



Promoting Accessibility and Adding Value to Social Work Education

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Author(s):	<i>Irene Carter, Donald Leslie and Brent Angell</i>
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Irene Carter, Donald Leslie and Brent Angell

Introduction

With significant support from the School of Social Work, the Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada was initiated in September 2008. It offered the first full-time Honours Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies program in Canada. The program addresses the desire to confront existing oppression and the need to produce graduates with expertise in many areas relevant to this goal. Its courses help social work students enrich their education about disability and heighten their capacity to work effectively in the areas of disability policy, accessibility, and service delivery.

The authors discuss the critical and interdisciplinary nature of disability studies by highlighting the involvement of social work in the development of the University of Windsor Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program. As such, the professional discipline of social work and the interdisciplinary area of disability studies present as vital partners in developing a programmatic synergy focused on the study of disability. Both social work and disability studies promote respect for individuality, dignity, acceptance, self-determination, and empowerment. The authors posit that social work should strengthen its long-standing interdisciplinary approach by embracing disability studies to meet the increasing societal demand for the inclusion of those with disabilities into the larger culture.

Background

The establishment of an interdisciplinary disability studies program was driven by the diversity that existed in the local community and the government's human-rights approach. People with disabilities, the disability community, and the uni-

versity's focus on social justice were also influential. The social model of disability, which is integral to the program's philosophy, was adopted to ensure a collective commitment to social justice and accessibility, and to reflect the right of individuals with disabilities to be free of oppression and included as full participants in society.

Rates of Canadians with disabilities rose from 12.4% (Statistics Canada, 2001) to 14.3% (Statistics Canada, 2008) indicating the increasing necessity for educational institutions to address the needs of persons with disabilities. Legislation laid the foundation for the establishment of an interdisciplinary disability studies program at the University of Windsor. Since the International Year of the Disabled (1981) human rights and social justice issues for persons with disabilities have received increasing attention in the Canadian political and social context. The coalition building that took place in the 1980s among disability groups and associations ensured the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) with the insertion of Section 15(1) that stated:

15. (1) Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.

The coalitions and the *Charter* continue to play significant roles in the move towards social justice for persons with disabilities within Canadian society. The struggle continues to have these *Charter* rights reflected in both federal and provincial human rights acts. The *Ontarians with*

Irene Carter, PhD is an Assistant Professor at the University of Windsor School of Social Work.

Donald Leslie, PhD is a Professor at the University of Windsor School of Social Work.

Brent Angell, PhD is a Professor at the University of Windsor School of Social Work.

Promoting Accessibility

Disabilities Act (2001) was enacted with the help of disability coalitions and disability advocates who lobbied long and hard for change. This act set a broad definition of disability and clearly outlined the barriers to full participation. It required all major public institutions, including universities and colleges, to develop plans for identifying and removing attitudinal, systemic, and physical barriers that could prevent persons with disabilities from achieving full participation in those institutions. A subsequent act, entitled the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* (2005), required that both public and private institutions identify barriers to full participation, set minimum standards for accessibility, establish time schedules to meet the set standards, and remove all identified barriers prior to 2025. Consistent with this legislation, the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities has committed “to help make Ontario more accessible for people with disabilities and a more inclusive society for all Ontarians” (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2009).

The University of Windsor embraces its responsibilities under the *Ontarians with Disabilities Act* of 2001 and the *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act* of 2005. It has made significant efforts to examine all aspects of campus life including attitudes, awareness, policies, procedures, and the physical plant in relation to their inclusion of persons with disabilities. This planning process has stressed the inclusion of faculty, staff, students, and community representatives who themselves have disabilities. Commitment to diversity, social justice, and accessibility within the university strongly influenced the development of the interdisciplinary disability studies program in order to promote disability issues in teaching, learning, policy development, and research.

The societal need for this program was identified by a number of preparatory activities. The disability literature and existing programs across Canada and the United States were thoroughly reviewed, and an environmental scan of disability organizations and workplace accommodation and accessibility needs in Ontario was performed in

consultation with the Canadian Disability Studies Association and the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies. Together with workshops with the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE), policy planning with the Disability Caucus of CASWE, regional plenary meetings on education equity and accessibility, and networking with the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies and the Canadian Disability Studies Association, these developments provided the foundation for the establishment of an interdisciplinary disability studies committee. This committee’s mandate empowered it to explore the feasibility and establishing processes for an Honours Bachelor of Arts in Disability Studies.

One of the most important factors contributing to the development of disability studies was the vision and courage of people with disabilities and the professionals and academics who work with them. The authors stress that ongoing support from the disability community is a critical element to achieving continuing, successful outcomes. Persons with disabilities and disability groups and associations have emphasized the key principle that people with disabilities should be involved in all aspects of education and service delivery. The Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Committee of the University of Windsor includes community representation to ensure continuing input from the disability community and to keep educators aware of the perspectives and needs of people with disabilities. This committee also oversees and evaluates the knowledge and skill sets of its students, as well as the barriers which exist to full participation, and it includes students from disability studies and staff from Student Disability Services (2010) in its membership.

The University of Windsor’s School of Social Work generously supported the Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program by providing faculty, resources, and data to promote it. The School of Social Work was well positioned to take a leadership role in supporting a disability studies program since the school had connections to academic programs, community disability services and advoca-

cy networks, and a long history of supporting students with disabilities. Several faculty members had also established research agendas and community development interests in this area. The school had developed a social work course specifically dealing with disability issues (Leslie, 2008) and built active partnerships through student placements and faculty involvement. Further, faculty from social work conducted a market survey that provided data which indicated that a demand for disability studies did exist, including a significant demand by local colleges for a disability studies program for students who completed disability-service training programs and related work experience. Collectively, these factors encouraged the School of Social Work at the University of Windsor to promote disability studies.

Based on the Social Model of Disability

The University of Windsor Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program adopted a critical approach to the study of disability based on the social model of disability. The social model is compatible with the philosophy espoused by the American Society for Disability Studies (2010), a non-profit academic, professional, and educational organization committed to developing theoretical and practical knowledge about disability. This model counters the outdated vision of disability that fostered a medical model perception of deficiency and dependency that must somehow be “fixed.” As with the issues of gender and race, a paradigm shift enabled disability to be viewed as a natural occurrence which should not in any way diminish a human being’s right to a normal life (Silverstein, 2001). The medical model is associated with the notion of disability as characteristic of a sick, minority group. This medical model has been replaced by the social model, which holds the position that social, cultural, political, and environmental barriers are more disabling than physical or cognitive disabilities (Hiranandani, 2005). Since most adaptation to permanent disabilities happens outside of medical intervention, it is no longer adequate or desirable to focus on medical rehabilitation pro-

cesses to help people with disabilities adapt to life in a society. The medical model of understanding and working with persons with disabilities is limited in its ability to reduce stigma and environmental barriers (May 2005; Rothman, 2003). The social construct model emphasizes that “it is the environment that creates and perpetuates the disabling condition, not the individual” (Rothman, p. 12) and explores what could be done about the negative impact of environmental barriers and social attitudes on people with disabilities (Oliver, 1990).

Describing people with disabilities as an oppressed, marginalized, non-ethnic minority, promoted a major shift in the intellectual, experiential, and academic understanding of persons with disabilities. The problem now became society’s failure to accommodate individuals by providing appropriate services and taking their needs into consideration when organizing society (Oliver, 1990). The social model of disability revealed that negative social causes, and not the disability itself, restricted participation, and that progressive social policy could reduce and address oppression (Goodley, 2000) caused by disabling social, environmental, and attitudinal barriers (Morris, 2001).

The social model of disability has empowered and promoted respect for persons with disabilities, and has allowed for the development of effective service delivery. Emphasis on the social model ensures a collective commitment to social justice and accessibility, as is reflected in the disability movement’s slogan: “Nothing about us, without us.” The perpetuation of this model has resulted in legislation which have outlawed discrimination based on a person’s characteristics, and has required public agencies to manage programs in the most integrated fashion possible so as to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. It has further directed policies to relieve oppression (Prince, 2004), promoted accessibility for people with disabilities through necessary support (Roeher Institute, 2003), and laid the philosophical foundation for a disability studies program.

The Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program

An interdisciplinary approach is required for disability studies due to the complexity of life experiences faced by persons with disabilities. No single discipline, either academic or professional, can legitimately claim to know and adequately understand the range of areas of information and knowledge needed to understand disabilities. Interdisciplinary approaches to disability are able to transcend the limits of single disciplines to increase our capacity, intuitively and analytically, for understanding and addressing problems that are too complex for one discipline (Klein, 1998). To ensure that disability studies offered an interdisciplinary perspective, the program drew upon a wide range of disciplines including social work, psychology, languages, fine arts, drama, communication studies, and philosophy.

Educational Objectives of Social Work and Disability Studies

Social work program objectives run parallel to the objectives of the disability studies program. Both programs focus on strengths rather than pathology (Cox, 2001), and, consistent with their commitment to diversity and the elimination of oppression (Gilson & DePoy, 2002), both share a dedication to advocacy, social change, and client empowerment. Specifically, the concepts of understanding persons with disabilities and promoting social justice for the disability community reflect the goals of social work. Anti-oppressive approaches to interacting with persons with disabilities are strongly represented in social work objectives where the learning environment includes an awareness of the social construction of theory. Overall, there is a strong match between the values and ethics of social work and the respectful approach required in adopting a social model of disability and advancing equity and accessibility (Leslie, Leslie, & Murphy, 2003).

Program of Study for Disability Studies

The Disability Studies Program at the University of Windsor is a 40 course degree program consisting of a variety of interdisciplinary courses and a number of required courses from psychology and social work. In years one and two (freshman and sophomore), which comprise the pre-disability studies program, students take existing arts and social science courses. Following admission into the Honours Disability Studies Program, years three and four (junior and senior) students enroll in specific disability studies courses augmented by disability-emphasis courses as electives.

Students entering the disability studies program come from the following four sources:

- High school graduates who enter the program
- University students who transfer from other programs
- Graduates of disability service training college programs
- Disability service workers from the community

Particularly, this disability studies program has made it possible for new and working graduates of non-degree, service-training diploma college programs to realize their educational goals. New and working graduates of human service non-degree diploma programs find it challenging to move ahead in their careers given the minimum requirement of a bachelor's degree for future advancement. Data acquired by a market survey prior to implementation of the University of Windsor Disability Studies Program suggested there is a demand for a disability studies degree program by students who have completed a non-degree college program in a related field. Disability studies created opportunities for graduates from non-degree diploma programs to complete a university degree in disability studies in a timely manner by offering advance standing in the form of 20-course and 30-course degree programs to achieve the normally 40- course Honours BA in Disability Studies. Thus, the disability studies

program helps graduates of non-degree, disability-related human service programs to meet their needs for professional development and continuing education.

The school of social work faculty designed a disability studies program that, sequentially, included the following five required courses (Carter, Quaglia, & Leslie, 2010):

- Theories of Disability and the Social Model
 - This course explores models of disability and critically examines assumptions that have shaped traditional responses.
- Historical Approaches to People with Disabilities
 - This course highlights people, events, and legislation that have affected disability rights, including the eugenics movement and the civil rights movement.
- Community Approaches, Advocacy & Empowerment
 - This course reviews the role of Disability Studies and explores interventions that promote full participation, including empowerment and advocacy.
- Service Delivery Systems and Independent Living
 - This course analyzes power, inequality, and influence, and encourages a team approach with community and consumer leaders.
- Community Practice
 - This course encourages students to put the social model into practice, building strategies for action and promoting a team approach.

Other courses have been identified as disability-emphasis electives from social justice studies, science, English, political science, dramatic art, history, music, philosophy, nursing, psychology, and social work. Wherever possible, students choose elective courses according to their area of interest in disability studies in order to tailor their learning experience.

Disability and Social Work Education

By developing courses and programs in disa-

bility studies, social work addresses what is implicitly and explicitly stated in both Canadian and American social work accreditation standards (Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE), 2008; Council of Social Work Education (CSWE), 2008). CASWE (2008) emphasizes “equality of treatment in the admission of its students,” which includes all students with disabilities, and it has standards for curriculum regarding disability. The CASWE accreditation standards stipulate that at the Bachelor of Social Work and Masters of Social Work levels (SB 5.10.17 and SM 5.7.12.):

The curriculum shall ensure that the student will have: An understanding of theories relevant to disability and their implications for social policies and the practice of social work (CASWE, 2010).

The American counterpart to the CASWE is the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) whose Educational Policy 2.1.4.—Engage diversity and difference in practice, found in the *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS), explicitly states:

Social workers understand how diversity characterizes and shapes the human experience and is critical to the formation of identity. The dimensions of diversity are understood as the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation (CSWE, 2008).

The CASWE and CSWE accreditation standards indicate that social work considers the study of disability as one of its concerns. However, with a few exceptions, social work education has focused largely on issues of gender, race and class, leaving an educational gap with regard to issues surrounding disability (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). The School of Social Work at the University of Windsor adheres to the CASWE standards and intentionally embraces the educational objectives of the CSWE. It has moved ahead in creat-

ing, developing and promoting programs in disability as well as crafting an inclusive environment that embraces the intersectionality of gender, race, class, and disability. This attempts to counter social work's perceived lack of interest in disability studies, drawing on proven social work strategies to address discrimination and obstacles to full participation in society. In the process, social work faculty are learning to appreciate that the study of disability adds value to social work education.

Enriching Social Work Education through Disability Studies

Persons with disabilities expect professionals, such as social workers, to have the skills to help them seek the services they need (Carter, *in press*). However, persons with disabilities often experience professionals as limited in their knowledge of the rights of individuals with disabilities (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 2008; May, 2007; Tower, 2003). Past research of Canadian schools of social work found that 79.2% of social work bachelor and master's level field placements had limited awareness regarding issues of concern to persons with disabilities (Burge, Druick, Caron, & Ouellette-Kuntz, 1998). Liese, Clevenger, & Hanley (1999) found that US schools of social work varied widely in their acknowledgement and commitment to preparing students for practice with individuals with disabilities. Five years later, a US study revealed that less than 40% of graduate social work practitioners recalled content on disability in their social work training (Tower, 2003). Other US studies have indicated that social workers require training regarding the psychosocial issues related to acquiring a disability (Bloch, Weinstein, & Seltz, 2005; Boehm & Staples, 2003). Dunn, Hanes, Hardie, and Macdonald (2008) found that Canadian schools of social work had improved their responses to disability issues, an indication that schools of social work are moving towards improving past practices in working with persons with disabilities. They recommended that universities collaborate with schools of social

work to develop and promote opportunities in the field of disabilities. They suggested that a working group be formed to develop a best-practices manual to guide universities and schools of social work in developing and implementing disability-related curricula.

Although responses to disability have improved in schools of social work, Dunn, Hanes, Hardie, & Macdonald (2008) also found improvements were required in the areas of recruitment, admissions, accommodation, retention, graduation, employment, and curriculum. Also, they noted issues regarding hiring faculty and staff with disabilities, university relations, and resources. They suggested social work implement best practices in accessibility and accommodation, and that they train faculty in Universal Instructional Design (Burgstahler & Cory, 2008).

Social work remains under the critical gaze and scrutiny of disability scholars, and for its longstanding relationship with rehabilitative dominated paradigms. Although social work developed a level of critical analysis in relation to gender, race, and class, this has not occurred with disability (Meekosha & Dowse, 2007). Social work needs to be clear and detailed about what it has to offer in the area of theory, practice, and research in the area of disability.

Social work practice with persons with disabilities involves a number of social work perspectives (Rothman, 2003), including strength-based (Saleebey, 2006), feminist (May, 2005), and structural approaches (Mullaly, 2009). The strengths perspective gives individuals, groups, families, and communities insight into the forces affecting those with disabilities as well as access to resources that lead to self-empowerment (Saleebey, 2006). The emphasis on human capacity, self-empowerment, and resilience is consistent with historically held social work values regarding personal and social change. Since more adult women than men have disabilities, feminist social work is useful in helping women confront gender discrimination and question practices that

do not fit their experience. A structural approach connects social work practice with socioeconomic and political environments that promote and cause oppression, a useful approach to working with people with disabilities. Based on the social model, disability studies provides added theoretical guidance to social workers in designing structurally-based interventions for persons with disabilities. For example, programs involving disability studies promote a focus on policy advocacy, helping social workers increase their effectiveness in advocacy interventions with persons with disabilities (Haynes & Mickelson, 2006; Hoefler, 2006; Jansson, 2010).

Adding Value to Social Work Education

Interdisciplinary, creative, critical, and constructivist perspectives, such as those found in disability studies, transcend practice techniques in specific disciplines. For example, Mazza (1986) proposes that techniques using materials from poetry, music, or literary works can sensitize students to critical issues in Human Behavior and the Social Environment courses, by prompting students to become more aware of their own feelings. Once the poem, song, or literary work is aligned with the course learning objectives, the instructor can share it with the class and invite reaction. This teaching approach provides an opportunity for the student social worker to better understand self and the client in a social context. This challenges social work to incorporate multiple views of caring, healing, and change (Martinez-Brawley, 1999). Social work addresses practical problems that require perspectives that transcend single disciplines. Disability studies is another avenue for broadening social work by adding perspectives from interdisciplinary fields in order to create a greater understanding of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities (Ware, 2001).

Gilson and DePoy (2002) view social work's increasing interest in disability studies as reaffirming the shift away from individual deficiency.

They recommend integrating a broad perspective of disability -- one which is constructed by social, cultural, political, and economic factors -- into the social work curriculum. They see the increasing emphasis on constructionist approaches as essential to the mission and values of social work. They add that integrating disability into the dialogue on diversity and oppression has wide applications for persons with disabilities as well as for those who are not currently disabled.

To help eliminate discriminatory practices and to seek changes in existing policies in agencies, communities, and legislatures, social workers must also be familiar with social policies that affect people with disabilities and be prepared to incorporate research findings into their practice (Jansson, 2010). Advocacy allows social work to return to its original reasons for helping clients work towards policy change. An emphasis on advocacy, crucial to disability studies, enhances social work's commitment to its ethical responsibilities.

Greater involvement with disability studies presents an opportunity for social workers to become fully aware of injustices and of the continuing barriers for persons with disabilities. It projects social work to the forefront of the philosophical discussion that is developing regarding the intersectionality of gender, race, and disability. It generates a transformative process that is cutting edge, allowing social work to continue to invent creative ways to address the ever-changing needs of clients. Aligning social work with the rising development in disability studies transforms and strengthens social work education, which fortifies the social work profession against other helping professions that are incorporating social work theories and practices. Supporting a disability studies program and integrating social work and disabilities studies by promoting combined degrees, minors, and certificate programs adds value to the social work degree and enhances social work's ability to promote accessibility.

Combining Social Work and Disability Studies

A combined social work and disability studies degree was discussed at the implementation of the University of Windsor Interdisciplinary Disability Studies Program, and a required disability studies course was offered as an elective for social work students. Feedback from disability studies students in the first year of the program and non-disability students has recommended that the university develop a combined social work and disability studies degree program or a minor or certificate in disability studies. These students confirmed the findings of a market analysis, which was completed prior to the establishment of the disability studies program. The study indicated that 19 percent of the Faculty of Arts and Social Science students and 27 percent of social work students would be interested in a combined social work and disability studies degree.

Options for combining programs in social work and disability studies are possible, given that the objectives of social work and the learning outcomes of disability studies are similar. Both social work and disability studies have historically integrated knowledge from the arts and social sciences (Carter, Quaglia, & Leslie, 2010). The social model of disability (Bickenbach, 1993; Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 1998) is a solid fit with how social work fosters students' abilities to recognize the structural barriers created by society. Social work and disability studies share a commitment to diversity, the elimination of oppression (Gilson & DePoy, 2002), and social change. Both social work and disability studies employ a critical, structural, and strengths-based perspective and promote social advocacy, self-advocacy, and empowerment. A combined degree in social work and disability studies and other continuing professional options, such as a certificate in disability studies, present useful, attractive options for students and practitioners, resulting in professionals who are better equipped to work with persons with disability in helping to remove the "dis" from disability.

Conclusion

We have been raising awareness about disability for the past three decades (Canadian Charter of Rights, 1982). It is time for social workers to take action. As accessibility is the focus of recent legislation on disability (American Disabilities Act, 2000; Ontario Disabilities Act; 2001; Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005) collaboration between social work and disability studies should be promoted. Introducing disability studies into the social work curriculum enriches social work and promotes social work approaches to working with persons with disabilities, as noted in the following ways:

- Disability studies increases the value of social work. Although social work has had effective approaches to working with persons with disabilities, such as the strengths, feminist, and structural perspectives, the critical, socially constructed approach evident in the social model of disability allows social work to come full circle in its practice of advocacy for vulnerable populations. Social work and disability studies address social injustice by employing advocacy based on a structural approach. This provides opportunities for both to create strategic pathways towards collaborative community initiatives through practice, education, and research.
- Disability studies offers social work a more academic, richer understanding of disability. Rather than relying on personal stories provided by persons with disabilities, disability studies provides scholarly expertise about disability.
- Disability studies using the social model of disability enhances social work education. The social model provides a counterbalance to the limitations of rehabilitation approaches used by professionals when intervening with persons with disabilities. This better ensures that social work graduates understand disability as a social construct, a concept not easily evident in social work.

- Disability studies removes the exclusivity apparent when viewing persons with disability. Social work has assumed that persons with disabilities are clients, but it has not largely accepted them as colleagues. Disability studies changes the focus of social work from benevolent acceptance to a genuine, respectful, welcoming environment for social work students and faculty.

By embracing disability studies, social work is making a conscious effort to align the values of the social work discipline with disability studies. In order to avoid incongruity between values and actions, social workers should encourage feedback and regularly address concerns and challenges of persons with disabilities. There is a need to create a flexible relationship that allows both disability studies and social work to integrate their knowledge and experience, providing opportunities for social work to improve its effectiveness with persons with disabilities. Seizing opportunities to create interdisciplinary programs in social work and disability studies adds relevance to social work education. In combination, social work and disability studies result in interdisciplinary courses and programs about disability, student placements that promote policy advocacy about disability, and actions that promote accessibility.

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Promoting Accessibility

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