

Foregrounding Neurodiversity, Mental Disability, and Chronic Illness in an Expanded Field of Disability Studies in Arts and Education

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For our spring 2026 column, I wish to highlight the DSAE Interest Group sessions that were presented during the 2026 NAEA National Convention held on March 5–7. It is particularly notable that this year's sessions focus on neurodiversity, mental disability, and chronic illness, considering these areas of disability were largely marginalized in disability studies scholarship until beyond the turn of the 2000s. This is particularly due to ableism within early disability studies community that tended to label chronic illness as "unhealthy disabled" (Wendell, 2001, p. 17), or neurodivergence and mental disability as lacking the "rational mind of a 'good' disabled person" (Price, 2011, p. 13). In the past 2 decades, fields like mad studies, neurodiversity studies, and critical autism studies have been richly developed both adjacent to and inextricably entwined with disability studies discourses and practices.

This is certainly not to say that disability experience beyond these areas is no longer relevant. On the contrary, it is crucial to note that the 2026 DSAE Doctoral Thesis Award (listed below) was presented to Jenna Gabriel's dissertation. This dissertation engages broader critical disability studies research with disability critical race theory and critical whiteness studies as an intersectional analysis of multiply minoritized lived experiences.

The paradigm shift from disability studies to critical disability studies has vitally enriched disability theory and practice by forging a robust equity- and justice-based affiliation with other critical emancipatory endeavors, such as critical race, decolonial, queer, and feminist theories. As such, it is striking to note the diverse perspectives presented in these DSAE Interest Group sessions that exemplify the critical development and innovation in disability studies in ways that would have been unheard of in the field 30 years ago.

Sessions of the DSAE Interest Group presented at NAEA26:

Neurodivergent Aesthetics in the Art Room

Presenter: Albert Stabler

Gain an expansive view of creative experience, practice, reflection, and evaluation through a presentation of works from neurodivergent artists and discussions of personal experiences from a neurodivergent artist, student, and teacher.

Art, Schizophrenia, and Meaning-Making: The Generative Visions of Linda Carmella Sibio

Presenter: Ann Romero De Cordoba

This session examines the art and pedagogy of Linda Carmella Sibio, an artist whose lived experience of schizophrenia shapes her expansive, visionary practice. Sibio often frames her mark-making as hieroglyphs and her creative approach as an "insanity principle," a method that resists linear logic and embraces fragmentation, intensity, and multiplicity. Her work invites educators to reconsider vulnerability, neurodivergence, and artistic process as generative sites of meaning-making, offering new ways to engage with difference, imagination, and care.

Universal Design for Neurodiversity-Affirming Teaching in Higher Art Education

Presenter: Alexandra Allen and Timothy Smith

Two art educators discuss practical approaches to neurodiversity-affirming undergraduate teaching. The presenters will share their approach to creating an inclusive classroom by using neurodiversity studies and Universal



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Design for Learning (UDL). Presenters will include examples of how concepts are introduced and how students respond to this pedagogical approach.

A Flamingo Among Penguins: Using Creative Writing, Illustration, and Metaphor to Teach About Autism

Presenter: Laura Hetrick

Discover how creative writing, illustration, and metaphor can illuminate the lived experience of undiagnosed autism. This session, led by an autistic art education professor, offers inclusive storytelling strategies that foster empathy, support neurodiverse learners, and inspire reflective, identity-centered art education practices for K–12 and higher education educators.

Art, Pandemics, and Chronic Illness

Presenter: Albert Stabler

Discover how art can be used to consider public health emergencies and chronic illnesses. Through the historic visual culture of pandemics and recent artistic expressions of chronic illness, I will offer ways to reconsider the shared experience of COVID-19.

Rhythms of Maternal Worlding: Nurturing the Conditions of Neurodivergent Experience

Presenter: Lori Esposito

In this session, an artist–educator shares their arts-based research with evaporation, to inquire into ways to share lived experiences of maternal grief. Following materialist, crip, and disability studies frameworks, she discusses how opening her practice to unpredictable forces has generated new ways for sustaining her research practice.

DSAE Doctoral Thesis Award

Presenter: Jenna Gabriel

My dissertation titled *(Art) Education in the Afterlife of Massive Resistance: Constructing, Capturing, and Commodifying Racialized Disability in Virginia's Student Assignment Practices, 1956–1966 and Present Day* exposed how the anti-Black logics underpinning Massive Resistance constructed racialized understandings of disability in the years immediately following the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board* and maintained school segregation under the guise of racial neutrality by disabling Black students while using disability labels to increase investment in white students. Tracing effects to present day art education, my analysis exposed how historically constructed understandings influence dominant, racialized notions of artistic ability and uphold ableism and racism in elite art education settings. With an eye toward the transgressive potential of anti-ableist art education, my dissertation concludes by positing opportunities for disruption within historical legacies of creative resistance.

REFERENCES

- Price, M. (2011). *Mad at school: Rhetorics of mental disability and academic life*. University of Michigan Press.
- Wendell, S. (2001). *Unhealthy disabled: Treating chronic illnesses as disabilities*. *Hypatia*, 16(4), 17–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2001.tb00751.x>