. The second option was a workbook in PDF format, capped at 25 pages. Regardless of the chosen format, the module should include several key components: an ice-breaker activity to initiate engagement, clearly stated learning goals in bullet format, detailed content on the subject, interactive learning activities to promote active participation, integration of multimedia elements to enhance understanding, a list of additional helpful resources, and a section for references. This structured approach ensured that the module was both educational and engaging, catering to the diverse needs of the audience.

The module was envisioned to be a comprehensive resource for community partners. It was designed to foster a deeper understanding of mental health issues and support initiatives surrounding these topics. This resource aimed to be more than just informational; it was intended to be a practical tool that community partners can regu-

larly utilize. Based on anecdotal feedback, students expressed a high level of appreciation for the opportunity provided by this assignment. It allowed them to adopt the role of a teacher, which in turn facilitated a deeper self-evaluation of their understanding of the material. More importantly, they valued the chance to create a practical and beneficial resource for the community. This aspect of the assignment not only enhanced their learning experience but also contributed to their sense of accomplishment and community engagement.

Bringing Lived Experience to the Classroom

Faculty in our program see the community, our allies outside the university setting, as integral cocreators of knowledge and learning opportunities. We recognize and actively center the expertise of those with lived and living experience. The second author takes an approach to curriculum development and assessment design that involves those with expertise in the choice of topics and methods of assessment in undergraduate courses. Our larger department has granted special funding for compensating guest speakers with lived experience. In practice, the contributions of community collaborators with lived experience go beyond guest talks. In a course on Mad Studies, for example, one self-advocate from the antipsychiatry movement, a psychiatrist identifying as a Mad ally, a family support person for an adult identifying as Mad, and a community support worker and author with living experience were consulted on course content. It was collaboratively decided that students would be required to read about the position of each community contributor in the Mad movement in Canada. Students then engaged with content recommended by community contributors, such as peer-reviewed articles; legislation (e.g., The Alberta's Mental Health Act); and advocacy writing and media items such as social media threads, podcasts, and editorials. Once the prereading and background research had been completed by the students and monitored by the course instructor through weekly discussion posts online, community contributors joined a panel in a 2-hour class session. Students were required to ask informed questions prepared ahead of time and note the responses of the panelists. The following week students were asked to report on their own learnings, their personal reflections and experiences with the material, and the panel

event. Students were graded on their preparation and their reflexivity, including newly formed responses to mainstream mental health campaigns and treatment strategies.

The intention of this assignment was to guide students through a transformational, critical learning experience. Although a simple guest talk might have been impactful, the choice of background readings, the active centering and recognition of lived and living expertise, and the bridging of Mad Studies theory to community activism and praxis provided unique mentoring opportunities and models of change-making for students hoping to effect systemic change.

Alternatives to Traditional Capstone Projects

Our faculty members' programs of research are often transdisciplinary in nature, and we welcome opportunities to supervise students outside critical disability studies. Positive social impact and systems change is central to our supervisory roles, and we intend for all our students, even those at the undergraduate level, to not only learn from our community collaborators but to actively contribute to disability-justice-focused work with equity-deserving groups. The term "equity-deserving groups" refers to groups that face systemic discrimination and inequality that prevent access to resources and opportunities often available to other social groups (Government of Canada, 2022; these groups may also be called equity-denied groups or equity-seeking groups). This particular term importantly "highlights the fact that equity should be achieved from a systemic, cultural or societal change and the burden of seeking equity should not be placed on the group" (Government of Canada, 2022, Notes). Our commitment to creating social change is not only an abstract idea or a "nice-to-have," but an integral aspect in our consideration of research outputs.

Students tasked with producing traditional research papers for their capstone projects are also expected to invest time in developing outputs collaboratively designed with the community. The second author's extensive research into the experiences and needs of community collaborators and students has yielded several key principles for creating collaborative, impactful student work. Paramount among these principles is the cultivation of relationships among supervisors, students, and community

partners. Regular meetings with the research team, which include students and faculty, nurture connections and provide an enjoyable, relaxed environment for peer and faculty support. These sessions often spark creative ideas for research outputs, with more experienced students guiding their junior counterparts. Additionally, weekly meetings that include community partners reinforce these bonds and maintain open communication channels. It's crucial to continually address the design of meaningful capstone outputs in these discussions, integrating this focus into the course timeline. Community collaborators and students may not be familiar with designing impactful capstone outputs, so this goal must be intentionally mentioned at each meeting and worked into course timelines.

The community-engaged capstone approach has catalyzed a range of impactful initiatives. For instance, public policy students, working in close collaboration with self-advocates and relevant organizations, crafted a survey to gauge the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on individuals with disabilities. The resulting survey, made accessible through translation into plain language, served not only as an instrument for community dialogue and media outreach but also as a cornerstone for the students' theses.

In another project centered on food security, students leveraged insights from families directly affected by the issue, resulting in both noteworthy theses and essential documents now utilized by a collective of food security organizations to drive policy and systemic change. These students further extended their impact by disseminating their findings at a community event, thereby engaging with stakeholders and the general public.

Currently, two health sciences undergraduates are deeply invested in an inclusive research project, working in partnership with coresearchers who have intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. Although their capstone requirements were initially limited to simple data collection, the students have committed 2 years to nurturing meaningful relationships with their coresearchers. Their collaborative work is expected to yield a comprehensive set of best practices and educational resources that will support inclusive research endeavors across community and academic settings.

The implementation of this dual-focused assessment and assignment strategy can be quite challenging for both supervisors and students. Confronted with the conventional constraints of capstone projects at many universities, students are required to deliver a thesis that satisfies the rigorous criteria of honors-level academic work within certain time constraints. Students who choose to incorporate community engagement into their thesis work must navigate the complexities of in-depth collaborations with community partners. These partnerships often operate on timelines that do not align neatly with university schedules, presenting additional challenges for students to manage alongside their academic expectations. Although this multifaceted process is intricate and time-intensive, students typically find it enriching and are made aware of these additional demands at the beginning of their capstone projects.

Community Impact: Tangible Benefits of Community-Engaged Assignments

The assignments in our critical disability studies program are designed not only to enhance student learning but also to generate meaningful, concrete benefits for the community. By centering the needs and expertise of community partners in the design and implementation of these projects, the assignments produce outputs that address real-world challenges while fostering collaboration between students, faculty, and community members.

For example, the board games developed in the Disability and Aging course were integrated into the Alzheimer Society's programming, offering accessible and engaging resources that promote cognitive and physical engagement for older adults with disabilities. These games filled gaps in the organization's activities, aligning with their mission to foster social connection and skill retention. Similarly, the independent study project on reproductive health produced a board game and infographic that empower women with developmental and intellectual disabilities to better navigate health care settings. By addressing communication barriers and inaccessible information, these resources created practical solutions for both patients and providers, enhancing inclusivity in health care practices.

The comic books created in the Mad Studies course transformed complex academic concepts into accessible visual narratives. Shared

with advocacy groups and community partners, these outputs have been used to educate the public and spark conversations about mental health, amplifying awareness and challenging societal perceptions. Additionally, the educational modules designed by students for service providers have been adopted for staff training and client engagement. By incorporating multimedia elements, interactive activities, and accessibility principles, these modules offer practical tools to address challenges identified by community partners, advancing the quality of service delivery.

Across these examples, the community impact of our assignments is clear: They provide organizations with innovative tools, fill resource gaps, and amplify the voices and needs of marginalized groups. By ensuring that the outputs of these projects are both relevant and actionable, we uphold a commitment to reciprocity in our partnerships. Our approach to community-engaged learning not only equips students with the skills to address complex societal issues but also creates lasting benefits for the communities we serve, demonstrating the transformative potential of academic-community collaboration.

Lessons Learned

As we reflect on our efforts to integrate community-engaged pedagogy into a critical disability studies curriculum, we recognize both successes and areas for growth. These lessons provide valuable insights for educators looking to adopt similar approaches and ensure continuous improvement in their practices.

Balancing Academic and Community Expectations

One of the ongoing challenges is managing the alignment between academic timelines and the often slower, relational pace of community work. Community partners may require more time to review or implement student-generated outputs, which can conflict with rigid university schedules. To address this issue, we have begun implementing more flexible timelines for deliverables and emphasizing the importance of patience and adaptability to our students.

Supporting Students in Navigating Emotional Labor

The deeply relational nature of these assignments often involves emotionally charged topics, such as systemic inequities or lived

experiences of discrimination. These experiences enhance learning; however, they can also create emotional labor for students. We are working to incorporate more robust supports, such as dedicated check-ins and mental health resources, to ensure that students feel prepared and supported as they engage in these meaningful, but sometimes challenging, assignments.

Strengthening Partnerships Through Reciprocity

Although our partnerships with community organizations are strong, we recognize the need for more structured mechanisms to ensure reciprocity. Students benefit from learning opportunities, but ensuring that community partners consistently derive tangible benefits requires ongoing dialogue. For example, we are exploring postcourse evaluations for partners to gather feedback and identify areas where the outputs could better align with their needs.

Expanding Accessibility and Inclusivity

Accessibility is a cornerstone of our pedagogical philosophy; therefore, we continually strive to refine and expand our approach. Students may have varying levels of familiarity with accessibility principles, which can result in outputs that require further refinement. Providing detailed guidance and examples of accessible design early in the course has emerged as a strategy to ensure high-quality outputs.

Creating Opportunities for Reflection

Lastly, we have found that structured opportunities for reflection deepen student learning but can be inconsistently implemented across assignments. Moving forward, we will incorporate mandatory reflection exercises, such as journaling or peer discussions, to help students critically evaluate their experiences and articulate the connections between theory and practice.

Building Faculty Capacity

Faculty engaged in community-based pedagogy often require additional time and resources to manage partnerships and mentor students. This work is rewarding but also labor-intensive, and institutions must recognize and support it. We advocate for workload adjustments and professional development opportunities to ensure faculty can sustain their commitment to this approach without experiencing burnout.

Building Transferable Skills

More importantly, by embedding research skills, evidence-based practices, and collaborative methodologies into the core of critical disability studies education, we prepare students to enter the workforce as not only thinkers and analysts but as active agents of change. These skills—such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration—are transferable across sectors and essential for addressing complex social issues in diverse settings.

Our approach instills in students the capacity to navigate interdisciplinary challenges, engage with stakeholders, and implement solutions that are both context-specific and scalable. For example, the ability to design accessible resources, such as board games or educational modules, fosters adaptability in fields ranging from health care to community advocacy. The integration of lived experiences into project design also prepares students to lead with empathy and inclusivity, traits increasingly valued in industries prioritizing equity, diversity, and inclusion. Moreover, the emphasis on knowledge translation and communication ensures that students can effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice, making academic insights actionable and impactful in real-world contexts. This pedagogical model not only contributes to their professional readiness but also empowers them to serve as catalysts for systemic change in their communities and beyond.

Conclusion

By discussing our classroom experiences and sharing examples of course assignments, this article underscores the transformative power of academic learning when merged with community collaboration. It is within this innovative educational space that we see Paulo Freire's vision of liberatory pedagogy come to life, as our students engage in praxis, applying the theories from their classrooms to the lived experiences of disabled people in the community. Our role as educators in this process is not just to transmit knowledge, but to facilitate the

creation of new understandings through partnerships that both challenge systemic inequities and center the voices of disabled individuals.

The case studies presented in this article reflect a deep commitment to an educational philosophy that views knowledge not as a static entity but as a dynamic force for social change. By integrating practicum hours and fostering critical engagement with course concepts, we have seen students evolve into not only scholars but also advocates and allies to the disability community. Their work, exemplified by assignments like the creation of board games and comic books, not only serves educational purposes but also functions as a medium for creating more social awareness and igniting new discussions among service providers and community organizations.

Reflecting on our pedagogical approaches, we recognize the imperative to continuously adapt and respond to the evolving needs of both our students and our community partners. Our program stands as a testament to the belief that the ultimate measure of our success as educators lies in our ability to equip students with the tools to become architects of change and to do so by working with communities. This collaboration is the true essence of a critical disability studies program—one that is deeply woven into the fabric of community, activism, and the pursuit of a more just society.

As we look forward, we hope that the reflections shared in this article will spark conversations and inspire other programs to continue reflecting on the nexus of academia and activism. The journey of bridging the gap between theory and practice is ongoing, and we are committed to contributing to this collective endeavor, always striving to enhance the impact of our work both within and beyond the university walls. It is our hope that the dialogues initiated through our case studies will continue to resonate, fostering a future where inclusive, community-driven education becomes the norm rather than the exception.



Declaration of Interest

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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