

# The Narrative Space

## Exploring the Interdependence of Normative and Disabled Ways of Knowing in Design Education

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### Abstract

This exploratory paper examines the co-creation of a narrative space for knowledge exchange between non-disabled design students and disabled experts in a classroom context. We conceptualize the narrative space as both a physical studio arrangement that supports experimentation and a discursive environment that enables collaborative dialogue. Through iterative prototyping and a reflective focus group, we explore how shared stewardship restructures epistemic authority, positioning disabled experts as co-authors rather than users. We argue that prototypes function as performative epistemic artefacts, crystallizing lived experience, while mediating socio-political negotiations. We contribute to design pedagogy by proposing narrative space as a dual construct for structuring equitable, reflexive learning, and to participatory design by foregrounding disability as an epistemic standpoint. We outline how narrative space can be operationalized in design education through shared stewardship, early involvement of disabled experts, and prototypes as epistemic artefacts.

### CCS Concepts

• Human-centered computing; • Human computer interaction (HCI); • Empirical Studies in HCI;

### Keywords

Narrative Space, Disability Studies, Co-creation, Design Pedagogy

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### 1 Introduction

There has been a growing demand for design education to be outcome- and market-driven [23]. Traditional curricula continue to privilege autonomy and speed, often treating disability as marginal [9, 26], despite longstanding recognition that all knowledge is partial and situated [11, 15]. Within this context, disability narratives—well established in disability studies and critical pedagogy [10, 29]—remain undertheorized in design education [1, 13, 16, 25, 33]. This gap raises questions of epistemic authority, such as who can teach disability-related design. As Goodley [10] notes, non-disabled educators can teach disability studies, but only through critical reflexivity that centers disabled people’s lived experience as knowledge. More broadly, design always engages disability, either by producing barriers or creating access [16, 24]. Disability should therefore be understood not as an incidental outcome of design, but as a fundamental condition through which its social, political, and material effects are mediated [27, 28].

With this paper we make a humble contribution to the scholarly discussions arguing that, when disability is approached as an epistemic position rather than a deficit, it has significant implications for design and pedagogy. Disabled experts contribute knowledge grounded in lived experience, interdependence, and embodied negotiation within social, material, and institutional environments [13, 14], thereby enriching and extending what counts as design knowledge. In our work we treat disabled people’s lived experiences as generative resources for learning and change in the context of the classroom. Our key insights derive from a focus group discussion that was conducted during the final lecture of a design elective course on designing for and with blind and low-vision people. Five students from different design backgrounds collaborated with three disabled experts (two blind people and one low-vision person) to co-design concepts and prototypes drawing on the experts’ lived experiences. The focus group brought together disabled experts, instructors, and non-disabled students to examine how collaboration unfolded, what and how participants learned, how lived experiences informed design decisions, and what roles disabled experts assumed throughout the process.

We use the term narrative space to describe a deliberately configured pedagogical arrangement in which spatial setup, discursive practices, and material artefacts jointly enable reciprocal knowledge-making between design students and disabled experts.

Rather than functioning merely as a narrative-based or participatory classroom, the narrative space redistributes epistemic authority through shared stewardship of stories, prototypes, and design decisions. In this setting, prototypes operate not only as design outcomes but as epistemic carriers through which lived experience, tacit knowledge, and normative design assumptions are negotiated. We propose the narrative space as a Participatory Design (PD)–oriented pedagogical framework grounded in epistemic reciprocity, shared stewardship of knowledge, and materialized storytelling through prototyping practices.

Our research challenges normative ways of knowing—dominant epistemic practices and ideals socially privileged as “normal” such as autonomy, speed, visibility, and abstraction[13]—and instead foregrounds disabled ways of knowing as generative epistemic resources capable of reshaping design processes and pedagogical practices. While resonating with situated and reflexive pedagogies, this approach extends them by explicitly treating disability as an epistemic standpoint and by foregrounding the negotiation of normative and disabled ways of knowing within the classroom.

Next, we position disability as an epistemic standpoint for design education and highlight the potential of co-creation as both a pedagogical practice and a theoretical lens for fostering reflexive learning.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Disability as Epistemic Position

Design history has long framed disability as “*special needs*” [7], reflecting what Bérubé [3] calls the discipline’s politics of disavowal. Such narratives cast disabled people as passive recipients of intervention, stripping them of agency and obscuring the structural conditions that disable. More recently, design scholarship has repositioned disability as an epistemic standpoint rather than a deficit. Building on Hamraie’s [13, 14] analyses of disability as a design-relevant epistemic position and Haraway’s [15] notion of situated knowledges, we understand disability in design as producing distinctive, contextual, and relational forms of knowledge grounded in lived, embodied experience and interdependence with social, material, and institutional environments.

Crucial to this shift is confronting ableism which is a normative ideology rooted in the preference for ability and normality. Like racism, it fosters internalized devaluation and self-hatred among disabled people [5]. As Chouinard[6] observes, ableism is embedded in “*ideas, practices, institutions and social relations that presume able-bodiedness, and by so doing construct persons with disabilities as marginalised and largely invisible ‘others’*.” Beyond individual prejudice, ableism functions as a systemic structure that privileges non-disabled people within social, cultural, and economic hierarchies[18]. Moreover, as Lewis [21] notes, ableism affects everyone: it ranks bodies and minds according to constructed ideals of normalcy, intelligence, excellence, and productivity. Recognizing disability as an epistemic standpoint destabilizes such ideals, emphasizing interdependence and collective production over autonomy and perfection [32].

For design, recognizing disabled participants as epistemic agents—actors whose lived experiences, practices, and adaptations generate insights that reshape inquiry itself—challenges normative

logics and unsettles the asymmetrical hierarchies design education often reproduces[13, 14]. As Hamraie [13] notes, “*disabled users positioned themselves as experts credentialed by their lived experiences to remake the world.*” Rather than being cast as objects of intervention or end-stage testers, disabled co-designers— “*design experts*” [13] and “*needs-knowers*”[20, 12]—act as knowledge holders whose embodied adaptations redefine the very terms of design inquiry.

### 2.2 Design Pedagogy and Disability

Nevertheless, design pedagogy continues to treat disability as marginal. As Bennett and Rosner [1] argue, empathy-driven exercises prioritize non-disabled students’ impressions over the lived expertise of disabled people. Such practices frame disability as an object of understanding rather than a source of knowledge, reinforcing ableist logics rather than dismantling them. Even frameworks such as universal design, when incorporated into curricula, risk being treated superficially. As Hamraie [13] notes, universal design in higher education often becomes reduced to compliance checklists rather than fostering epistemic recognition of disabled people as design experts. Traditional curricula privilege polished outcomes and marketability, often reinforcing binaries between designer and user. Yet it is precisely the frictions, dissonances, and discontinuities that arise when lived experience confronts normative expectations that hold generative potential [8].

PD has begun to address these challenges by re-centering lived experience, collaboration, and reflection. Building on commitments to democracy, mutual learning, empowerment, and power asymmetries [4], PD repositions design not as problem-solving but as engaging with creativity and critique. In this way, PD is not simply a toolkit of methods but a political practice confronting appropriation while insisting on collective ownership of knowledge and justice-oriented futures. At the same time, PD opens a pathway toward social design. Ventura and Bichard [30] argue that design anthropology positions the designer as a mediator between users, institutions, and broader socio-cultural structures. More recently, Ventura and Shahar [31] have expanded this into a pedagogy of the social designer, emphasizing curricula that combine theory, research, and practice with activist commitments. Here, students collaborate with disabled people, healthcare providers, and community organizations not as “clients” but as partners. The goal is not polished outputs, but meaningful interventions embedded in socio-cultural and political realities.

Within PD, disabled participants act as active contributors whose expertise shapes both process and outcome[20, 1, 17]. Yet empathy, when performed as a method of knowing, can paradoxically distance designers from lived realities [1]. Simulation techniques like blindfolding risk centering designers’ experiences, while Johansson et al.[17] stress that participants wish to be treated as subjects, not objects, with their lived knowledge acknowledged as essential to design.

Taken together, these critiques and practices underscore the urgency of embedding disability centrally within design education—not as a marginal topic or add-on, but as a generative standpoint for reimagining what design is, how it is taught, and who counts as a designer.

**Table 1: Student and expert participants of the course, their backgrounds, and project descriptions.**

| Participants | Background     | Project Title             | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------|----------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| S1           | Product Design | Hot Water Dispenser       | A device that aids BLV individuals in pouring hot water into a container. It was inspired by E1's descriptions on some of the main challenges he has when engaging with hot water in the kitchen during everyday activities.                                                                                                                                                                   |
| S2           | Product Design | Tactile Lane for Swimming | A tool that enhances spatial awareness and navigation through tactility, allowing visually impaired swimmers to move confidently, independently, and safely in the water. This project was again in the context of safety and water, but this time also S5's lived experience played a role as they were swimming instructors for children.                                                    |
| S3           | Media Design   |                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| S4           | Media Design   | Play Blind!               | Redesigning a popular board game to be accessible to both sighted and BLV individuals to promote empathy and mutual learning through play. This concept was inspired by E1 who has been programming audio games as a hobby. They had heard about this popular game before, but they did not have the opportunity until then to engage with it as there is not any digital version of the game. |
| S5           | Graphic Design |                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| E1           | Programmer     |                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| E2           | Programmer     |                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

In the next section we present the course objectives, the participants (including students and disabled experts), and the focus group methodology.

### 3 THE COURSE, STUDENTS AND EXPERTS

The insights we report in this exploratory paper derive from a focus group which was conducted during the last lecture of a ten-week Master's level design elective course that focused on co-designing with and for low-vision and blind people. The disabled experts who participated in the study were fully informed about the research component of the course and all signed consent forms for their participation. Since the course was an elective for different departments of the university, the five students who participated in the course had media, product, and graphic design backgrounds. During the course the students collaborated with three disabled experts who were also students from a different university. Students and experts worked in teams (See Table 1). Initially, the aim was to include the experts three times over ten lectures. However, this changed as experts expressed their desire to collaborate more closely with the students either by prototyping with them or attending the classes more frequently. The students did not have to produce a single polished product as an outcome, since the course focus was entirely on the design process. Each class lasted three hours and was divided between lectures and design studio activities. During the course we invited guest lecturers who shared their knowledge and experience in areas of disability, ethics, and

social responsibility. In the Design Studio, we engaged students in ideation, planning, and prototyping sessions. We introduced best practices in co-design, iterative prototyping, and provided tools and materials to build physical and digital prototypes. We explicitly structured the course according to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles [22], fostering multiple means of engagement (safe, choice-rich participation and authentic collaboration with disabled experts), representation (combining lectures, lived narratives, and tactile/prototypical materials), and action & expression (process-based assessment through iterative prototypes rather than a single polished outcome).

During the first class we outlined the course aims, learning outcomes, assessment methods, and expectations. Next, in creating an inclusive environment we formed a circle gathering insights about the students' motivation, background, and former experience in design for disability while also providing space for questions and answers among students and lecturers. This session played a crucial role in setting up the tone for the course, creating a safe and welcoming environment where students could share both their expectations and, in some cases, their concerns or fears about working with vulnerable groups. We emphasized that there were no "wrong" questions to ask, and that they were free to express their vulnerability or limited knowledge of the topic without fear of judgment. It was also an important moment to foster empathy within the class and to gauge students' prior knowledge of design for disability.

In the lecture preceding the final presentation, we conducted a focus group involving three tutors, four students (S1, S2, S3, S5), and two experts (E1, E2). The aim was to collectively reflect on the value of such collaboration and on the experiences of each participant. The guiding assumption was that the insights generated could reveal tendencies, aspirations, and possible approaches for co-creating a space of knowledge exchange in which disabled experts share their lived experiences while co-designing with non-disabled design students. Six questions guided us:

- How was your experience working with people who have different abilities than your own during the course?
- How did you feel about sharing and asking questions with each other during the course?
- What motivated you in the process of sharing experiences and designing in this context?
- What do you think encouraged or discouraged you from sharing knowledge or experiences?
- How did you experience working with “imperfect” design outputs (e.g., rough mock-ups or prototypes), and focusing more on the process rather than the outcome?
- What are your reflections now about your former or parallel concepts and prototypes?

## 4 ANALYSIS

The focus group lasted one hour and was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English. To ensure participants' comfort and authenticity of responses, the discussion was conducted in their native language (removed for review). For the analysis, all authors of this paper first engaged independently with the transcript and took notes guided by two questions: (a) whether and how co-creation occurred during the course, and (b) how the classroom functioned as a space for knowledge exchange. In a subsequent in-person session, the four authors compared notes and collaboratively engaged in open coding. This process, inspired by affinity diagramming [19], involved highlighting key insights, annotating them with reflections, and clustering them into thematic categories. Through this process, four main themes emerged: (a) reciprocal learning, (b) process over perfection, (c) redefining inclusion, and (d) educational and attitudinal barriers.

## 5 RESULTS

The focus group revealed several interrelated aspects of the student-expert collaboration and knowledge exchange over the duration of the course. While the guiding questions structured the discussion, participants often moved into an open exchange, allowing situated experiences and design assumptions to be negotiated collectively.

### 5.1 Lived experiences as epistemic authority

Disabled experts brought indispensable, diverse lived experiences that challenged assumptions and enriched the design process, ranging from interactions with assistive technologies to personal habits and everyday practices. The three prototypes developed during the course were directly inspired by these experiences (see Table 1). All four students who attended the focus group highlighted that the experts' perspectives surfaced design considerations they would

not have identified without direct collaboration. For instance, S5 described the course as a transformative learning experience in which their initial preconceptions were challenged: *“I also came to this course because there aren't really any people with disabilities in my environment, and I felt this kind of barrier or wall within myself, and I definitely wanted to break it down, so I was happy to have the opportunity to overcome these barriers through personal consultations or personal interactions.”*

### 5.2 Negotiating individuality and normative assumptions

Discussions also revealed tensions around how disability is framed in design contexts. S3 suggested that collaboration would have been more effective if students had engaged with experts in their own environments rather than expecting adaptation to the university setting. E1 problematized this framing, noting that such distinctions risk categorizing spaces as either “sighted” or “blind or low-vision,” emphasizing instead that *“A's environment is A's environment—not simply the environment of a blind person.”* This exchange illustrates how disability narratives challenged generalized design assumptions and foregrounded individuality over categorical thinking.

### 5.3 Prototypes as narrative and epistemic mediators

Through dialogue, students shifted attention from polished forms toward people-led adaptations, asking *“what extra things could be added to make it easier to use”* (S1). Blind and low-vision experts reframed categorical separations as political language (E1), highlighting how design norms are embedded in broader regulatory and institutional logics. This surfaced in discussion of accessibility legislation, where participants debated how mandates translate (or fail to translate) into situated practice. When E2 referred to accessibility legislation requiring all new products to be accessible, E1 questioned the applicability of universal mandates — *“from July you'll be fined if new products aren't accessible”*—emphasizing instead how blind people develop situated strategies for engaging with designed infrastructures and why tailored solutions may be preferable to top-down approaches.

### 5.4 Shared stewardship and reconfiguration in co-design

There was strong consensus that disabled participants should be involved as partners (S1, S3) from the very beginning of the design process (S1, S2, S3, S5), rather than positioned merely as testers. Both students and experts described disabled participants as *“design collaborators”* (S5) or *“co-designers”* (E1). Early involvement was seen as a way to identify dead ends before testing, as E1 said, *“If you involve people with disabilities in the design process from the beginning, you can design much more effectively.”* In this framing, lived experience was positioned as central expertise rather than supplementary input.

In relation to design education, only two participants (S1, S2) had prior formal training in accessible or inclusive design. Participants expressed the need for broader exposure to inclusive methods. Reflecting on the course's impact, S5 noted: *“Maybe*

*later when I'm designing something, I'll think, why not, why does it have to be a screen? Couldn't it be something tactile, and work the same way for everyone?"* The course's emphasis on process, iteration, and learning from mistakes was described as liberating and valuable. At the same time students (S2, S3, S5) pointed out tensions within short academic courses, where iterative prototyping with sketches or mock-ups is sometimes perceived as inefficient or a waste of time despite its pedagogical value for broadening possibilities. Students also highlighted the challenge of shifting from a perfectionist mindset to one that values prototyping and reflection (S1, S3).

Ultimately, participants reported smooth communication and the value of active listening during the course. However, they also recognized that empathy alone is insufficient; genuine understanding arises from dialogue and shared experience. As S5 reflected, *"Even if someone takes a class like this, where everything is taught really well, that alone is not enough to radically change someone's mindset."* Key barriers included limited prior exposure to disabled people (S5), uncertainty about how to design inclusively (S1, S5), and a tendency to perceive disabled people as a separate group (S3, E1). Overall, these insights illustrate how the course functioned as a transformative pedagogical space in which participants co-constructed understanding of design for disability, moving from conceptual distance toward collaborative, reflexive and process-oriented design practice.

## 6 REFLECTIONS

While above we presented students' reflections on collaboration and knowledge sharing, several elements transformed the classroom into a platform where everyone felt included, welcome to collaborate, and able to share their lived experiences and ideas. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation in the focus group. Accessibility supports included flexible participation, accessible formats for shared materials, and adapting classroom activities in response to participants' needs. Disabled experts were acknowledged as contributors, and care was taken to foster a respectful, comfortable, and dialogic learning environment. For instance, applying the UDL principles and introducing collaborative ethics were significant components that transformed the experience of the classroom drifting away from normative models of teaching. Thus, inclusivity and accessibility were not add-ons, but an ongoing negotiation co-created with participants of the classroom including students, experts, and educators. All participants brought diverse access needs into the classroom, and the environment itself was adapted and reshaped in response to these needs. In this way, access is not a precondition delivered from above, but an ongoing negotiation. Accessibility was a condition for collective epistemic production, and the site of becoming, where disability, pedagogy, and design interdependently reshape one another over time. The ongoing negotiations and exchanges of knowledge, both through the set-up of the learning environment, primarily facilitated by educators, but also through the participants' discursive interactions, materialized in the prototypes.

The prototypes embodied the experts' lived experiences and the interpretation of those by the students and carried socio-cultural negotiations, institutional norms, and everyday frictions, acting not as neutral artefacts but epistemic sites where disability knowledge

was made visible, shared and acted upon. Just as biographical prototypes [2] transform first-person accounts into design artefacts, prototypes created within a narrative space operate as tangible extensions of dialogue and reflection, making lived experience present and actionable in the design process.

The lived experiences of disabled experts thus shaped the class on multiple levels: they were materialized through prototypes, embedded in the co-construction of the inclusive classroom, and articulated through ongoing discourse among students and educators. Together, these elements formed a narrative space in which lived experiences do not merely inform design but actively generate knowledge and shift design perspectives. This space is co-created and continuously negotiated within the physical classroom, through designed artefacts, and in dialogue.

In relation to Das et al.'s [7] call for a new sub-discipline of socio-cultural inclusive design for disability, the concept of narrative space illustrates how disability knowledge itself can function as a generative standpoint. Rather than serving as input for predefined solutions, lived experience disrupts solutionist design logics and opens design practice toward new epistemic and political possibilities.

In this sense, sharing lived experiences and negotiating their meanings becomes a practice of co-imagining more just and interdependent futures, where disability is central to the re-making of design. The narrative space thus functions simultaneously as a pedagogical method and as a socio-cultural and political arena, in which disability is not reduced to individual deficit but explored as a socially, culturally, and politically situated condition.

## 7 LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This paper offers an exploratory account of how the narrative space was created and functioned through students' reflections and project descriptions. As a co-created and context-dependent construct, the narrative space will inevitably take different forms in other classrooms, shaped by the specific participants, educators, and lived experiences involved. Our current work provides only an initial glimpse into its dynamics; a thicker case and extended study would be needed to fully articulate its characteristics and implications. Nevertheless, the short format of this paper contributes by opening space for dialogue and expansion—serving as an invitation for the participatory design community to further explore and negotiate the contours of the narrative space. In sum, in this exploratory paper, we presented insights from a focus group with four design students and two disabled experts. We argued that situating disability as an epistemic standpoint and enacting the narrative space in the classroom reorganizes who speaks, what counts as evidence, and how futures are prototyped in design education.

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