



## **Myth busters: centring disability and displacing ableism through reimagining dissertation mentoring with care and critical pedagogy**

**Leigh Graves Wolf**

University College Dublin, Ireland

**Jacob C. Bunch**

Arizona State University, USA

### ***Abstract***

This brief communication is the account of an emancipatory learning journey between a doctoral dissertation writer and supervisor. In the spring of 2022, we started down a path of pushing boundaries and working through normative expectations and perceived rigidities of qualitative research. Coming from the perspectives of a disabled, first-generation doctoral researcher with Cerebral Palsy and multiple learning disabilities, and a first-generation faculty member with a chronic disease (endometriosis), this opinion piece will invite readers into a conversation which explains how the experience of the dissertation mentoring process raised our consciousness of educational trauma, ableism, and its intersection with knowledge production, specifically in the realm of qualitative inquiry. We will explore how caring and critical pedagogies supported the development of a genre-busting dissertation, which heavily integrated multimodal explorations to examine assistive technology lifeworlds from the perspective of postsecondary students with dyslexia. Through the dissertation analysis, innovative and inclusive qualitative methodological processes were developed. By rooting the experiences in care, both researcher and supervisor found joy through a process which can often be isolating, especially in an entirely online modality. At the core, the brief conversation presented explores: *how did the innovations that came from the experience emancipate and restore the researcher, co-partners, and guiding faculty?*

**Keywords:** critical disability studies; emancipatory pedagogy; pedagogy of care; critical qualitative inquiry.

## ***Introduction***

As an act of modelling, the work presented below was created using assistive technology. Assistive technology, as defined by Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA, 2024, para. 1) is, 'any item, piece of equipment, software program, or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of persons with disabilities'. In this context, technologies were used to support the functional needs of an author with Cerebral Palsy and multiple learning disabilities, including: (1) crafting the brief communication from a recorded conversation using Zoom (Zoom Communications, Inc., 2024) guided by agreed upon prompts for each of the authors; (2) speech-to-text technology to generate a transcript; (3) editing and analysis through 'deep listening' (Hart, 2021, p.290; Lavee and Itzchakov, 2021); (4) text-to-speech; and (5) adaptive word processing technologies.

**Leigh (supervisor):** I'll just start by asking the first question, very briefly, give me an elevator pitch or core idea of your dissertation.

**Jacob (dissertation writer):** The dissertation really had two aims. One of them was to challenge conventional methods of qualitative inquiry by really integrating considerations at the outset for the diverse bodymind throughout the whole research process for both myself as the researcher and my co-partners (Lester and Nusbaum, 2021). It really aimed, I think, to make a qualitative inquiry more representative and inclusive of disability. The other aim was to increase awareness that diverse bodyminds really do offer powerful narratives of diversity in the human condition and why that matters (Ledwith, 2016; Lester and Nusbaum, 2021).

**Leigh:** What was the most joyous part of the process?

**Jacob:** When I came to the realisation that there really isn't any one right way to move through the process of inquiry and no singular right mode of knowledge production. Then, when I began incorporating multimodal methods that were complementary to and leveraged the power of the diverse bodymind for myself and my co-partners. We included audiovisual data and co-construction of meaning through narrative storytelling and 'deep

listening' (Hart, 2021, p.290; Lavee and Itzchakov, 2021) and using video editing as analysis, that left the voice of experience nearly completely intact, so I found joy in that process.

I took up the challenge for myself to engage in the emancipatory exercise that I was asking of my participants, that was to create a disability reclamation statement. This statement was very cathartic for me. It gave me a space to acknowledge and really confront for perhaps the first time, the social and educational trauma (Olson, 2009) and 'ableism' (Campbell, 2001, p.44) that I had experienced as someone with multiple disabilities. By educational trauma I am referring to the inflictions of pain, suffering and shame that I internalised as a student with disabilities from educational systems and structures that attempted to reinforce that I was educationally burdensome.

**Jacob:** How did you, as the dissertation supervisor, ensure care for my bodymind in the dissertation process and, in turn, guide a centring of disability experience throughout the dissertation process?

**Leigh:** All of my own teaching work comes from a pedagogy of care. I centre that deeply in all the work that I do with all the students I've been lucky to work with. I think we worked successfully together in coming up with ways of working that might not have been the 'normate' – in voice memoing and how we drafted through the process, building that trust between us so that you felt comfortable to push the boundaries. Some examples of what we used to support diverse bodyminds through the process included video recorded narrative interviewing with participants, 'deep listening' (Hart, 2021, p.290; Lavee and Itzchakov, 2021), intentional use of a specialised multimedia analysis tool, Transana (Transana, 2023), voice memoing throughout and staging the writing process into manageable 'chunks'.

**Jacob:** What were the most challenging and most joyous parts of the dissertation process for you as the dissertation supervisor?

**Leigh:** I wanted to create a comfortable space but also didn't want to be overly rosy about it. Really one of the most joyous parts was just to see you develop and to see you become so much more comfortable with yourself in the research space and for us to be at ease with each other (Mingus, 2011).

**Jacob:** I do remember in your mentoring of me through the process, if you recall, we had a very candid conversation and you said, *'How do you learn best? How do you receive, perceive, and interact with information?'* I remember telling you, *'Audiovisual information.'* You said, *'Okay, well, let's just focus on that then. Let's make that the analysis and sense-making.'* I was given the autonomy as the writer to work all of that into ultimately what ended up being a very powerful dissertation and a beautiful representation of what is possible by centring disability.

**Jacob:** What do you consider the most critical and timely and myth-busting implications of this dissertation process for the field?

**Leigh:** I do think that individuals all have different types of power. It doesn't always have to be from top down. While there are systems in place, we made logical arguments, I hope, to change systems through this dissertation. You changed rules with ProQuest and helped them improve the uploading of video-based work to their system. I think that as individuals, we feel like we don't have a lot of power, but we can incrementally push the system and make arguments for paths and spaces to be created. I think that's critical and timely in this moment because we do feel disempowered and disenfranchised, rightly so, in systems. But we can't give up.

**Jacob:** While I could have gone through a standard five-chapter dissertation, I think you could see something in my voice and in the purpose behind my dissertation, and the opportunity of practice, to not have it to be just the standard, but to really reconceptualise it in a way that not only worked for my diverse bodymind, but in a way that presented it very dynamically.

**[END AUDIO]**

To experience the dissertation (Bunch, 2023) discussed in this conversation, visit: <https://keep.lib.asu.edu/items/190733> - the link will bring you to several multimodal files associated with the dissertation, including the video testimonials. For the paper portion of the dissertation, visit: <https://keep-qa.lib.asu.edu/items/190734>.

## ***Acknowledgements***

As noted, the authors used assistive technology (specifically automatic Zoom transcription) to create a typed first draft of the conversation. The authors did not use any other generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

## ***References***

- Assistive Technology Industry Association (2024) *What is assistive technology?* Available at: <https://www.atia.org/home/at-resources/what-is-at/> (Accessed: 15 May 2024).
- Bunch, J.C. (2023) *Assistive technology lifeworlds: inclusive qualitative methodological innovations for diverse bodyminds*. Ed.D Thesis. Arizona State University. Available at <https://keep.lib.asu.edu/items/190733> (Accessed: 15 May 2024).
- Campbell, F. (2001) 'Inciting legal fictions: "Disability's" date with ontology and the ableist body of the law', *Griffith Law Review*, 10(1), pp.42-62.
- Hart, D. (2021) 'COVID times make "deep listening" explicit: changing the space between interviewer and participant', *Qualitative Research*, 23(2). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211027780>
- Lavee, E. and Itzchakov, G. (2021) 'Good listening: a key element in establishing quality in qualitative research', *Qualitative Research*, 23(2). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211039402>
- Ledwith, M. (2016) 'Emancipatory action research as a critical living praxis: from dominant narratives to counternarratives' in L.L. Rowell, C.D. Bruce, J.M. Shosh and M.M. Riel (eds) *The palgrave international handbook of action research*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.49-62. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-40523-4>

- Lester, J.N. and Nusbaum, E.A. (2021) *Centering diverse bodyminds in critical qualitative inquiry*. 1st edn. New York: Routledge.
- Mingus, M. (2011) 'Access intimacy: the missing link,' *Leaving Evidence*, 5 May. Available at: <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/> (Accessed: 2 October 2024).
- Olson, K. (2009) *Wounded by school: recapturing the joy in learning and standing up to old school culture*. 1st edn, New York: Teachers College Press.
- Transana (2023) *Transana* (Version 5.01) [Computer program]. Available at <https://www.transana.com/> (Accessed: 8 August 2023).
- Zoom Communications, Inc. (2024) *Zoom* (Version 6.0.11) [Computer program]. Available at <https://www.zoom.com/> (Accessed: 4 June 2024).

## **Author details**

Leigh Graves Wolf is teacher-scholar and an Assistant Professor in Educational Development with Teaching and Learning at University College Dublin. Her work focuses on online education, critical digital pedagogy, educator professional development, and relationships mediated by and with technology. She has worked across the educational spectrum from primary to higher to further and lifelong. She believes passionately in care, collaboration, and community.

Jacob Colby Bunch is a Programme Coordinator, Sr. for Alternative Media for Arizona State University Student Accessibility and Inclusive Learning Services. His areas of expertise include: Alternative Format Production, Assistive Technology, Universal Design for Learning, Disability Policy and Critical Disability Studies, and accessible qualitative research methodology for diverse bodyminds. Dr Bunch is the 2024 American Educational Research Association Award Winner for Outstanding Qualitative Dissertation.

## **Licence**



©2025 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).