



**ENGAGING IN
SPECULATIVE THOUGHT
THROUGH PERSONAL
NARRATIVE:
A DEEPENING OF
RESPONSE-ABILITY AND
RELATIONAL-CARE IN
ART EDUCATION**

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"I tell stories about stories, all the way down" – Donna Haraway, 2003, p. 21

After class concluded and all the students had left, I stared at an anonymous exit ticket and it read, "I learn best from personal stories." I took that little scrap of informal assessment home with me and sat with it for a while. As it laid there on my desk, I felt the words quietly encouraging me to ask where was the space for personal story in my curriculum. Where was I offering places of connecting in a relational way? How was I supporting and encouraging expanded thinking around the concept of relationality, care, and response-ability in my pedagogical practice? Where was I, as an instructor of pre-service art educators, modeling what I was asking students to do – to engage in ways of thinking and making that allow one to question, investigate, learn, and unlearn together.

In this particular context, unlearning is taken to mean intentional shifts in emphasis from assumed knowledge and the primacy of teacher expertise, to a kind of co-learning and co-experiencing of the world where students and teacher dismantle assumptions and re-assemble knowledge as it is understood together (McWilliams, 2008). Within this project, unlearning and *co-re-learning*, centered on the topic of disability and stories, along with a fostering of both response-ability and relational care.

This project came about specifically because of my investigation into disability studies and critical disability studies as I began to teach a course on differentiated instruction and inclusive practices. As I dove into the topic, I began to question how we might connect to someone's struggle, visible or not, and deepen awareness, compassion, and understanding in-and-through our teaching.

As the instructor, who was also learning about her own neurodivergence at the time, I was immersed in a topic that was shifting my personal thinking and began to ask the following questions: Where do we expand thinking, consciousness, awareness and connection so that someone's struggle or someone's potential struggle, visible or not, becomes a consideration from the very beginning? How do we relate, know, and do differently when it comes to considerations of art education and individuals of all-ability for pre-service teachers? How do we press on the edges of art education and conventional ways of knowing with our pre-service students when it comes to disability studies and even critical disability studies?

Unexpectedly, I found my investigation into these furious and determined thoughts to lie in that small exit ticket and the working of this speculation-based project, which has now become a research-creation study that I am pursuing.

The essays: Connecting to stories

For this research-creation study, pre-service art education college-aged students are asked to spend roughly fourteen weeks engaging with one personal narrative written by an individual who identifies as disabled. These essays are used as context for personal narrative engagement throughout the semester as students are asked to interact with them weekly in a creative, embodied, and speculative way. They are a key component to the work as they provide a personal connection for the students and solicit a different kind of knowledge. Knowledge that is centered around speculative and intimate relations with words on the page and personal stories, instead of clinical descriptions and breakdowns of pathology.

The essays distributed and used throughout the semester are pulled directly from scholar and artist Alice Wong's (2020) book *Disability Visibility*, which features individuals who participated in the Disability Visibility Project (DVP). The DVP began as part of an oral history and archival project with StoryCorps and the United States Library of Congress in an effort to increase media representation and preserve stories. I chose this book due to its focus on stories and personal narratives involving individuals with disabilities and the call for community and connections throughout.

The connection to personal stories is important in an academic setting where stories and "story-ing" is often pushed aside for more clinical discussions or theoretical breakdowns of the topic of disability and inclusive practices. As Valente and Danforth (2016) express, "scholarship on inclusion is often disconnected from the lived experiences of those it intends to describe" (p. 4). Stories, on the other hand provide an entry point, a way into the lived experience of an-other and a means of reflecting back on the self; they hold the potential not only to connect but also to highlight personal bias or culturally and socially informed misunderstandings that one must unlearn in order to consider ableist assumptions and compassionate connection (Whare and Wheeler-Hatz, 2016).

Learning from personal stories enables a pulling away from the divisive binary of abnormal/normal and self/other by offering metaphorical connective tissue between polarizing states of misunderstanding and blanket categorization. Given the context of the university and the short amount of time I have with the students as their instructor, I chose to mobilize the personal essays provided by Wong's book as a way to engage in slow, intimate, learning with personal stories that hold the potential to disrupt notions of difference and disability and reassemble them over the course of several weeks.

Design of the study: Introducing the project to students

The preservice students choose their essay during the second week of class, and are expected to carry it with them throughout the full semester, with an average class being roughly twelve students. In order to choose their essay, I designate time in class to read aloud the title and first paragraph of each essay. The student who raises their hand first receives a copy of that essay for the full semester. If two people desperately want the same essay, I write down the name of the second student to raise their hand and they can receive a copy after class. This first step is actually one of my favorite parts of the process; it enables me to see what piques each student's individual interests and offers a glimpse as to why a particular narrative resonates with them. Reading the first paragraph aloud not only entices them to further engage, but subtly provides insight into my students' own challenges as they tend to seek out essays that relate to their personal struggles. Additionally, reading stories aloud, even if it is only the first paragraph, and sitting back to sink into the listening process, is not something I believe college-aged students get a chance to practice often. This method of delivery enables us to engage in slowing down, sitting with the words that hang in the air a bit longer.

Once the students have received their essay, they are asked to carry it with them in their bag/backpack for the full semester and to take it out to reread it every so often. Carrying the physical copy of the essay with them is part of the methodology to this research-creation study. Here I use the term methodology loosely as it is a contested and openly discussed term in the context of research-creation overall (Loveless 2019, 2020; Springgay, 2022; Manning and Massumi, 2014).

The students are given weekly, or sometimes bi-weekly, prompts that have very specific engagements. They are asked to follow those prompts and submit one-hundred and fifty-to-two-hundred-word reflections on a weekly basis. These prompts are designed to encourage students to engage with their essays/author's stories in a manner that is embodied, disruptive to traditional ways of knowing, and often situated within a particular context. For example, in the first week students are asked to take their essay for a walk in a very literal way. I ask them to take the physical copy of their essay with them to any location of their choosing, and then find a place to pause and sit with their essay.

Some students take this as an opportunity to share their favorite nature spots with their authors while others make it more essay-related. For example, I had one student choose an essay about a person who grew up with a facial disfigurement due to Crouzon syndrome, and the student chose to take her essay to the mall where she walked into the face and makeup store Ulta. While in the store, the student speculatively considered what it would be like for her author to be in that space, how they might feel, and how others might engage with them.

Other weekly prompts include the following: record a soundscape for their author, create a shared meal for your author or take the essay/your author to dinner, use the physical copy of your essay as the basis for art-making (see figures 1- 4 as examples of student work), write a responsive letter to your author, make a gift for your author, create black out poetry with a copy of your essay, walk around campus with your essay and speculatively consider the spaces from your author's perspective, have someone else read your essay to you and deeply listen to the words as they read them aloud, and more.

It should be noted that all work shown and all students cited in this chapter have provided ethical permission for their artwork and their statements to be gathered and published anonymously. In addition to the weekly prompts, we have regular essay check-ins in class where we engage in open

dialogue around the impact of that week's prompt, and reflect upon their journey with their author's words.

At the end of the semester, students bring in their essay-related artwork, letters, images, etc. created throughout the semester and are asked to answer a final reflection-based, open-ended interview directly with me. The design of the project is intentional in its encouragement to be-with, slow down, engage differently, and have ample time for reflection.

Carrying-with, walking-with, making-with

These repeated engagements have become not only ways for students to consider and get emotionally close to their chosen author's story, but ways or methods for students to reconsider their own relation to the words on the page, the physical paper, the text, the person behind the text, their understandings of the term disability, and the impact of being in an environment that is not built for disabled individuals. Over time, students have expressed how carrying around the essay increases their growing connection to the authors and a kind of relatability to their own narrative; it opens space for rethinking through the carrying-with, moving-with, and walking-with of an object in one's daily spaces.

In Truman and Springgay (2015) and Springgay and Truman (2018, 2019) research-creation is discussed as concepts in-the-making and as thinking-in-movement, specifically when talking about walking-with. Here Springgay and Truman (2019) state, "Walking research-creation is accountable to an ethics and politics of walking-with: walking-with considers with whom and where walking takes place, disrupting the over-used figure of the White male flaneur" (p. 550). While this project is not solely focused on walking methodology, it does have that component deeply ingrained within it. As the students carry the essays with them throughout the semester, they are provided with the opportunity to think-with and move-with these essays, not only the stories in their minds but also the physical copies in their hands or in their personal belongings. This act or gesture holds the potential to disrupt thinking and reconsider the structure-ings of the world that hopefully bleed forward into their future teaching with students of all-abilities.

Referring back to Erin Manning's (2016) work that emphasizes how methods in the context of research-creation resist categorization and embraces practice as a producer of knowledge, the act of carrying of the physical copies and engaging in the prompts with their essays, become part of the methodology to the research. As Manning (2016) expresses, "The unquantifiable within experience can only be taken into account if we begin with a mode of inquiry that refutes initial categorization" (p. 29).

Returning to the questions listed above, if the inquiry is around pressing on the edges of conventional knowing in art education so that we may expand consciousness (and compassion) when it comes to considering individuals struggles with disabilities, visible or not, then there has to be space for that which is not-yet-understood, the unquantifiable within that produces new knowledge. As such, the students form connections to the physical papers, being-with the author's individual stories for extended weeks of time. Engaging with loose and often open prompts on a regular basis, provides a ripe landscape for the potential formation of new knowledge/new understandings to grow.

Speculative engagements and embodied actions engendering response-ability

Connecting with stories in this speculative and often embodied way holds the possibility of engendering *response-ability* as expressed by Haraway (2016) and heightening the issue of care. Authors such as Haraway (2008, 2016), Stengers (2014), Tsing (2015), Rose (2017) and to some degree Barad (2007) summarily propose that one re-thinks the concept of responsibility to response-ability, from a two-way directional and transactional form of care to care that include webs of relationality. Looking at it this way decenters the human and enacts our ability-to-respond through alternative relational understandings and repeated actions or gestures that cultivate a desire to *be-with*.

Considering response-ability in a relational way allows one to carefully consider how to hold and extend a kind of being-with, a relational-caring-for, and a shared vulnerability beyond the boundaries of personal and individualised bodies; it holds the potential to result in a more inclusive questioning of what it means to be human and considering alternative futures for the art classroom. These ideas are rooted in the work of Donna Haraway's speculative fabulations and situated feminism, also explored by Truman (2018) and Puig del la Bellacasa (2017) within educational research (Truman) and care (Puig de la Bellacasa). As interdisciplinary scholar of science, technology, feminist, and environmental studies Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) explains, "speculative thinking fuels hope and the desire for transformative action" (p. 110). She continues to say, "Devising relevant and grounded interventions calls for speculative thinking that goes beyond descriptions and explanations of what is and how things came to be" (p. 111) For this study, I translate this to mean in order to have transformative action we must first engage in speculative and embodied ways that moves beyond traditional language and forms of knowing. Instead, it is about engaging repeatedly and in nuanced, unusual, and embodied ways.

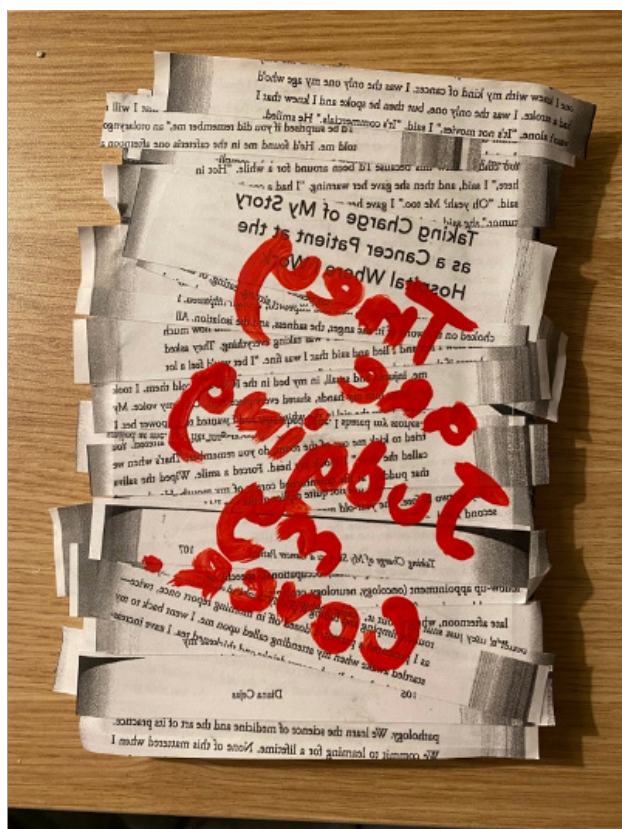
Embodied knowing challenges the body-mind split so common in education and alternatively embraces ways of knowing that emphasize or prioritize *thinking-feeling* and the lived experience (Ellsworth, 2005); it emphasizes being in relation to oneself, others, and the world at large. Leaning on the work of Ellsworth (2005) who discusses teachers as being in the making already and the importance of embodied learning, as well as Massumi (2002) who attends to emergent felt-based relations where the self is not separated from the world, I believe the act of walking through and gesturing-through these unusual prompts for students holds the potential to reveal or expose their own becoming in a world that is not built for all-abilities (Massumi, 2002, p. xxiv).

There is work being done in education and art education that acknowledges the value of the embodied lived experience and the need to continue pushing on the edges of these spaces, where learning happens in the in-between, the intra-personal and intra-subjective spaces¹. When talking about embodied knowledge and teacher education, Jimenez et al., (2025) state that, "accepting the idea that knowledge can be embodied allows us to understand knowledge as existing in liminal, in-between, and dynamic spaces" (p. 2). While this work is key and very important, it does not specifically address critical disability studies and speculative futurings, and instead focuses primarily on unpacking positionality by bringing dysconscious assumptions to the surface when dealing with culture and race specifically. Others who study embodied knowledge and teacher education include, Klein and Taylor (2022), Klein et al., (2019), Mitchell and Reid (2017), and

1. Here I use the term *intra* instead of *inter* to refer to Karan Barad's (2007) use of the term *intra-action* over *interaction* to reinforce the idea that agency does not presuppose or precede interactions, but rather come into being together through an emergent and relational process.

Zembylas (2005, 2015) who addresses embodied knowing within what he calls the pedagogy of discomfort. Similar to this study, these scholars are using the idea of embodiment to address intra-body relations and practice-based teacher education. However, the difference between this study and their writing lies in the use of connective personal stories with preservice educators to engage in embodied actions and the focus on disability work. As such, I argue that there needs to be a re-thinking of how to integrate this kind of speculative and embodied learning into art education preservice programs from the start. Making the change at the teacher preparation level where we can begin unlearning preconceived notions around disability, recognize the problems in the present, and speculatively consider future possibilities holds potential for long-term change over short term, reactionary, accommodations.

Figure 1
They Are Judging My Cover



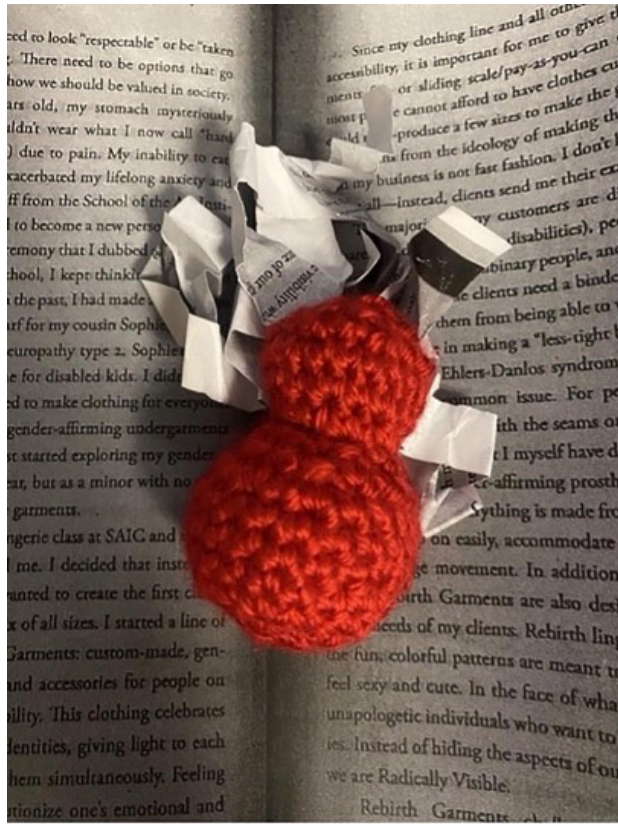
Note. Digital photo of student work (2024) [Paper, book, & paint]

Figure 2
Stuffed with Feelings I



Note. Digital photo of student work (2024) [Paper and yard]

Figure 3
Stuffed with Feelings II



Note. Digital photo of student work
(2024) [Paper, book, & paint]

Figure 4
Stars of Sisyphus



Note. Digital photo of student work
(2024) [Folded paper]

Rethinking the approach

Rethinking how to approach disability and classroom practices or even the curricular planning of classroom activities is not new or novel to the field. Art educators and scholars such as Karen Keiefer Boyd (2018) and Michelle Kraft (2013) have been considering this for some time. Kiefer Boyd (2018) encourages educators to design curriculum that promotes the inclusion of difference and empowers cultural and social participation. What Kiefer-Boyd brings to the table that is aligned with this project is the call for a recognition of multiple narratives when it comes to disability studies and how educators learning about alternative stories through the use of empathy can challenge oppression. As Kiefer-Boyd (2018) states, “Empathy is crucial for upstander behavior to occur” (p. 49). In this case, Kiefer-Boyd is referring to an upstander as someone who stands up to and challenges injustices. I believe this sense of empathy has the potential to be cultivated through research-creations, where the intra-connected untold story is of value to the process of the research itself (Haraway, 2016; Loveless, 2019).

In turn, this story is not linear. It is not just the story of Wong's (2020) selected authors, or of the student who picked up each essay—it is also the story of the paper it was printed on, of the creases it takes when traveling in the students' bags or backpacks throughout the semester—it is the story of the shifts in thinking about food we keep in our classrooms or put in our bodies, the materials we ask others to touch, and more. These stories are growing outward and extending in unexpected ways. While they are not yet accomplishing what Haraway calls 'all the way down', they are following rhizomatic paths. (Haraway, 2003; Loveless 2019).

Implications, tensions, and opportunities for arts educators

This is not an easy class to take nor to teach at times. As we stay close to our author's stories, ideas around anti-ableist practices and reimagined pedagogical possibilities are also introduced. Readings by authors such as Wexler (2016, 2022) Wexler & Kallio-Tavin (2022), Penketh (2020), Long & Stabler (2020), Kiefer-Boyd (2019), and more, are assigned concurrently. These writings often present points of view that are in opposition to how the students have been taught to think about accommodations in other classes, or they stand in opposition to what students have witnessed in their own schooling experience as the result of institutional structures and categorizations (Keifer-Boyd & Knochel, 2019, 2018; Penketh, 2020).

As one student expressed "In the classes I have taken on inclusion so far, they have all been centered on making accommodations for students with disabilities, but here we are having to rethink entirely and I need to figure out how to do that for my future students" (personal communication, 2023). Reading these texts, and embarking on the journey with the authors, requires a hard look at personal ableist biases/practices that one might carry or exhibit (sometimes without awareness). This hard look is sometimes difficult for the students and myself as well. Yet, I believe it is this kind of disruption that can open up those larger shifts that have greater "sticking" potential—here I use the term sticking to mean embodied learning engagements that are retained by provoking one to consider new ways of knowing/being, even if that learning is not yet understood in the immediate moment (Ellsworth, 2005).

This kind of disruption of understandings and preconceived notions has the potential to create previously non-existent space to see/recognize/acknowledge the complexity of not only the human condition and self-Other relation but also of intra-body-environment relations. As such, talking about bodies in physical spaces to discuss the materiality of our bodies and the considerations of its porous-responsive nature, has slowly become a part of our author-essay conversations (see figure 5 from the sharing-food prompt). As Alaimo (2010) explains, "Disability studies, in particular, may reject medical models of the enclosed body in order to trace material/social interchanges between the body and place" (p. 12).

Recognising how the body is dynamic and in constant relation to other bodies and the more-than-human world is part of this work for art educators, and can be particularly important for students with disabilities that are yet to be diagnosed or not so visible. For example, the undiagnosed ADHD student who is incredibly challenged by the varying noise levels from classroom to classroom or the child who might not outwardly exhibit autistic traits but quietly struggles to handle the texture on the playground, the chalk pastel, and transitions throughout the day.

We cannot assume an unresponsiveness to shifting environmental factors played out upon the surfaces of the body, the inner workings of the mind, and the fabric of the soul. In fact, it is the complete opposite. We should assume and maybe even over assume (at times) a responsiveness

and response-ability to the spaces and material bodies in the places we occupy and the lessons planned, speculative or not. By offering a touchstone of visibility, Wong's (2020) highlighted stories enabled the students and myself to move beyond academic language and theory and bring these to life. While the project may be speculative it holds the potential to adjust the needle towards more inclusive ways of considering future possibilities but the work must start and mobilize now.

Figure 5

Smoothie love: Remembering to feed your body



As I constructed this smoothie for you, it is more than sustenance for the moment but also an extension of care for the wholeness of who you are. You are more than a writer with profound words to say. You are a human with bodily systems, organs, and cells. This smoothie is so much more than a cold drink for a writer, it is an intentional act of caring for a human being (name deleted for blind review, written letter, 2024).

Note. Student image of smoothie (2024) [Photograph]

Mobilising speculative futures now through response-ability and relational-care

Over the course of the semester we question our spaces, the materials we keep close to our bodies, the materials we put into our bodies (such as food), the art materials we use, and the representations we promote (or plan to in future classrooms). We begin to blur the boundaries between self-other through embodied engagements and speculative thought, and in turn there is a growing understanding that our bodies and inner-outer-selves are in constant and dynamic relations with the world around us. We tend-to and care-for the unpredictable disruptions of thought as they show up in the processing of the research-creation event itself.

Here, I would like to note that care (in the traditional give and receive directional sense) cannot be assumed to happen automatically when I hand out the essays on that first day of class. At the very least, I hope that there is a speculative thinking-with-care that will develop, and that the students and I will resist former understandings of reductionism—one body, one kind of human, one way of knowing and being in the world. My hope is that on some level the request to think-with relational-care for the author's story, or at the very least for the physical pages of the essay and the words

expressed, will alter a bit of reality and become its own kind of worldmaking. Here, I use the term relational-care specifically with a connective dash to indicate the concept pointing to a relational ontology as addressed by Haraway (2003), where she expresses how “beings do not pre-exist their relatings” and encourages us to think critically about relations while considering other ways of becoming in the world (p. 6). Relational-care in this way resists the sort of standard categorisations of care (as giver-receiver relationships) and invites consideration of the entangled web of care needed in this world, including human and non-human entities².

Scholar Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) addresses what she identifies as matters of care, as the ability to generate caring relationalities that attend to one’s contributions in a world that is constantly in a state of becoming, and within that to consider the production of knowledge. As she writes “*thinking-with* creates new patterns out of previous multiplicities, intervening by adding layers of meaning rather than merely deconstructing or conforming to ready-made categories” (p. 72). Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) continues to explain, “care is everything that is done (rather than everything that “we” do) to maintain, continue, and repair the “world” (p. 161, emphasis quotes in original text). In this case, we are thinking-with relational-care as we embark upon a speculative journey of relationship building—not only breaking down previous understandings of disability and inclusive practices, but adding back layers of new meaning.

Shifting traditional approaches to accommodations through speculative practices

One of the problems with traditional ways of thinking about inclusion, through after-the-fact accommodations, is when there is a heightened focus on what someone is “not able to do” and a more comprehensive view of the child is a marginalized perspective, at best. Or, just as prevalent, as Crockett and Blakeslee (2018) point out, teachers might unintentionally miss a learning problem when a disability is not as observable and unintentional discrimination might occur in the form of ableism.

While there are extremely helpful strategies discussed in the literature on disability and art education, provided by scholars such as Alter-Muri (2017) and Wexler and Luethi-Garrecht (2015), and we do review this work in class, what I am arguing for is a bit different. Equally, the emphasis on community-based work and early field experience by art education scholars such as Vanderlip Taylor (2024), Kallio-Tavin (2019), and Bain and Hasio (2011) are extremely valuable as well, but aren’t necessarily offering the same kind of space for considering alternative futures in the classroom.

Likewise, discussions on policy and resource allocation face the same problem. Similar to Penketh’s (2020) work on crip theory and the rethinking of curriculum with pre-service students, what I am proposing is that speculative practices at the pre-service stage enable a space to reconsider how we teach future art educators to think-with accommodations not as an after-thought or in a strategy-based manner, but as integral to the thinking process overall, from the beginning or from the jump. As Truman (2002) states in *Feminist Speculations and the Practice of Research Creation*, “The speculative process proposes what could be. It might usher in a different world while simultaneously changing us: this is the power and potential of speculative thought and storytelling practice” (p. 7).

2. Relational-care with a dash is conceptually different from how Noddings (2013) uses theories of relational care (no dash) to address attentiveness and connection between students and teachers and the importance of dialogue, which also has important value.

Although this approach is not as direct as field experiences and learned strategies, it places an emphasis on the potentials and possibilities. Re-thinking accommodation through the lens of speculative practices affords future art educators a chance to rewrite the coming narrative, to engage with the stories of self-other and ask how might I-we make a change from the start, from the moment we consider state standards, curriculum, classroom setup, the materials ordered, and more.

In conclusion

As mentioned above, this study is still in process, and I believe there is more work to be done, more stories to be rewritten and connections to be made, before I can fully understand what is unfolding through this continuous research-creation event. As Loveless (2019) states, “The work of telling new stories, or new versions of stories that need retelling/recrafting, is propositional; it requires ongoing engagement and a willingness to denaturalize the social, disciplinary, ideological within which we are embedded” (p. 20). The work itself is and will continue to reveal the next steps.

In the meanwhile, embodied and speculative practices seem to hold the potential of engaging differently and opening up new understandings about disability, in this case through personal narratives. As the instructor, this work has already impacted my own thinking on the subject, as part of our co-unlearning and re-learning. I believe it has afforded an expansion of thought with some students as well. While there are no guarantees, with comments such as the one below as part of a student’s final letter to their author, one can only hope that a better, more inclusive, future is possible:

It was very eye-opening for me to spend the entire semester with your writing and your thoughts on the world through the lens of ability. I have become much more aware of my surroundings, the world around me connecting to my able body. I am more aware of the materials I am using and how they impact my body and the future spaces I will create in my classroom (anonymous student, written letter, quoted with permission, 2024).

With Wong’s (2020) book, we were able to find a way in. We were able to begin investigating stories “all the way down”, discovering connections and recognizing small tendrils between narratives that connect, weave, and intersect with one another. The stories in *Disability Visibility* provided a place of beginning and becoming, where we could not only disrupt our own understandings of disability and difference, finding deep connections between self-other, but also imagine alternative futures for inclusion in the art classroom.

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