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Recommended Citation

Summers, Tammi (2008). "Teaching Adults with Disabilities in the Postsecondary Setting: Examining the Experiences of Faculty Members," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2008/papers/63>

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Teaching Adults with Disabilities in the Postsecondary Setting: Examining the Experiences of Faculty Members

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Keywords: disabilities, adults, postsecondary, faculty experiences, phenomenology

Abstract: This phenomenological investigation explores the essence of postsecondary faculty experiences teaching adults with disabilities. Twelve participants revealed how their positive and negative experiences impacted their teaching practices and resulted in specific disability dilemmas.

Adults with disabilities are a valuable untapped resource, viewed at times as helpless and incapable of high academic achievement and employment. In today's society, their human potential as contributing and intelligent citizens still needs to be fully recognized, nurtured, and developed. The fullest realization of their potential requires an investment of time and effort on the part of all educators. Currently there are more than fifty-four million Americans living with a disability, representing about 20% of the U.S. population and nearly half of these individuals have a severe disability affecting their ability to see, hear, walk or perform other basic functions of life (New Freedom Initiative, 2001). The importance of providing quality education options in higher education for adults with disabilities can have long lasting implications. Sitlington (2003) reports that three to five years after high school, 27% of students with disabilities, as opposed to 68% of students without disabilities, attend some form of postsecondary education. Although increasing numbers of professors are encountering students with disabilities in their classroom, training opportunities to learn how to meet the needs of students with special needs are lacking in many colleges and universities (Fichten & others, 1990, p. 2).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of postsecondary education faculty members who have taught adult learners with disabilities. This study on disabilities experiences encompasses those seen and unseen by the faculty member. Disability categories that involve learning, attention, as well as physical impairments related to vision, hearing and mobility have been included. This study further explored and examined the specific meanings developed from these lived experiences and gain insight into how faculty members responded and felt about the experience. It was also important that this research provided an understanding of how college faculty viewed their role as instructors working with adults who have learning difficulties, physical impairments, and psychological disorders. The following major research questions were developed for the study:

- (1) How do faculty members describe their lived experiences teaching adults with disabilities in the postsecondary education setting? a) What was most significant about their teaching experiences and; b) What meaning did faculty members make of their experiences as it related to their teaching practices?
- (2) What positive or negative experiences have postsecondary faculty had with providing accommodations, modifying instructional practices, classroom structure, and establishing communication with adult students with disabilities?

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework for this research project uses Stephen Brookfield's (1995) Critical Reflection Process. This model examines the experiences of post-secondary faculty teaching adults with disabilities and how they see their practices in new ways by standing outside themselves and viewing what they do for students with disabilities through four distinct lenses. This model involves four critically reflective lenses: (1) personal autobiographies as teachers and learners, (2) seeing ourselves from the student perspective and understanding, (3) colleagues' experiences, and (4) theoretical literature. There are multiple assumptions made in higher education regarding faculty teaching adults with disabilities. First, students are viewed as not having the academic ability to complete required work. Second, adult students with disabilities use their disabled status as an excuse or crutch. Third, providing accommodations to students with disabilities alters or significantly changes the content of the course or program. These assumptions made by faculty members need to be challenged and explored in greater depth in order to truly understand the lived experiences of faculty members. This research project sought to examine these areas by using Brookfield's Critical Reflection Process in an effort to elicit the details behind these faculty assumptions.

Research Design

In order to truly capture this lived experience, the qualitative research approach of phenomenology was employed in order to study human behavior, explore reflection, and personal experiences. In this case, not only understanding the phenomenon of teaching adults with disabilities but also gaining insight into what meaning faculty members gained from the teaching experience and about themselves, thus leading to critical reflection. This investigation combined critical reflection, meaning development, and phenomenological procedures in order to gather information on the lived experiences of faculty members and the researcher. The target population included faculty members of colleges and universities located in the state of Wisconsin. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to locate and select 12 postsecondary faculty members who had personally taught adults with disabilities within the last three-five years. Research participants took part in two 60-90 minute interviews related to their personal teaching experiences. Seeking vivid, accurate, and comprehensive portrayals of what these experiences were like for faculty members (i.e., their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) a critical Incident Questionnaire was administered which asked participants to identify one positive or negative event or happening pertaining to adults with disabilities in a postsecondary setting.

The data analysis process began with the researcher providing a full description of her own experience with the phenomenon of teaching adults with disabilities, this concept is known as Epoche. Second, the process of bracketing and horizontalization was employed in order to organize the data and reduce the information collected (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). Themes that emerge were graphically organized into concept maps and supported by individual narrative descriptions and statements. Segments of participants' statements were used to develop the textual and structural descriptions and further supported with the critical incidents questionnaires.

Essential Themes

The experience of teaching adults with disabilities was placid or easygoing for some participants while others considered it an "on edge encounter" pushing them at times to respond "what should I do now?" For the participants in this study, the essence of teaching this group of

adult learners essentially fell into three categories: Discovery of Disability, Realization & Reality, and finally Reaction and Results. Within these categories of experiences, participants discussed how they were delighted, challenged, uncomfortable, and perplexed by the disability situations they had experienced over the last three to five years. The participants were reflective on both the positive and negative experiences they had with teaching adults with disabilities and how it impacted their own instructional abilities and beliefs. The most significant findings reveal three major themes that encompassed the entire disability experience.

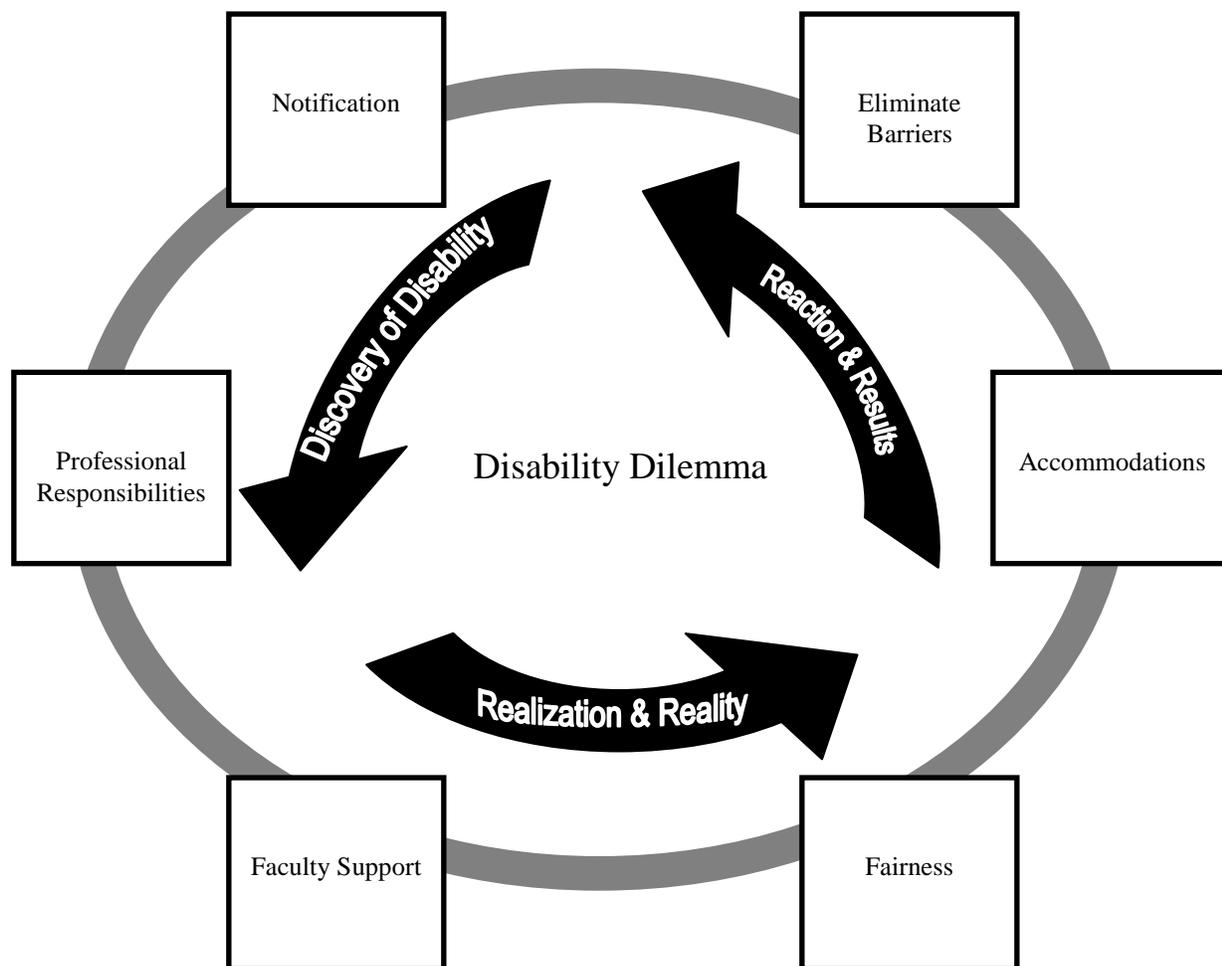


Figure 1. Significant faculty experiences and major dilemmas

Disability Discovery

There was a reaction of surprise and disappointment for some faculty, when students were not willing to reveal their disability or learning troubles until they were close to failing the class. For these study participants, detection and notification of a student with a disability occurred ultimately in one of three ways; in person or revealed by the student, identification through the disabilities services office, or not revealed at all. Discovery of the disability for the faculty participants raised the question of “Ok what does the student need for me to do?” While not being viewed as giving special treatment or be resentful about the possibility of additional work. During this stage of reflection faculty members felt uncertain about the unknown, a sense

of responsibility, as well as pressure to verify or uncover what the student's needs were. Once the discovery or revelation was made that a student with a disability was in the class, it was rarely described as an encouraging and enlightening experience to grow and learn from by the faculty member. A willingness to provide accommodations in the eyes of these participants was considered the beginning stage of acceptance and sensitivity to adult learners who have physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges in learning.

Realization and Reality

Study participants delighted in the possibility that faculty development and training sessions on disability issues at the postsecondary level could possibly be addressed and deal with the struggles they face in the classroom setting. Most participants had a strong desire for their respective institutions to offer more in depth training about teaching adults with disabilities. After reflecting on their own personal experiences, they realize now how a lack of understanding and disability awareness can seriously impact a student's success in the school environment. In addition, this self-reflection prompted faculty members to examine their own insecurities and limitations as a teacher.

The experience of working with adults with disabilities in the classroom was for this group of faculty unnerving, difficult, and rewarding experience all blended together. Many times the participants had done some reflective analysis about what happened in their experience with the disabled before participating in this study. Nearly all the participants indicated that personal responsibility, willingness to seek out professional growth opportunities, and consistent training on how to teach and work with people who have different learning, physical, and emotional needs is unfortunately lacking in their current postsecondary structure. Also, most of the faculty indicated that they had learned about the disabled from personal contact outside of the classroom environment. For example, the majority of the participants indicated that by way of family and friends who were disabled or they themselves had worked with the disabled in a work setting or community. This contributed to their knowledge base related to the disabled. The reality for many participants was that they felt uncertain and concerned that their peers would view them as "inept" for not knowing what to do with students who are disabled.

Reaction and Results

A significant number of the faculty experiences in this study resulted in some type of action being taken on the part of the faculty member or the student. These faculty participants often struggled with the idea of what was the appropriate action to be taken and whether or not the student completed the class with a passing grade, turned in assignments, and completed all projects and tests. According to this group of participants, success most times remained solely on the student and the faculty member simply complied with the Americans with Disabilities Act and institution's expectation of providing accommodations. Many faculty members were challenged with the internal dilemma they faced with providing accommodations. Often they were not always confident that these changes met the student's academic or physical needs. In addition, they faced the difficulty of how to resolve this ethical conflict within themselves regarding the additional assistive tools or aides afforded to the student.

The experience of providing testing accommodations was unpredictable for many faculty, the details on when and how a test was given and who was responsible for proctoring an exam when given in another location. If the disability was physical, in most cases the participants could rationalize and accept the disability and begin making changes. However, for students

with disabilities that were considered unseen, most faculty members felt unsure about how to best serve the student with attention deficit, learning difficulties or memory loss, and emotional problems. Some participants clearly made sweeping changes to their curriculum and teaching style where as others only made minimal adjustments to what they did in the classroom for all learners. Many times faculty reported having the feeling of “did I do enough or should I have been doing something else to make this student more successful in class?” This internal struggle faced by faculty members along with the rationale of who should be responsible for student learning, this group of participants felt rested solely on the student.

Findings and Conclusions

The data from this research study indicated the following: First, faculty members describe their experiences with teaching adults with disabilities as “worrisome, distressing, enlightening, and eye-opening.” For some participants, these were their first experiences teaching adults with disabilities for other participants, they had previous students, relatives, or friends with disabilities. What was described as most significant was the professors’ willingness to be helpful and sensitive to the students’ needs. However, maintaining academic integrity and rigor in the curriculum and content expectations was a significant challenge. Second, all of the participants were reflective about their attitudes, feelings and personal responses to the situation; however, a large number of the participants were not critically reflective as defined by Stephen Brookfield. Most participants were just in the early stages of personal reflection and had not proceeded to the level of being critically reflective of their own abilities as a teacher and how that impacts significantly on what they do in the classroom. However, the researcher did discover that regardless of the extent of the disability experience, all participants encountered what has been defined as “Disability Response & Action.” These responses and actions in most cases were the result of some “Disability Dilemma” that had occurred during their personal teaching experience. Finally, participants also shared in detail their positive or negative critical incidents that involved providing accommodations, academic advising, modifying instructional practices, classroom structure, and establishing communication with students with disabilities.

Implications for Adult Education and Students with Disabilities

The findings from this research project reveal the importance of postsecondary institutions notifying faculty that a student with a disability will be in their class. This study suggests that notification and communication that a student with a disability was in a specific class was inconsistent and if written notification was given most times it was not helpful, due to the vagueness of the information provided. Results from this study offer suggestions for how faculty members contemplate and examine their own behaviors and teaching practices. Based upon the results of this study in-depth personal reflection took place occasionally for some faculty as a response to having a student with a disability. However, the issue still remains that many postsecondary faculty are trained to be experts in a specific discipline and not grounded in the theories and practices associated with teaching and learning. Findings from this study also indicate the need for faculty to be able to converse and learn from their peers about how other educators have addressed the needs of students with disabilities in the postsecondary setting. Because postsecondary faculty in most cases teach independently within the classroom setting, they do not have the opportunity to socially learn and view the work of other colleagues who may have had a similar disability related experience. Social learning theory as explained by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) involves learning occurring through observation and within a

social setting. None of the participants in this study indicated that they consulted or observed how other faculty members provided support to students with disabilities. Finally, this research study also supports the importance of self-advocacy skills for both students with disabilities and faculty members. Several inferences can be made about a student's willingness to request disability accommodations in a timely matter. The findings in this study indicate that faculty members would prefer and appreciate if students came to them early in the semester with their accommodation requests. Faculty indicated that students waiting until the last minute could possibly indicate that there were other challenges that the student faced, fear of being rejected and judged, made to feel stupid or dumb in front of their peers, or the possibility of failure in the class. These described experiences suggest that researchers should explore further the question of why students have such a fear of identifying themselves and their disability needs to their professors.

Possible benefits include adding new information about personal experiences and critical reflection for faculty members to the body of knowledge in the fields of Adult Education and Disability Studies. In addition, theorizing about why more attention has not been placed on the importance of self-advocacy skills, motivation on the part of both students with disabilities and faculty members. Finally, postsecondary institutions can use these results to develop faculty development programs, and strategies for training faculty on disability issues.

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