



COSDIA
COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING FOR DISABILITY AWARENESS

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Re-writing disability narratives through collaborative creative writing: Reflections on the COSDIA project

23-24 May 2026,
DIS FESTIVAL – TOGETHER WE ARE BETTER

European Scientific Conference
DisAbility Culture: Art, Inclusion & Social
Transformation

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Agenda

- **Introduction:**
 - Overview of the COSDIA project
 - Theoretical Background
 - Contextualizing the project
- **Project Objectives & Research Questions**
- **Developing the COSDIA Approach (Research – Curriculum – Participants)**
- **Initial Findings & Implications for Practice**

Acknowledgements: A.G. Leventis Foundation Award (funding body), University of Cyprus

- COSDIA was awarded 1st place
- Funding to develop, implement and disseminate the COSDIA approach

Overview of the COSDIA project

COSDIA project brings together different fields:

- Inclusive Education and Inclusive Pedagogy
- Disability Studies , Disability Studies in Education,
- Collaboration between disabled and non-disabled people
- Creative Writing
- Media Literacy
- Drama Techniques
- Digital Storytelling
- Augmented Reality



Why? To develop an innovative educational approach focusing on inclusive education and shifting away from medical and charity disability models

Theoretical Background



- Inclusive Education:
 - ensures the uninterrupted access of all students to school facilities and the general education curriculum
 - their active participation in all school activities, without any discrimination based on gender, race, language, religion, or disability
- **Disability Studies (DS):** scholarly field that focuses on understanding disability on many different levels, including history, culture, politics, experience, and rhetoric (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2012).
- **Disability Studies in Education (DSE):** to apply DS theory to promote inclusive education in practice (Connor et al., 2015)
- Variety of viewpoints in DS and DSE, BUT the main focus of is that they view disability as a ***socially constructed phenomenon*** (Connor et al., 2008)

Theoretical Background



- **Social construction** : knowledge and understanding of a particular notion (such as disability) have developed via social interaction and have been shaped by a variety of intersecting economic, social and cultural factors

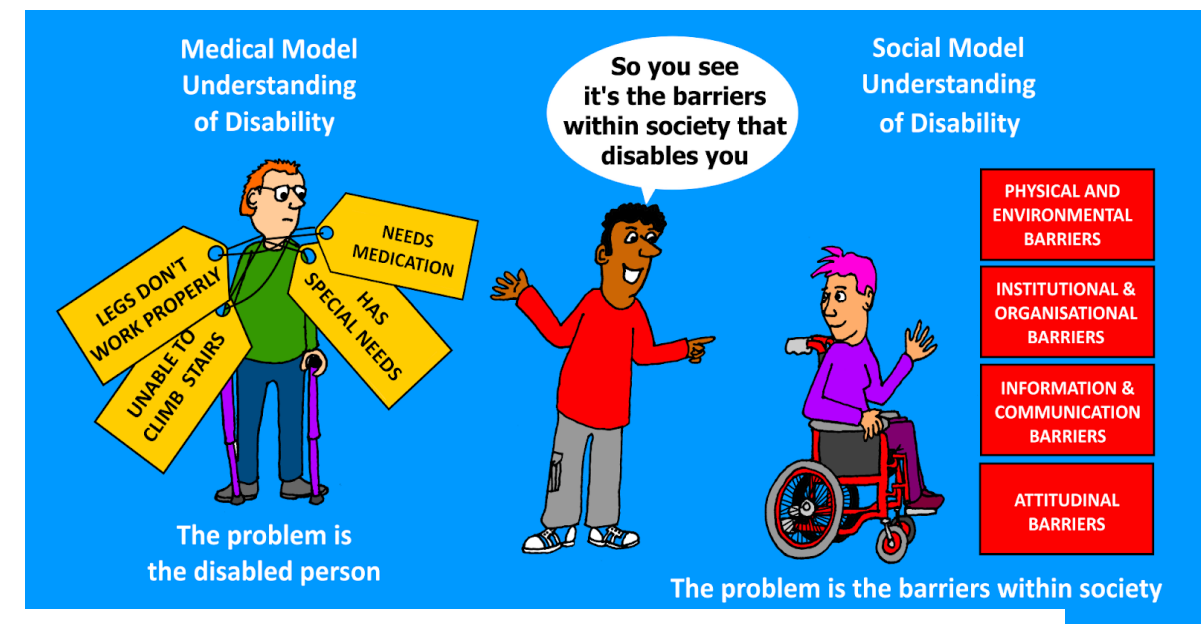
How we perceive disability affects our actions towards disabled people

Disability Models are different ways of perceiving and understanding how one views, perceives disability

- medical disability model
- charity disability model
- social disability model
- human rights model

Theoretical Background

Disability models, language and research



- Tremendous power of language in transmitting ideologies for inclusion and exclusion (Ballard, 2004)
- The way we speak and communicate about specific concepts reflects and constructs particular ideologies." (Foucault, 1980)
- Research shows that often student teachers and teachers perceive disability through medical and charity models (Lyra et al., 2023), related to a multiplicity of factors e.g. curricula, access to resources, educational background, training on special education and not on inclusive education, DS/DSE (Symeonidou, 2024)
- Educational approaches based on the framework of Disability Studies/DSE are valuable for fostering student teachers and teachers' disability awareness (Chrysostomou & Symeonidou, 2017)
- Initial education & continuous professional development focusing on critically examining disability constructions (critical consumers)
- But few studies on **critically creating** (Derby & Karr, 2015; Derby, 2016)... There is an identified gap in the literature regarding interdisciplinary approaches focusing on disability studies, collaborative storytelling and creative writing in contemporary online-offline environments - co creation of educational material.

COSDIA Development and Implementation

Considering disability models &

“Creative writing is both a way of knowing as well as a way of knowledge creation (Ostrom 2012, p.84).

in our case...

Collaborative creative writing as a way of understanding disability as well as a way of constructing knowledge about disability.

our aim...

To enhance student teachers and teachers' disability awareness and collaboration between disabled non-disabled, through collaborative storytelling and collaborative creative writing

in doing so...

Nayia & Myria developed eight modules, around the topics of disability studies, inclusive education and pedagogy, creative writing, media literacy

Creative Writing is a topic that permeates all modules but there are also specific modules dedicated to creative writing

Module 0: Introduction to COSDIA approach

Module 1: Once upon a time a team began to explore the connection between accurate disability representations and inclusive education in a blended environment.

Module 2: The team encountered fairy tales/stories about disability and had to search for language and picture clues in the books (Exploring disability representations in fairy tales/stories. How is disability represented? Why does it matter?)

Module 3: The team came upon a puzzle “Nowadays fairy tales/stories exist in online-offline environments of interaction. What does media literacy have to do with the stories/fairy tales and other forms of storytelling?” (how is media literacy connected to disability representations? being a prosumer, why does it matter?)

Module 4: Having solved the puzzle, the team decided to write its own story/fairy tale about disability/inclusive education – Creative Writing Part I

Module 5: The team encountered another puzzle “How can we make our own story/fairy tale engaging and accessible?” (Digital Storytelling and AR Applications) & Creative Writing part II

Module 6: But... they had another puzzle! “How are you going to utilize your stories/fairy tales in your teaching practice in engaging and accessible ways?” (inclusive lesson plans, Universal Design for Learning, drama techniques)

Module 7: and... they lived happily ever after? (reflections on the COSDIA training course, on the role of accessible and engaging fairy tales/stories,, on obstacles for disabled people's participation)

Contextualizing the COSDIA project



Research Team:

Dr Nayia Stylianidou & Dr Myria Pieridou
Project PI (UCY) Prof Helen Phtiaka

Support Team:

Dr Angelos Sofianidis, Yota Kotsafti,
Elena Koushiappi, Dr Anna P. Vakali

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COSDIA Project Development and Implementation

Collaborative creative writing as a way of **understanding** disability & **constructing** knowledge about disability

Our approach...

- elements of **flipped learning approach**
- **google classroom** → study material was sent to participants before synchronous meetings
- **synchronous meetings** had the form of workshops (f2f & online)
- small and diverse group (15 participants, student-teachers, teachers, disabled, non-disabled)
- cultivating a **culture of collaboration**, safe space, encouraging discussion and reflective practice
- inviting **experts** on the topics of the programme (e.g. experts on creative writing, on drama techniques, on AR)
- **flexibility**: two options of collaboration in small groups
 - (a) 2-3 people collaborate to write their own story
 - (b) Each person writes their own story but collaborates with the other members of the team for feedback



COSDIA Project Development and Implementation: Face to Face 1st meeting

Module 1: Once upon a time a team began to explore the connection between accurate disability representations and inclusive education in a blended environment.

Module 2: The team encountered fairy tales/stories about disability and had to search for language and picture clues in the books

Module 3: The team came upon a puzzle “Nowadays fairy tales/stories exist in online-offline environments of interaction. What does media literacy have to do with the stories/fairy tales and other forms of storytelling?” (how is media literacy connected to disability representations? being a prosumer, why does it matter?)

Creative Writing Step by Step

- Introduction to creative writing
 - Activities to familiarize participants with creative writing
- provide alternative titles to well known titles
- automatic writing
- story completion based on a prompt

Inclusive Education & Disability Models Step by Step

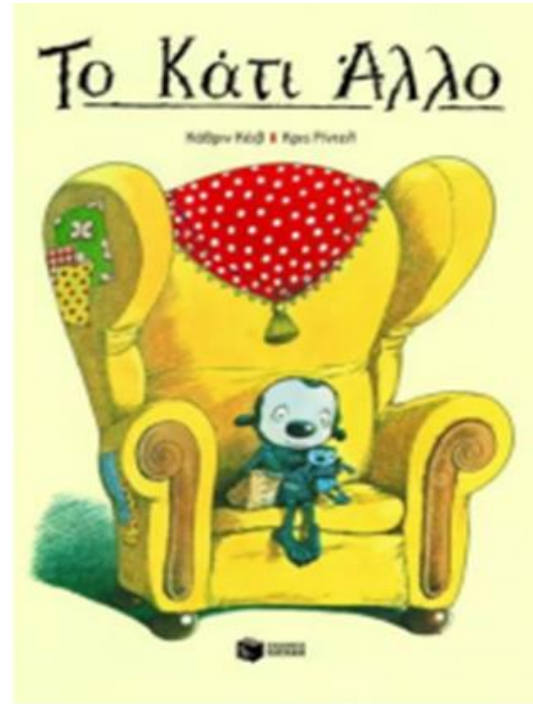
- Introduction to inclusive education and disability studies, disability models
 - Activities to familiarize participants with DS /DSE
 - Each group was provided with excerpts from fairy tales, movies, (Synchronous meeting 1)
- discuss how disability was represented , role of language (through which model or models in the specific excerpts)

COSDIA Project Development and Implementation: Face to Face 2nd meeting

Module 4: Having solved the puzzle, the team decided to write its own story/fairy tale about disability/inclusive education – Creative Writing Part I

Disability Representations Step by Step

- Examining plots and how disabled characters are represented in excerpts from fairy tales, micro-fiction
- “Something Else”
- “Do giraffes dance?”



COSDIA Project Development and Implementation: Face to Face 2nd meeting

Module 4: Having solved the puzzle, the team decided to write its own story/fairy tale about disability/inclusive education – Creative Writing Part I

Creative Writing Step by Step

- plot, setting, characters: creating a character
- brainstorming for participants own stories



Data collection research methods

Questionnaires	Identify participants' understandings of disability, as well as their needs in relation to innovative learning approaches related to inclusive education.
Focus group interviews	Explore participants' conceptualizations of disability and inclusive education and pedagogy, investigate if and in what ways the COSDIA approach contributes to their practice.
Reflection & Evaluation Forms	Allow participants time and space to reflect and evaluate their experiences, the materials and their interactions with the researchers and the supporting team.
Reflective Diaries	Enhance reflective thinking throughout the research project. Facilitate the researchers to acknowledge power dynamics, emotions and dilemmas, while strengthening a meaningful relationship with participants.
Participants' stories	Explore participants' conceptualizations of disability, investigate if and in what ways the COSDIA approach contributes to how participants write about disability

Initial Findings

1. Personal and Professional Development Needs and Challenges
2. Integration of Creative Writing and Disability Studies
3. Enhancing Disability/ies Understanding through Interdisciplinary Learning
4. Moving from knowledge to praxis
Educational Practices and Application



COSDIA project

Research, preliminary findings, thematic analysis

1. Integration of Creative Writing and Disability Studies

- Participants expressed that the program was effective in blending creative writing with disability studies
- This integration allowed them to explore and represent disabilities in ways that moved beyond traditional models (medical and charity model)
- Participants were keenly aware of the potential pitfalls of misrepresentation, stereotyping, or inadvertently reinforcing negative perceptions of disability.

“The program helped me with avoiding falling into the trap of eliciting pity or sympathy through my story. As the programme progressed, I focused on promoting messages of empowerment” (P2, Focus Group1)

“It was a challenge to write stories that didn’t fall into the usual clichés about disability. But with the support of the group, I was able to create something that felt true and respectful” (P5, Focus Group2)

COSDIA project

Research, preliminary findings, thematic analysis

2. Enhancing Disability/ies Understanding through Interdisciplinary Learning

- The combination of creative writing and disability studies provided participants with a new perspective on inclusive education.
- Empowerment for participants and their characters
- Increase of knowledge about disability models and disability representation

“Even though I had studied disability and inclusion before, approaching it through creative writing gave me a new perspective. It made me think more deeply about how we portray people with disabilities, who is included and who is excluded in our stories”
(P8, Focus Group1)

“Writing these stories was empowering not just for me, but for the characters I created. I wanted to show that people with disabilities are just as capable and multi-dimensional as anyone else” (P1, Focus Group2)

“Disability models are now clearer in my mind, and I understand how a story should be constructed in order to avoid stereotypes”
(Reflective Diary_Final)

COSDIA project

Research, preliminary findings, thematic analysis

3. Moving from knowledge to praxis

Educational Practices and Application

- The interdisciplinary nature of the program provided participants with practical skills that could be applied in educational settings, particularly in promoting inclusivity.
- Self-confidence in designing inclusive lessons

“The interdisciplinary approach was incredibly useful. I’m excited to bring what I’ve learned into my classroom, especially using creative writing to engage students on topics of inclusivity” (P8, Focus Group1)

“I now feel more equipped to design lessons that are inclusive of all students, regardless of their abilities. The program gave me practical ways to implement what I learned” (P1, Focus Group2)

A participant's story-journey: Sorrow in the land of Emotions

1st draft

But no one ever wondered where Sorrow was. No one is looking for her anyway. Everyone avoids her, since a black cloud constantly hangs over her, making others unhappy. Besides, it wasn't just that she made others sad. She was... Different.

You see, she couldn't run or play with the others, since her wheelchair made it difficult for her.

So today, just like every day, she curled up in her gray sheets while tears streamed down her face. "Why doesn't anyone want me around? Why do I make everyone unhappy? Why am I different?" These thoughts swirled around in her mind all day long.

2nd draft

In the Land of Emotions, there were no ramps, nor wide sidewalks where Sorrow, in her wheelchair, could play carefree, spinning in circles like a top in the streets and parks.

Besides that, in the Land of Emotions, there were also some little black monsters with huge tongues. They were called Prejudices. The Prejudices lived in tiny little houses made of coal. They always wore the same black clothes, ate black licorice every day, and loved to make fun of anyone who was different. So, whenever they saw Sorrow, they would snicker, saying, "She's weird with those different legs."

Final draft

Suddenly, Disappointment, who was looking for a quiet place to be alone, saw that the wooden bench where Sorrow always sat was empty. Although she didn't play with Sorrow at all—since Prejudices had convinced her "that Sorrow doesn't belong here and has nothing in common with anyone" Disappointment understood Sorrow. She, too, often felt alone, even if she wouldn't admit it. The Prejudices would have spoken ill of her. That's why she never said or did anything. She was always quiet and alone. But now something was changing inside her. That's when she decided to defy the Prejudices. "Neither Sorrow nor I deserve to feel this way. ... She decided she had to do something!

A participant's story-journey: Echo

If I could speak... (title – draft 1) Medical model

..”Echo, hand in hand with her sister, Love, plays together. She looks at her sister with puzzled eyes, ready to speak. **She wants to say so many things, but unfortunately, she cannot.** ‘If I could speak... I would tell you I love you, I'm sorry, thank you, I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, do you want to play?’ (draft 1).

I can speak ! (title – draft 2)

Towards social model...

She looks at her sister with puzzled eyes, ready to speak. She wants to say so many things, but unfortunately, she falls silent. I can speak too; I would shout and declare that I am not just a label. **I am Echo, who loves sounds, even if she herself cannot speak in turn.** Listen to me! Remember that I have a voice that does not want to remain hidden. If I could speak... I would tell you to remember, **I could also say I love you, I'm sorry, thank you, I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, do you want to play?** I would tell you I can also tell you that I like spaghetti with meat sauce, which food I like, but also which I dislike, ‘ **I could read** my favorite fairy tales.

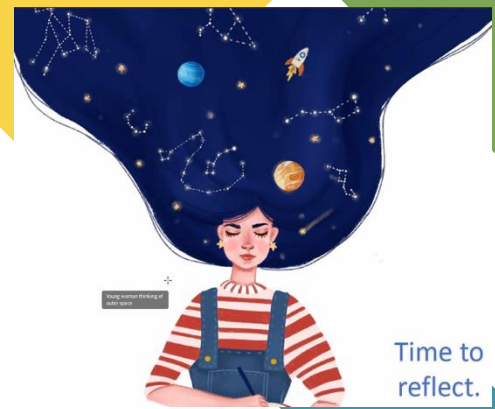
I can speak too! (title- final draft, 6)

Social & Human Rights Model

I would shout and declare that I am not just a label, I am not just an autistic person. I am Echo, who loves sounds. Listen to me! Remember that I have a voice that does not want to remain hidden. **It wants to live in the light.**

Remember, **I can also** say I love you, I'm sorry, thank you, I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, do you want to play?“...**I can read** my favorite fairy tales even if I don't read them out loud. Suddenly, she came across **a page from the old diary.** It read, "If I could speak...". She flipped through a bit more and a little further down, **she encountered another of her thoughts: "I can speak too."** She smiled and wrote on the last page of the diary: **"I have a voice too, remember that! I love, I dream, and I will never be silent... Listen to me. I am here!"**

Supporting **inclusive practice** through the **COSDIA** approach



- Reflective diaries & focus group discussions:
- ✓ **Personal and professional changes** that participants experienced throughout the COSDIA program.
- ✓ Participation facilitated **emotional and cognitive growth**, particularly in understanding disability and implementing inclusive education
- ✓ **Shift in Perspective** on Disability: moving away from a charity-based model towards one centered on acceptance and equality.
- ✓ **Professional Development and Confidence:**

“Through this program, I realized that people with disabilities don’t need our pity. They deserve the same respect and opportunities as everyone else. This has changed how I see and interact with people in my everyday life”(Cosdia_FocusGroup1).

“This program changed me as a person. It wasn’t just about learning new things; it was about becoming a more compassionate and understanding individual”(Cosdia_FocusGroup1)

“I now feel more equipped to design lessons that are inclusive of all students, regardless of their abilities. The program gave me practical ways to implement what I learned”(Cosdia_Focus Group2)

“I’ve gained so much confidence in handling diverse classrooms. The techniques we learned here are going to be a huge help in my teaching career”(Cosdia_FocusGroup1)

Reflections on COSDIA & next steps

- ✓ Blending of creative writing, inclusive education, and disability studies was a particularly powerful aspect of the program.
- ✓ Interdisciplinary approach enriched participants' understanding but also provided them with practical tools to implement in their teaching practices.
- ✓ The collaborative learning environment further supported participants' growth, enabling them to overcome challenges and produce meaningful work.
- **Next steps:** Develop and share research report & COSDIA Guidelines/ [COSDIA project website](#)/ Organise dissemination events for participants & teachers/ **Publish edited book with stories & lesson plans**/ Wider dissemination - OER



Thank you!

Nayia & Myria



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Thank you for everything! This project was an incredible opportunity for us; we cried and laughed, we had discussions & disagreements, we read fairy tales and wonderful stories, we discussed them and (again!) had disagreements, we re-wrote (stories), we became human sculptures (in our theatre & drama activities)...

And this is how one can learn about inclusive education & challenge dominant disability representations....

And you made everything possible!

Thank you for your active engagement & participation!



July meeting ☺

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