



EDUC/PSYC 355 - Critical Disabilities Studies: Seminar and Practicum

Course Syllabus

Fall Semester 2026

Instructors: Natascia Petringa, PhD

Credits: 3

Contact Hours: 21 seminar hours and 30 practicum hours

Prerequisites: none

Class Meeting Days & Time:

Seminar: Mondays 2:15-3:45 pm

Practicum: Wednesdays 2:15-5:30 pm at VIVA Sports

Office Hours: One hour before or after class. Please email the Professor to schedule an appointment.

Email:

Course Type: Seminar and Practicum

Course Fee: USD\$135

Course Description

The course intends to give a multicultural view on differently-abled persons and how societies respond and handle the issue of critical disability. Focus is posed on the different forms of disability (acquired vs. inborn), how to empower a differently-abled person in order to reinforce resilience and how to assist people to reach as much independence as possible. Students will gain insight on how different countries respond to disabilities and which policies of integration are adopted.

All students enrolled in this course will complete three contact hours per week with VIVA Sports Association, which is an athletic program for children and young adults with motor and/or intellectual disabilities in Perugia. Students will assist the professional staff in managing the athletic activities, helping children and adults with a variety of disabilities play sports, including fencing, ping-pong, volleyball, and basketball in order to develop social and motor skills. In addition, students will also collaborate with VIVA staff in designing new activities for participants.

The goal of this course is to foster greater awareness of the experiences of differently-abled people and to reflect on inclusion of individuals with disabilities into society by assuming a critical perspective. It also introduces students to cultural engagement based on mutual benefit and growth through dialogue and hands-on experience. The course is designed for students willing to broaden their cultural perspectives, develop a heightened sense of intercultural awareness and sensitivity, and see different communities from a comparative, global standpoint. Students who commit to this course should keep an open mind, be motivated to actively learn, and be flexible. For more information on VIVA: VIVA's website (<https://www.vivapg.it/>)

Learning Outcomes and Assessment Measures

Below are the learning outcomes, followed by the methods that will be used to assess students' achievement for each learning outcome. By the end of this course, students will be able to:

By the end of the course students will be able to:	Assessment Measures used to assess achievement for each outcome:
<i>List and summarize</i> the main forms of disability	Course Journal, Midterm Exam
<i>Understand and describe</i> cultural variations in the approach to improve societal integration for differently-abled people	Class Discussion and Practicum Participation Reflection Paper

<i>List and summarize</i> the aims of a programme to encourage participation and build resilience for differently-abled people	Course Journal, Midterm Exam
<i>Analyze and evaluate</i> a programme to encourage participation and build resilience for differently-abled people	Practicum Participation Class Activity

Course Materials

Readings

A course reader, including all the indicated readings, will be available. The course's Moodle site is the primary location for readings and assignments.

Assessment

Attendance 10 %

Weekly Moodle Quizzes 10 %

Course Journal (2.5% x 2 submissions) 5 %

One-to-one meeting with teacher (x 2) 5 %

PhotoVoice 5%

Infographic 5%

Midterm Exam 25 %

Reflection Paper: Outline or draft (5%) and final paper (20%)

Group Activity 5%

End of semester Community Engagement Presentations 5%

Grading

Students are reminded that it is their responsibility to note the dates of exams and other assignments. No alternative exam dates will be offered and professors are not required to give partial credit for any late work (they do so at their discretion: the Institute's default policy is no extensions and a zero for any work turned in late). Students who book travel when they have an exam or other assessment will have to change their plans or accept a zero.

Letter grades for student work are based on the following percentage scale:

Letter Grade Range	Numerical Score Equivalent	Student Performance
A A-	93% - 100% 90% - 92%	Exceptional Excellent
B+ B B-	87% - 89% 83% - 86% 80% - 82%	Superior
C+ C C-	77% - 79% 73% - 76% 70% - 72%	Satisfactory
D+ D D-	67% - 69% 63% - 66% 60% - 62%	Low Pass
F	59% or less	Fail (no credit)

Please note: decimal numerals between 1-4 are rounded down while 5-9 are rounded up: e.g., expect 89.4 to be 89.0 while 89.5 to round up to 90.

Course Requirements

Grades are based on the following criteria.

Attendance (10%)

Attendance is an essential part of this course. You are allowed 2 unexcused absences per course without penalty, per Institute policy. If you attend all the other meetings, you will receive 10% for this part of your grade. There are no make-ups offered for attendance.

Moodle Quizzes (10%)

Students will be assigned short quizzes throughout the semester, which will be due before class time and will not be reopened. The quiz will be on Moodle and it is not timed. Students can take the quiz as many times as they like, with the recorded grade being the highest grade they receive. There will be a combination of *content*, *technical*, and *methodological questions*. The content questions will help students zoom in on the most important ideas of the week's teachings and readings. The technical questions will help students learn the class's policies and administrative procedures. The methodological questions will test on skills that will pop up every week, like finding an author's argument and assessing sources.

Course Journal (5%)

Students will keep a notebook at the start of the semester, which they will use as a personal space through which to reflect on course material and ideas. In-class assignments (e.g., summaries of assigned readings, analyses of primary sources, mental maps, reflections, predictive exercises) will be regularly scheduled and graded two times throughout the semester, i.e. fairly early in the semester (Week 5), and towards the end of the course (Week 10). Each of these checks is worth 2.5% of your grade, for a total of 5%. See the full prompt on Moodle for more information.

One-to-One Meetings (5%)

Getting to know your professor makes you more comfortable with that person and therefore more likely to ask for help. It also might help for you to ask questions about the various assignments or discuss a paper idea. In this course, you get 5% of your grade for coming to see me twice. I would suggest seeing me before Week 6 and Week 10. Please email me for an appointment.

PhotoVoice (5%) Students will take a picture of their choice that best reflects an aspect of critical disability. They will then write a personal reflection on the photograph and discuss ways to create greater awareness and social justice (250-300 words, 12-point Garamond font). Hand in printed version.

Infographic (5%)

Each student will make a one-page infographic on a disability of their choice. This can be a *cognitive*, *physical*, *intellectual* or *socio-emotional disability*. Students will submit a printed version and present their infographic for five minutes in class. Detailed requirements for the infographic will be shared by your teacher.

Midterm Exam (25%)

Students will sit for a midterm written exam, consisting of a mixture of short answers, multiple-choice, and case-studies questions covering all of the course materials. Students will be provided with a format of the exam (NOT a review sheet).

Reflection Paper (25%)

The reflection paper will amount to 25% of the final grade divided as follows: Outline or draft, as the student prefers (5%) and final paper (20%). Detailed rubrics will be available on Moodle.

Group Activity (5%)

Students will work in small groups (2 or 3) and make either a game or poster to create greater awareness of cognitive, physical, intellectual or socio-emotional disabilities. Samples will be shared by your professor.

End of Semester Community Engagement Presentations (5%)

During Special Academic Events Week, the class will present a 15-minute summary of the project experience to the Umbra community during the **Community Engagement Final Presentations** in Week 13. Students will receive the guidelines and presentation order after the mid-semester break. Participation in this event is MANDATORY and an integral part of the community engagement grade.

Extension & Submitting Late Work

Work submitted after the deadline will receive a grade of zero, not partial credit. Each student is allowed one extension of 24 hours over the entire semester. This can be used for any assignment except the final project. Students need to email the instructor before the deadline and inform the instructor of their use of the extension. Any work submitted after the 24-hour extension will be marked zero. As for all policies, exceptions can be made by the Director for students with special accommodations or in case of medical emergencies, etc.

Attendance Policy

Attendance is expected and mandatory for classroom times and co-curricular activities. The first two absences per course due to illness will be considered excused "sick days" and do not require medical documentation. To receive additional excused absences due to illness, students are required to see a local physician or request a letter from an Institute-approved doctor documenting they should be excused from class for illness. Unexcused absences will adversely affect a student's academic performance and will result in a reduction of the student's final course grade by 2% per absence up to a maximum of 10%. Excessive unexcused absences may result in a failing grade or disciplinary action. It is the student's responsibility to be aware of the number of absences or late arrivals for each course, and to ask the instructor when in doubt.

If students miss class, they are responsible for obtaining class notes from other students and/or for meeting the professor during office hours. Any work missed in class because of an excused absence may be made up within one week of the return to the class. Any work missed that was a quiz or other test must be made up outside of class time and will, in the interest of intellectual honesty, be a slightly different test than the one given in class. Presence during mandatory field trips is especially important. Missing a mandatory field trip for a course, unless for a very serious reason that is communicated to Umbra staff in a timely manner, will lower the students' grade by half a letter grade (i.e., a final grade of a B+ would be lowered to a B).

Participation in practicum sessions is imperative to the course. Failure to attend a practicum session will be regarded as an absence.

Legitimate reasons for an excused absence or tardiness include death in the immediate family, religious observances, illness or injury, local inclement weather, and medical appointments that cannot be rescheduled.

Absences relating to illness may be excused by the Director, but only if a medical certification is provided. Students who request an approved absence to observe a religious holiday must submit a formal request to the Institute's Director within one week after the add/drop period when course schedules, including any field trips, are finalized. No exceptions will be made after this deadline.

Except in the case of medical emergencies, absences are not accepted when tests are scheduled; tests cannot be made up. Furthermore, scheduled times and dates indicated for exams, quizzes, oral presentations, and any other graded assignments cannot be changed for any reason. Even if more sections of the same class are activated, students may only take exams during the scheduled times and dates for the section they are enrolled in.

Tardiness Policy

Students are expected to attend all classes punctually. Any student arriving up to 15 minutes late or leaving up to 15 minutes earlier than the scheduled class end time will be marked as tardy. Each incident of tardiness (late arrivals to or early departures from class) is 0.5% off the final grade. However, should a student arrive more than 15 minutes late or depart more than 15 minutes before the conclusion of the class, it will be recorded as an absence.

Students are also expected to remain in class during the time of instruction except for a reasonable amount of time to use the restroom. Students who leave class and do not return during the class session will receive an unexcused absence or late penalty.

Academic Integrity

All forms of cheating (i.e., copying during exam either from a fellow student or making unauthorized use of notes) and plagiarism (i.e., presenting the ideas or words of another person for academic evaluation without acknowledging the source) will be handled according to the Institute Academic Policy, which can be found in the

Umbra Institute Academic Policies and Conduct Guidelines.

Utilizing ChatGPT or other artificial intelligence (AI) tools for the generation of content submitted by a student as their own as part of any assignment for academic credit at the Institute constitutes a form of plagiarism. Should the Institute become aware of a student's use of such platforms and services, the student will be subject to the same consequences and judicial proceedings as are in place for plagiarism (defined above).

Classroom Policy

Students are expected to follow the policy of the Institute and demonstrate the appropriate respect for the historical premises that the school occupies. Please note that cell phones must be set on silent mode before the beginning of each class. Computers and other electronic devices (for example, earbuds and smart watches) cannot be used during class lectures and discussions for anything other than note-taking, unless there has been a specific academic accommodation.

Laptop Policy

Students are expected to follow the policy of the Institute and demonstrate the appropriate respect for the historical premises that the school occupies. Please note that cell phones must be set on silent mode before the beginning of each class. Computers and other electronic devices cannot be used during class lectures and discussions, unless there has been a specific academic accommodation, or if working on a group project and literature searches are an integral part of the lesson.

An ever-increasing body of research shows that open laptops and telephones in the classroom create distraction (both visual and auditory) for those using them and those around them. You can type faster than you can write, and as a result you end up processing less when you're simply typing notes. For this reason, I have a physical notebook policy: I ask you to leave your computers in your bags and phones in your pockets and use a regular notebook. There are four exceptions: 1) if you have a vision or other accommodation; 2) if you are using a tablet to take notes, one which is not connected to the internet; 3) if we have an in-class tutorial about online research tools; or 4) if you make an office hours appointment with me to discuss a need.

Schedule of Topics, Readings, and Assignments

Week 1 **(SEPTEMBER 7-11, 2026)**

Introduction to Critical Disabilities

Introduction to the course and definition of critical disabilities

Goals and expectations: What is critical disability?

Introduction to VIVA and the practicum (Approx. 45 minutes)

Introduction to VIVA Sport by Gabriele Bartolucci (founder of VIVA).

Introduction of the practicum by Umbra staff

You will receive an email from Mr Manuel Barbato and Ms Margherita Garilli with detailed information about the practicum at VIVA Sports.

Week 2 **(SEPTEMBER 14-18, 2026)**

A Framework to Study Critical Disabilities

Readings for the week:

World Health Organisation (2001) *The ICF and Overview*, pp.1-10.

https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/icd/icfoverview_finalforwho10sept.pdf

World Health Organization. *World Report on Disability 2011*. World Health Organization (2011): 3-10.

Week 3 **(SEPTEMBER 21-25, 2026)**

Defining Disability: Assessments and the Need for Definitions

Readings for the week:

Ferguson, Philip M., and Emily Nusbaum. "Disability studies: What is it and what difference does it make?." *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities* 37, no. 2 (2012): 70-80.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/154079691203700202>

Migliarini, Valentina, Brent C. Elder, and Simona D'Alessio. "A DisCrit-informed person-centered approach to inclusive education in Italy." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 54, no. 4 (2021): 409-425.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2021.2047415>

For reference only:

United Nations Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol (2006): 1-37.

Assignment:

Weekly Moodle Quiz

Week 4
(SEPTEMBER 28- OCTOBER 2, 2026)

Challenges and Implications in Development: Inborn and Acquired Disabilities

Readings for the week:

Bogart, Kathleen R. "The role of disability self-concept in adaptation to congenital or acquired disability." *Rehabilitation Psychology* 59, no. 1 (2014): 107-115.

Bogart, Kathleen R., Nicole M. Rosa, and Michael L. Slepian. "Born that way or became that way: Stigma toward congenital versus acquired disability." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 22, no. 4 (2019): 594-612.

World Health Organisation. (27 February 2023) Factsheet on Congenital Disorders.
<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/birth-defects>

Assignments:

Weekly Moodle Quiz

Photovoice (printed) and brief presentation (2-3 min).

Wed September 30th at 2:15pm: In-class guest lecture by Prof. Veronica Vassura on "Special Education" in Italy.

Week 5
(OCTOBER 5-9, 2026)

Communication Skills, Empathy and Disability

Readings for the week:

Mirete, Ana B., Ma Luisa Belmonte, Lucía Mirete, and Ma Paz García-Sanz. "Predictors of attitudes about people with intellectual disabilities: empathy for a change towards inclusion." *International Journal of Developmental Disabilities* 68, no. 5 (2022): 615-623. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2020.1851122>

Moudatsou, Maria, Areti Stavropoulou, Anastas Philalithis, and Sofia Koukouli. "The role of empathy in health and social care professionals." *Healthcare*, vol. 8, no. 1: 26 (2020): 1-9.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare8010026>

Assignments:

Weekly Moodle Quiz

First Course Journal submission

Wednesday, October 7: Initial day of practicum at VIVA Sports Association

Week 6
(OCTOBER 12-16, 2026)
Midterm Exam Week

Monday October 12: **Midterm exam** (in class). Students will be provided with a format of the exam (NOT a review sheet).

Practicum: Hand in your hours log to Manuel (mbarbato@umbra.org) by **Thursday, October 15 at 12:00 pm**

Assignment:

First one-to-one meeting with professor – last chance to get credit

Mid-Semester Break: October 19-23, 2026

Week 7 (OCTOBER 26-30, 2026)

The Importance of Physical Activity (PA) for Differently-Abled People. Guest speaker on severe Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) for 45-60 minutes (Mr Andrew Kavchak).

Readings for the week:

Holt, Nicholas L., and Kacey C. Neely. "Positive youth development through sport: A review." *Revista Iberoamericana de Psicología del Ejercicio y el Deporte* 6, no. 2 (2011): 299-316.

Sancassiani, Federica, Sergio Machado, and Antonio Preti. "Physical activity, exercise and sport programs as effective therapeutic tools in psychosocial rehabilitation." *Clinical practice and epidemiology in mental health: CP & EMH* 14 (2018): 6-10. <https://doi.org/10.2174/1745017901814010006>.

Optional readings:

Scarpa, Stefano. "Exploring psychological well-being and bodily identities formation of youth sports adapted practitioners. Comparison of people with congenital and acquired disabilities." *Italian Journal of Health Education, Sports and Inclusive Didactics*, 5, no. 2 (2021): 127-138.

Specht, Jacqueline, Gillian King, Elizabeth Brown, and Carey Foris. "The importance of leisure in the lives of persons with congenital physical disabilities." *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 56, no. 4 (2002): 436-445.

Assignments:

Weekly Moodle Quiz

Infographic and 5-minute presentation

Week 8 (NOVEMBER 2-6, 2026)

Being Differently-Able: Resilience

Readings for the week:

Hart, Angela, Becky Heaver, Elinor Brunnberg, Anette Sandberg, Hannah Macpherson, Stephanie Coombe, and Elias Kourkoutas. "Resilience-building with disabled children and young people: A review and critique of the academic evidence base." *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies* 5, no. 3 (2014): 394-422.

Mannino, Jennifer Emilie. "Resilience and transitioning to adulthood among emerging adults with disabilities." *Journal of Pediatric Nursing* 30, no. 5 (2015): 131-145.

Stuntzner, Susan, and Michael Hartley. "Resilience, coping, & disability: The development of a resilience intervention." *Vistas Online* (2014): 1-11.

Assignments:

Weekly Moodle Quiz

Week 9 (NOVEMBER 9-13, 2026)

Evaluating the Programmes for Youths with Disabilities

Readings for the week:

Magnanini, Angela, and Giulio Morelli. "Primary school pre-service teachers' attitudes on the value of inclusive motor activity and physical education lessons." *Italian Journal of Health Education, Sports and Inclusive Didactics*, 6. no. 1 (2022): 1-12.

Shields, N., Anneliese, J.S., Barr, M. "Perceived barriers and facilitators to physical activity for children with disability: A systematic review." *Br J Sports Med* 46 (2012): 989-997.

Assignments:

Weekly Moodle Quiz

Outline or draft of Reflection Paper due

Week 10

(NOVEMBER 16-20, 2026)

NO CLASSES ON THURSDAY DUE TO CAPSTONE TRIP

Intellectual (or Cognitive) Disabilities: Children and Adults with Down Syndrome

Readings:

Cuskelly, Monica, Penny Hauser-Cram, and Marcia Van Riper. "Families of children with Down syndrome: What we know and what we need to know." *Down Syndrome Research and Practice* (2008): 105-113.

Menear, Kristi. "Parents' perceptions of health and physical activity needs of children with Down syndrome." *Down Syndrome Research and Practice* 12, no. 1 (2007): 60-68.

Assignments:

Weekly Moodle Quiz

Second Course Journal submission

Second one-to-one meeting with professor – last chance to get credit

Week 11

(NOVEMBER 23-28, 2026)

NO CLASSES ON THURSDAY DUE TO THANKSGIVING BREAK

Disability and Inclusion in Schools and the Workplace

Readings for the week:

Egilson, Snaefridur Thora, and Rannveig Traustadottir. "Participation of students with physical disabilities in the school environment." *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy* 63, no. 3 (2009): 264-272.

Gastaldi, Luca, Antonio Ghezzi, Riccardo Mangiaracina, Andrea Rangone, Marcelo N. Cortimiglia, Mateus Zanatta, and Fernando G. Amaral. "Mapping ICT access and disability in the workplace: An empirical study in Italy." *Work* 51, no. 2 (2015): 293-300.

Assignment:

Final Reflection Paper due on **Monday November 23** (printed on paper and stapled). This date is negotiable. We can discuss it in class.

Assignment:

Weekly Moodle Quiz

Week 12
(NOVEMBER 30-DECEMBER 4, 2026)

Preparation of the Community Engagement Presentations

Taking stock of the practicum experience.

End of semester Community Engagement Presentation: Preparation and rehearsal for the event.

Practicum: Hand in hours log to Manuel (CE Office, Umbra 1st floor) by Thursday, December 10 at 12:00 pm.

Week 13
(DECEMBER 7-11, 2026)

Class Group Activity: A surprise activity on CD in class!

Wednesday, December 9: End of the Semester **Community Engagement Presentations** - Special Academic Event