

Ableism in the Curriculum: A roundtable conversation

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Roundtable participants:

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Transcript of discussion of question 3

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you. Such amazing answers so far and I'm sorry we don't have more time for you to discuss among each other about them but I wonder if we could move to the third question which is what would a curriculum that isn't ableist look like or feel like or be experienced as? How would that be?

Fiona Kumari Campbell

I laughed when I saw that question because I'm usually a very upbeat person, I'm very much an optimist and believe that whilst change happens slowly and sometimes incrementally positive social change is possible. But my first response was is it actually possible to not have the curriculum that's not ableist? I'm not sure. I'd like to think that if we can move towards it – but it needs to be a university wide commitment. This comes into the previous question. For the university to develop a standpoint and an ethos that it will commit itself, and it's a really hard task because it includes conscious and unconscious bias, that will commit itself to anti-ableist practice.

So that in itself, and I think again picking up those comments from some of the previous speakers, it needs to be immersed and overflowing in all aspects of the curriculum. And how do we do things, how we communicate learning styles. How we even structure education. It does assume a degree of consciousness mind you and consciousness raising. Ableism as a term now is being used with increased frequency. I've got a book that's coming out and it's called #Ableism. We use it a lot but it's not understood very well in its complexity and people need to be prepared to do the hard work.

In terms of a non-ableist curriculum, I think we need to resist approaches – so here's a small ... – resist approaches that put marginality into silos. The concern I have at the moment since I've been involved in equality and diversity strategies at my own university, is that it's like the different groups. We've got LGBT in our history month at the moment, we just had Black history month. So, we cluster these groups. They don't talk to each other; they don't share experiences. And I think as I said to you, we need to ensure that all our modules; we need to develop some criteria to – and a former speaker just talked about scrutinising what is being taught in the courses and modules.

For example, just because LGBTIQ is in a module, or disability, what is being said? In fact, I find that sometimes when those particular peripheral populations are included in modules, or I see them written down, I often wonder what the hell is going on. And to be honest, this is being recorded of course, but I kind of think oh ok, this is the module leader, I think I know what their politics is, and sometimes I feel that's dangerous.

I do think we have to stop seeing disability just as a need. It has to be seen along with race, gender, sexuality as another axis of marginality. And we need to have a flexible assessment. And can I just say, I think we also need to call out ableist practices and unconscious bias. And there needs to be a process in modules and in classrooms of creating a safe space.

I just want to finish here because progressive intellectuals know it is no longer acceptable to exclude disability studies or exclude ableist analysis from the research project. And I want to give you an example. Recently, and I don't know much about it, but it was on Facebook and that's where people get their information. Recently there was a brand new Centre for Minority Studies set up at St Andrew's University in Scotland. So you would think Centre for Minority Studies, I go into their webpage and find out that disability is not mentioned as an axis of exclusion. In 2018 that is no longer acceptable. So we need to be able to call out ableist practices and unconscious bias and that's how we can resist ableism in the curriculum.

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you.

BGS: Obviously as I said before, I come from a student standpoint. I speak to a lot of students who have disabilities and I think what a massive difference that would be if the curriculum was not ableist, is that you would actually have more presence of disabled students in class. Because personally I don't go to two thirds of my classes because I physically can't. The rooms aren't accessible, the teachers teach in a way that I simply cannot understand, cannot process. I don't go to the vast majority of my classes. Of course I catch up and, you know.

So that's kind of my biggest difference is that there would be more presence of disabled students. Many disabled people don't actually go to university because they're worried about the access, there are so many reasons. Obviously I could go on forever about that.

And also a key thing that I picked up on, I can't remember who said it, was about integrating, it's more than integration, it's inclusion. Because if you integrate, having all these different sections LGBTI, BAME, all of these different sections yes they are brought in and they are within there, but they are still sectioned off into a group within society and within university.

Nicole Brown

I would just like to second what Fiona and Rachel said. It's not about being made to stand out and I think that's the important thing is that you don't want somebody to be made to stand out for whatever issue or whatever reason. And I think it's about therefore to have strategies as practical lecturers, teachers to have strategies that are inclusive.

So for example, slide and font colours. Slide and font colours aren't a big deal to change and for most people it doesn't really matter what slide and font colour you've got. But for somebody who's dyslexic, black on white is horrendously difficult to read. For somebody who has got some sensory processing issues, black on white is horrendously awful because

it's just too bright and too contrasting. So having dark blue on light blue would make a huge difference to those people. But actually the rest of us probably wouldn't care.

And it's that kind of attitude that we need to bring, that we just have to basically find ways where you shouldn't have an 18 or 19-year-old student having to go up to a lecturer or professor and say excuse me please, can you make sure that you change your slide colours next time. I know myself a person who had to do that. And I'm thinking that is completely inappropriate, to ask an 18 or 19-year-old student to do that, that is a huge amount of responsibility and I think it should be the responsibility of us on the teaching side to just automatically include these things. Similar when we put pictures up, automatically include a description of the picture. When we put abstracts up or readings up, automatically put up a link to text to speech so that people can actually listen to it. And that kind of thing is actually what I think would make something that is not ableist.

Rachel O'Brien

I agree with Fiona in the sense of I like to think of myself as an optimist. I think most of my friends would disagree, but – is it actually possible to have a curriculum – I'm talking like now, that is not ableist? And don't think it is in our current social situation because as I said, universities do not exist in a vacuum. If you look at the wider social and political things which are happening to disabled people, cuts to social care, cuts to benefits, cuts to DSA, Disabled Students Allowance, these are all material needs that disabled people have.

One of the reasons why a lot of disabled people don't go on to university or don't stay in university is it's completely irrelevant, I can't often engage with the course material or whatever. But the other reason is that people literally cannot afford to go university or they don't have the social care needed or they need in order to go to university. So, actually I don't think as things stand now, that our curriculum cannot be ableist because our entire society is ableist and excluding disabled people to the point of yeah, people dying, like en masse.

I think in a hypothetical situation where everything was sorted out and good in whatever society, which I don't think is going to happen for a while, I think in terms of how you would then make the curriculum not ableist, is – yeah, inclusive delivery as we've been talking about. Or the different options, just like you have different access needs, so at least – the lecturer might deliver it in one format but if you go on the website you've got in three different formats so that you can print it off and have it in front of you before the lecture so you can follow it. Things like that, having sign language interpreters who are readily available when a student needs them, so on and so forth. For some, like autistic students in particular, like having things broken down step by step is often very useful, things like that.

I think also another thing is acknowledging the history of where the information being taught has come from is really important. Like I don't know if anyone has seen the Rhodes Must Fall campaign at Oxford? Now this is about more specifically black and ethnic minority students but every day they had to walk past this statue of a coloniser basically. This is someone who violently colonised people – in many of the countries where these students had come from or where their families had originally come from. And it wasn't a case of pretending that had never happened, but putting up a plaque that just acknowledged the history of that and actually made conscious attempt to move on from that and changing the way – so that actually black and ethnic minority students are included and considering their views on how colonisation was taught. And I think something similar needs to happen in

regards to disability as well, acknowledging where many of the things we are taught have come from.

And I think being taught in a non-tokenised way. So we are taught about – we talked about even – I think it's been mentioned how you might get a lecture on race, a lecture on gender, in a module separate to everything else. This doesn't really happen with disability but I'm going to argue that actually this is not a good thing how it's happening with race and gender as well because it is tokenistic. It's like one lecture shoved on to the end, like generally in the last two weeks of a module. Where it's just like we're gonna cover everything this has to do with race and gender this week out of 20 weeks. So I think in a way across the board, disability agenda, race, and I think it makes it more intersectional as well to split them up because none of us live single issue lives. It's like yeah that integration, it's like every week we should be talking about these things because we're not disabled one week of the year.

Sarah Golightley

Again I feel we need to talk afterwards because a lot of that is stuff that I've been thinking about particularly with Edinburgh and Charles Darwin being one of the famous graduates of Edinburgh, they've got buildings named after him and he definitely had his part in eugenics. But that's not something that anybody really talks about, not at the university anyway.

But thinking about this question more. I'm really wanting to bring it back to the culture of the university who has power within the university. And I agree that I don't think you would ever have a non-ableist curriculum or a non-ableist university. And I think part of that is also that acknowledging that disability is not – there's not a simple map of how to make it accessible for all. And sometimes people have needs that conflict with each other. And these are difficult, messy things to deal with.

And so this idea that there is a perfect space is not true. So what we have to do with that is think about how can we improve things to the best that we can and how can we think more creatively and flexibly? So those are the kind of main things that I think would have to happen.

But also I think the nature of the competitiveness that happens in the UK universities is really a problem and I think it actually goes against a lot of what, like more critical disability approaches would say we should be learning and the environments that we should be creating for each other. And I think it would be much better if instead of having grading systems where we are graded by percentiles, we're given qualitative feedback, that we are not fighting to get the distinction or whatever it may be. And even just the idea of rewarding people based on who is the smartest, who is the most able to articulate themselves within a system that as you were saying, is built on legacies of ableism and many other axes of oppression.

So I think we need to get away, so far away! And I don't know how we would deconstruct and reconstruct that. It would be more than a lifetime's worth of work, but working towards that would be something that I think would benefit all. And I think that's one of the really crucial things is that talking about making life more accessible for disabled people actually benefits people who might otherwise be considered able bodied as well.

So, I think you mentioned earlier the 9 am lecture. I know very few people who want a 9 am lecture. So, I have chronic fatigue, 9 am lecture is really hard for me. And they are things that the universities are very stubborn to change. I went on tutor training last month and

one of the trainers was saying a joke about getting student feedback – ‘they always say in my class that they don’t like the 9 am lecture’. And then he just laughed and said ‘that’s never gonna change’. And it was such a moment of being – so everybody is giving you this feedback but you dismiss it. And what does that mean? And they may be disabled or they may not be disabled students. But just as an example, these are things that could make the university much better beyond even just thinking about disabled students.

Nicole Brown

Can I just add one thing. I agree with what you were saying but at the same time I think the universities – and Fiona said about the commitment from the universities. But I think the commitment from the universities needs to go beyond the students. It actually needs to be a commitment to eradicate ableism full stop, whether that’s within the curriculum, whether that’s within the working environment, it doesn’t really matter. At the end of the day, I think that there needs to be an interest in acknowledging that even lecturers have got difficulties and actually may not be able to get up for the 9 o’clock lecture themselves. You even said yourself that you are starting to tutor; if you were to be given a slot to start teaching at 9 o’clock, that’s similarly difficult for you then.

So, it’s that attitude that needs to change. I agree with what you were saying that it’s not gonna happen easily and quickly but I think everybody just does a little bit. It’s like with the plastic thing, if everybody tries to avoid plastic, eventually it will happen. Same with the plastic bags, if they do become more expensive, we do avoid them now. And in a similar way, I would say if everybody, if every lecturer starts doing a little bit more, it becomes more the norm and more accepted. And I think that’s the way forward really.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

Yes, because don’t underestimate, because that’s what I said about ableism is a very complex system of practices and processes. So it’s about universities making a commitment to have an ethos that is anti-ableist. And one of the other speakers said that it’s very difficult in our current environment. So, yes it’s not just about students, it’s not just about staff, it’s actually about the bigger issue about how universities do business.