

Storying Neurodiversity: Critical Reflections Through Field Education

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Paula Crockford:

Welcome to Storying Neurodiversity: Critical Reflections Through Field Education. Hello, my name is Paula and I am speaking to you today from Bracebridge; traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee Peoples where I am grateful to harmoniously live.

Sarah Leo:

My name is Sarah and I am here in Grand Valley, which is situated on the Haldimand Tract, land promised to the Haudenosaunee people of the Six Nations, which includes six miles on each side of the Grand River. This territory is the traditional territory of the Neutral or Attawandaron, Anishnaabeg and Haudenosaunee Peoples. The home institution for this project, the University of Waterloo, is also situated on the Haldimand Tract.

Meg Gibson:

And I'm Meg, or Margaret, speaking from Tkaronto, the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Haudenosaunee, and the Huron-Wendat, where I am grateful to live and work.

Paula:

Sarah, what is the Neurodiversity Matters Project?

Sarah:

Yeah, so the Neurodiversity Matters project is a research study about the way people use the language and ideas of “neurodiversity”. We do this by learning through interviews with people who have lived and professional experiences with neurodiversity language and ideas, as well as observing selected public events and examining texts to explore the different ways the terms and ideas of neurodiversity are being used. So, within this project, I am an apprenticeship student. So I was an apprenticeship student from September until December 2020 and I had the chance to acquire research skills and learn a lot about the research process, especially within the Neurodiversity Matters project. And now I am a research assistant.

Paula:

So I'm Paula. My role in the project was a student, basically to learn about neurodiversity through observation of interviews, conferences, and through discourse analysis of academic articles and books. Also to reflect on research methodologies of ethnographic observation, institutional ethnography, and discourse analysis. And I would also say to learn through discussion with my peers through team meetings.

Meg:

Okay. And I'm Meg again, and I'm the principal investigator for the project, which means that I kind of coordinate what everybody is doing with the research. I also coordinate with the co-investigators and the collaborators on the project and the grant. I manage the funds, and in a field instructor context, I'm also, I was Paula's field instructor for her MSW placement and Sarah's instructor for research apprenticeship course through Social Development Studies.

Meg:

I think we were going to move to talking about your story next. Is that where we're at? Okay. So what inspired you as you created this digital story about the project?

Paula:

There was a lot that went into this digital story. I thought, okay, this digital story is two minutes long, it's not going to take me that long to do. And then, when I started to do it, it actually took me almost a month to complete it because, as I was doing it, I was constantly reflecting on the themes that came up throughout, throughout the learning in the project. And then I thought, okay, I'm just going to have a conversation because conversation was really important to me. So I used what I felt was really decolonizing for myself and I thought, I'm going to have, I'm going to create this digital story so that I can present themes. Not that they're good or that they're bad, just so that people can have a conversation about them. So you know, I present themes like, you know, is neurodiversity a social construct, or is it a natural evolution? Is it a diagnosis or an identity? It can be both, and both can be viewed as positive, both can be viewed as negative. The main thing is, who decides what construct is more important than another? You know, especially around a neurological gift or an atypical pathology. I, I think about critical disability here and I think, you know, who decides these things? And, what do, what do all of these constructs mean to me? I really had to reflect on what they actually mean to me and from my point of view, I've kind of landed in a place that they have equal value because it just depends on what situation you're in. So, you know, participants would bring up this often, you know diagnosis. Diagnosis can be of a benefit to people, but it can also become a pathologizing identity in a particular context, if that's how society views neurodiversity. However, it can also be interpreted as a gift, and I really feel that the gifts of neurodiversity provide innovation.

Meg:

Thanks Paula. Paula, I was just wondering if you had anything else you wanted to say, also about connections between indigenous ideas or decolonial concepts and the film.

Paula:

I think you know, looking at the gifts as strengths are very important. They go along with, you know, balance, I think in the medicine wheel. You know, you're looking for strength in people instead of honing in on their deficits. Because honing in on deficits is very colonial, it's pathologizing, well it's demoralizing. This film is just meant to have a conversation with others, but also with yourself to reflect on, how do I view these particular concepts? What are my biases with these concepts? What do I value with

these particular concepts? As an indigenous person myself, sometimes in education myself, I feel that, you know, I have course outcomes. And I need to reflect on course outcomes and that is the goal and that is the agenda. And yes, I understand that I need to do that because I'm in a learning environment, but I also need to be able to have open conversations without judgement. So, I think perhaps this film is, is a bit of my learning journey and a bit of my western views and my indigenous views kind of merging together in this particular film because it isn't about power, it's about conversation. Research methodology of conversation is so empowering to me...

Sarah:

I also wanted to ask Paula. Sorry I didn't mean to interrupt. Paula, I was just wanted to say, a lot of the themes you were just talking about apply directly to yourself. Like you're talking about the empowerment and how people have a lot of knowledge to share. And you've done exactly that through your digital story. And that to me is very inspiring. The fact that you can have this sort of knowledge amalgamated into something that can be shared to everyone and interpreted in having this conversation. Like, I wish I could do something like that, maybe in the future, that means that much to me and that I can share with the world.

Paula:

It, it's a very empowering, self reflective process. I, I still look at the film and I'm still thinking about the themes of the film. I'm still thinking about creating it. I'm still thinking, okay, I was in a research project with you, Meg, and the digital story was not part of my learning goals, like we didn't decide that I was going to create a digital story. I came to you and I asked if I could, and you said yes! And, I find that decolonizing in and of itself because I came to you and I said, you know, I would like to do this. I understand that it's, you know, not particularly part of our project. You agreed, and it has, I think it's actually, you know, it really sums up what I have learned in my particular project so it's kind of come full circle. I am so happy to be have, to have been able to embark, like it's a journey, it was a journey for me. That's why it took a month for me to create this story. Yes, you can write a reflection in the black and white in APA style, and yes, it is very important for us to be able to do that. In future though, I am going to be leaning on more creative forms of reflection. Which I actually have done, I just, I created a model of Indigenous Centered Clinical Supervision because I couldn't find one. So, I think that creating this particular story made me realise that I can do these kinds of things and they are important in practice. So I'm grateful for that.

Meg:

That's great.

Sarah:

Yeah, it's great to think about too, how the, the knowledge that you're transferring through your story is also in a very subjective manner, like we've been talking about. This entire project has been done subjectively and this story just ties in perfectly with that whole structure.

Meg:

And you have generously, you know, allowed us with the project to share your story, so this will actually reach a lot more people probably, than most of the research articles that we come up with, right? So one of the things that I really appreciate about, you know, both of you actually as students is that you're both very creative and you have skills in visual arts that I do not at all and I'm very word centered. And it's really been a huge benefit to me to work with students who remind me that there are things other than words. There's things other than reading and writing, and that they are hugely valuable and effective.

Sarah:

There's a lot of personal reflection going on. For me personally, I've had a lot of opportunity to personally reflect on myself and, where I position myself within this project or where I position myself within the world honestly. My goal has always been to get into the MSW and now I'm here, and now I'm like okay now what? So my experience with this project has really helped me to just start thinking beyond that and what I can really accomplish and achieve beyond that goal itself. And even going into the MSW and, the kinds of mentalities that I know a lot of my peers are going to have. There's going to be a lot of people who want to get into ABA, or people who want to go into those fields and that's going to have to be okay for them right? But for me, that's not something I would want, and so, and just being able to set those boundaries for myself and understanding that the communities I want to work with are going to be the ones with the voices and the power and I'm just going to be there to help in whatever way I can. So I guess, that's, that's what I wanted to say.

Paula:

I don't know if there's anything else I can add other than, I'm grateful.

Sarah:

Oh yes.

Paula:

I'm really grateful to have been a part of this process. I mean, I was thinking coming into my field education, okay so we're going to have some learning goals, and I'm going to achieve these learning goals and I'm going to, you know, this is how we're going to achieve them. It, it was, you know, task oriented and I have found that, I have learned so much more than the task at hand. You know, I've learned that, I learn really well in an equitable environment. I have blossomed in that particular environment. I don't know if I would have been able to have the confidence to create a film such as this if I didn't have this particular environment and focus on conversations within my field, you know, field education with you Meg. Because I, it's really, this type, this film is really outside the box of my typical experience in academia, but it's not outside the box in my philosophy as an indigenous person. But when I come into education in a western institution and I'm kind of expected I think, to you know, produce and to act and to be a certain way. It was very liberating to do something like this. And I've, I've used it again and again and it's part of my conversations now all the time.

Meg:

That's awesome. Oh, I didn't expect this to be like, so extensive, and you know, I'm, I'm, actually really feeling a huge sense of gratitude around this conversation as well and around the opportunity to work with both of you.