Simulation in Disability Studies: A Didactic Proposal

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I define and discuss a type of learning activity for Disability Studies where the student is invited to experiment aspects of disability in the flesh. Disability simulation activities consist of punctual participation in specific social environments as a disabled person, or in ways which allow to experience disability and reflect about it. Disability simulations can be understood as an experientialist didactic strategy. Contemporary 'experientialism' in education broadly refers to views and practices which involve (1) getting out of the classroom and (2) learning through engaging in activity; sometimes they mesh together these two elements in a diffuse way [1].

Seaman et al. [2] locate the inaugural practice of experiential learning in the action research developed by Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt and other applied social psychologists, where they collaborated with practitioners in trainings involving the self-evaluation and discussion of small group processes [3]. Ozar [4] provided an operational definition of 'experientialism' as encompassing learning designs that introduce a moment or phase of 'reflection' connected to some practical activity in real life. This notion coheres with David Kolb's model, which defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" [5].

Kolb proposes that a learning process occurs in a four-step cycle: Concrete experience leads to reflective observation; observation leads to abstract conceptualization, which leads to active experimentation in new situations; experimentation then leads the learner to another concrete experience (looping back to a next iteration). The reliance of this model on Piaget's genetic epistemology is explicit. The model itself can generally be seen as a theoretical contribution to psychological constructivism.

Disability simulation activities consist of learning activities designed to make non-disabled learners experience select aspects of having a disability. They incorporate, by definition, a problematic feature: You simulate being somebody you are not and experiencing something you do not habitually experience. In that sense, disability simulations are partially limited: they can never capture the experiences of impairment and ableism with their genuine essential properties.

Disability simulation activities can provide the student with opportunities to understand and describe the barriers encountered by people with disabilities; to think about how the environment can be changed; to experience the attitudes addressed at them by others during the activity. Ultimately, simulations should change the students' attitudes towards disability and disabled people, increase feelings of empathy and improve the understanding of the first-person disability experience. These motives and purposes align with experientialist pedagogy and fit well with the sequence proposed in Kolb's [5] model: The student can reflect about the observations made during the experience, focusing on environmental barriers and on the responses perceived from other people. These reflections are meant to modify attitudes and feelings, as a process of consolidation of learning that involves both cognitive and emotional change.

The most typical disability simulation consists of moving around in a wheelchair. The second most popular one involves doing activities or moving around blindfolded. In my teaching of courses on Disability I have developed other variations of simulations, to give students the chance to reflect on aspects of communicative and cognitive impairment. These simulations require the student to think or behave in a different way, associated to some characteristic impairments. For example, we can instruct the student to delay every move or action for a few seconds, forcing them to behave and experience activities with slowness and delay; or we can require them to remain silent through social situations.

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2. STUDENT REPORTS ON DISABILITY SIMULATIONS

The empirical contribution of this paper consists of an analysis of a sample of student reports from four Disability simulation designs: (1) moving around in a wheelchair; (2) doing activities or moving around with a blindfold; (3) delaying every action or move for a few seconds; (4) and remaining in silence for a period of time. I analyzed 17 reports from each of the four designs (a total of 68 reports), using the qualitative research software MaxQDA©. For all of them, I codified and analyzed all text referring to three topics relevant to reflection and learning from simulation. These three elements are key to the process of reflecting from direct experience and to the analysis of disability in context:

- Text describing or discussing **accommodations** during the simulation.
- Text describing or discussing the **reactions of other persons** (not students doing the simulation) during the simulation.
- Text summing up what the **student has learnt** from the experience.

3. FINAL REFLECTIONS AND WAYS FORWARD

From my general experience developing disability simulations and the brief analysis of a sample of student reports from these activities, I would highlight the following conclusions and suggestions for future development:

- Disability simulations effectively contribute to experientialist learning by providing opportunities for awareness, reflection and feeling about a specific practice in context, and for learning from that cognitive and emotional experience. They work in ways similar to the interventions by Lippit and others [3] where the examination of the learner's own activity becomes the object of sociological analysis. On top of that, disability simulations provide opportunities to reflect about psychological processes related to the organization of functional activity and the articulation of human competence in context.

- Reporting in written form is fundamental to disability simulations and other experientialist activities, as it requires articulating thought in the conventional language of the discipline and speaking to an audience in a process that allows for the revision and gradual improvement of a text.

- We should care to prevent the risk of orienting disability simulations to the 'exotification' or mystification of disability. Much of the text analyzed in the former section tends toward this attitude, which is contrary to the social model perspective. The purpose of activity and reflection should be to understand functionality and social interaction in context, rather than magnifying or admiring the properties or human values associated to impairment.

4. REFERENCES

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