Ableism in the Curriculum: A roundtable conversation

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Roundtable participants:

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Transcript of discussion of question 1

Jennifer Fraser

So maybe we could start with the first question that we posed everyone which is "What do we mean by ableism in the curriculum?" And I thought I would allow you to answer it in the order that suits you if that's ok, so that you can also have a bit of discussion with one another. And not forgetting that Fiona is sort of behind us on the screen.

Nicole Brown

Do you want me to start? I would say that ableism in the curriculum; ableism in general is the idea that we all expect everybody to meet certain norms, standards and abilities. And we all expect everybody to be of able mind and able body at all times. In terms of reality in the curriculum it basically means that we are expecting students to be able to get up for a 9 o'clock lecture. And that may well be an easy thing to do for most people but actually, if you've got medical conditions or you're being treated medically through medication or whatever, it may mean that you can't get up in the morning. And you are medicated for your deficiencies in such a way that it actually impacts your learning.

I've got, one of my undergraduate students right now, he's supposed to be getting up for a 9.30 lecture with me on a Tuesday morning and he's currently on new medication for ADHD. Now first of all to me, why treat ADHD? If he's himself unhappy about it, fine, but just because he may be a little bit fidgety in the classroom, that to me shouldn't be a reason why somebody gets medicated for that. But we expect everybody to be able to sit still for 3 hours. And that's the kind of thing, the attitude that as society we bring to ableism and within academia we bring that to the curriculum, too.

So for me it's about trying to make sure that we somehow get rid of the idea that everybody can do everything and we actually start looking at how can we make things more equal in that sense.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

I can't see whether anyone is putting their hand up and I'm happy to add if you want me to start my contribution?

Jennifer Fraser

That would be great.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

These are huge questions that you have posed and as I said, you could have a conference around that one question about what do we mean by ableism in the curriculum? But I jotted a few things down.

First thing that comes to mind is ableism in the curriculum occurs when disability is always an afterthought. But it's actually more than that because ableism is not just about disability, it's about able-bodiedness, or what I would call ablement, the process of becoming able. And in many ways, those ideas then are predicated on the basis of what's already just been said. What is the idea of being a student? What is the role of the university? Is it about, to quote Hart and Negri, is it about the productivity of the multitude? Is it about making citizens and particularly privileged students more productive?

Universities are often based on this idea that there is a student and obviously an ideal citizen who is unencumbered and unproductive. And I think that's increasingly – academic ableism. Ableism in the curriculum has increased as we are seeing the increased privatisation and locationalisation of universities. Universities are very active now involving, producing the future workforce and that's based on ableist values and ableist ideals. So it's not just about, I think there's a real danger here that we consider universities on their own and isolated. There is a relationship between the promotion of ableism and we need to be clear about this. Ableism is actively promoted within the university culture and I would actually say at this particular point in time, it's the job of universities to actually produce an ableist ethos for students so they can then go out and live the ableist values and work according to ableist values in society.

I think it's a really tricky area. We often confuse skills development with ablement. I think the issue is how does the curriculum, which the previous speaker already said, how does the curriculum work with people who they consider as a remnant or a residual population? People who are seen as non-contributory. People who often traditionally have been excluded from university education and there's almost a sense of doing a favour, letting all the riff raff, letting the marginal people – first it was women, then it was BAME and now it's disabled people, in.

I just want to say one final point before I be quiet. I think – ableism in the curriculum occurs in two ways, if I was just to do an overview. There is an apartheid system offloading within universities. We have often specialist and compartmentalised approaches to diversity studies. And that goes right up to how often universities have equality and diversity units. And that's emphasised in the UK by the fact that you often have charters for different groups. There is generally a trend to be fearful or not engage in intersectional conversations or conversations about intersectionality. And then we have general courses, so general modules in university where there are unconscious notions of what I call who is the benchmark human subject?

So until – as long as disability is understood as a state of exceptionality or a broadening perceptionalism, we can continue to have ableism in the curriculum. We need to bring the concept of ableism out in all the modules and in all the studies that we do. And I'll carry on and talk about that a little bit later.

Rachel O'Brien

So just to start with, I will probably use a phrase 'disablism' just out of habit. We mean pretty much the same thing, even though we're using two different words. So, I actually

disagree in the idea of disability is an afterthought and that's why we are excluded and the fact that there is disablism in the curriculum.

Society in my opinion is built on the oppression and exclusion of disabled people amongst other groups. And because universities exist within our society, they're not vacuums, they are subject to this as well. For example, if you're a medical student or a biomedical science student your course is based on eugenics. Like the knowledge that has been gathered and taught is a result of hundreds of years of eugenicist practice, both in regards to race and disability. That's not exclusion for disabled people, that is an active inclusion in the wrong way of disabled people.

And so I think when we talk about disablism in the curriculum we need to talk about both the content of our courses and the delivery and these things are not of course mutually exclusive. We have this campaign in the NUS called 'liberating the curriculum' or 'decolonising the curriculum'. And although there's not been much work done on the disability aspect of this, it actually needs to be worked on because it is huge.

How we – often you find that disability is not discussed in the curriculum at all. As I said, I did a course where – I wanted to concentrate a lot on disability. I ended up having to write my dissertation and nothing else on disability because the only way I could do it was the independent research project. And there is an erasure of disability and studies of disability, particularly at undergraduate level. If you specialise and go into a postgrad you might be able to find – there are a few courses out there that specialise in disability studies. But actually the vast majority of students, there is a complete erasure, they will not touch on disability at all, like in their time, unless you're doing something like social work or social policy. But, also when it is talked about, it's talked about like a very pathologising, medical model way. So it's how we understand what disability is and what standpoint we're coming from.

The disabled people's movement has spent the last 40-50 years advocating the social model. And the fact is at most universities, if and when disability is talked about at all, it's talked about in the context of a deficit model, like a medical model. Like disability is an individual problem, when in fact how it is understood politically is as like a social oppression. We're not people with disabilities, we are disabled people who have impairments, which are then, because of the way they're perceived by society, like we face that oppression.

So I think yeah, we need to – I think clarify what we're talking about. We're talking about disablism in the curriculum and say it's not just the fact that disability is never talked about, it's that when it is talked about, it's talked about in an extremely pathologising way. And particularly in the sciences, this pathologisation has been completely normalised.

I don't know if you've ever heard of medical students talk about disabled people? It's always bad! And that's because they're taught in such a way where it's like disabled people are not the norm. Like disabled people are like something is wrong with disabled people. When in fact actually, the understanding of disability in the political sense, it's about disabled people have advocated it's far more like social understanding of it.

Sarah Golightley

I'd like to respond to that. There's so much that I want to pick up on. I think first – so many things. One of them, picking up on these professional sciences which at some point you

referred to social work as well, which is what my background is. And I was trained in social work in England.

So I think one thing that I would challenge is that necessarily people who are in the medical professions or in the social work professions aren't themselves disabled. Because as is the case with myself and I think it's the case for at least the social work profession, there's quite a few of us, particularly with backgrounds of mental health, particularly also people who have been carers. And part of that distinction between the service user and the service provider I think is one that really needs to be broken down. Although the culture of the university often encourages that distinction, which I think is very much a problem.

In social work we do teach the social model. And I would think that that's probably not unique to the universities that I've been present in. Having said that, I think the social model is not always adequate and it goes back to the 70s. And disabled movements have moved on quite a bit from then, not to say that it doesn't have its usefulness, it absolutely does.

So, I should probably explain what the social model is because there might be some people here who don't know what that is referring to.

So if we're talking about the social model of disability, we're taking out the bodymind from a place of medical context and seeing bodymind as being variable, diverse. And that it's the way that society is built up, literally sometimes, in terms of – I think the classic example is stairs to buildings rather than ramps. And that there's not necessarily anything intrinsically wrong with a bodymind considered disabled but that society creates conditions which are disabling.

But more recent critiques would say that's not really nuanced enough, particularly people with chronic illnesses. So, for example, if you experience chronic pain, although there might be social circumstances which could make chronic pain less painful and might trigger chronic pain less or prevent it from occurring in the beginning, you can't always just take away the painfulness of that experience.

So, I think these sorts of nuances have moved on and I also am concerned in social work with disability movements being historicised and not always being brought to the current about movements that are happening now and about how social work may in most cases, but may not be, complicit with systems which are punishing and sometimes killing disabled people.

But bringing it more towards the kind of overarching ideas about what is ableism in the curriculum? For me, what I think about coming from this particularly critical stance, is departing from disability as a problem, as exceptionalised, as a lacking, as people to be assimilated. So when I think about, for example, getting so called reasonable accommodations, that it is a process of assimilating and accommodating disabled people into an otherwise ableist system. And that for me is part of the problem is that disabled people do not need a charity to allow them into a space. That we need to be valued as not just passive recipients of education and care. And I'll stop there because it looks like you want to jump in.

Jennifer Fraser

Can we make sure that Becca-Grace get a chance to answer that question?

Nicole Brown

Can I just say one thing please. And that's – I agree with what's been said but it's not just about disabilities and disabled people, it's also about those that are chronically ill, that have got neuro diversities. And I just wanted to throw that in, that it's not just disabilities, it's also about other ways or forms that are perhaps away from the norm. And that includes neuro diversities such as dyslexia, ADHD etc.

Rachel O'Brien

I would be including that.

Sarah Golightley

Same with me, I would. And when I say disabled as a clarification I mean it to include mental health, distress. I mean it to include neuro divergence. I mean it to include chronic illnesses, not just physical disabilities.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

That's right.

Becca-Grace Schrader

I'm the same. I forgot to mention at the beginning. I have a hearing impairment so I might ask people to repeat things, just to clarify.

I probably don't have quite as much to say but I do still have a point about what we mean by ableism in the curriculum. The best way for me to explain it is to describe the opposite, not having ableism in the curriculum. So if we didn't, we are fully inclusive and no one is left out. So the reverse of that is actually ignoring and even rejecting those with disabilities. So, I come from the standpoint of the social model of course, but I also agree with the point you made about developing the social model.

I come from a student standpoint as I said before. And it's something that people with disabilities face every single day. And it can be as simple as getting into the classroom. It's something that we all struggle with, those who do identify.