

Ableism in the Curriculum: A roundtable conversation

University of Westminster

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Roundtable participants:

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Transcript of discussion of question 4

Jennifer Fraser

I think that leads us quite nicely on to the last question that we posed you, which was are there any practical things that we can do in our classrooms? And by classrooms we were thinking about physical classrooms and online classrooms, modes of interaction really, that would move us towards these non-ableist or less ableist curricula.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

It's really a difficult one because I think there's lots of technologies out there to use within the classroom outwith the classroom in an online environment that one of the really big issues around technologies is people with disabilities and students in general are often the poorest of the poor. So the cost of these technologies is extremely problematic, particularly when you're looking at things like sign language interpretation or captioning. But I do think there are practical things – and again this comes back to the spirit and the ethos and the intention to look at curriculum design, to speak to different people, to deal with the issue as one speaker talked about when different kinds of needs that students with disabilities have where they might conflict with other kinds of disabilities. The kinds of spaces; the classroom is not just for students, as a disabled academic I use a wheelchair, you can't see that here. I also have chronic pain. There's lots of classrooms that are inaccessible for me to teach. The very fact that I'm not with you in person today was because it was just too difficult to get from the airport to your university in a wheelchair, it was not possible. And I put a limit on the amount of stress that I would subject myself to.

So we are using this technology; it's not ideal. I think we do need to think about how we ensure that marginal voices are not marginalised. Because there's always two sides to the coin and on one hand we want the range of voices of people who have been traditionally marginalised to be heard, to bring input into the curriculum. On the other hand, I think that some of us who have had long-term experiences of marginality often get very tired of constantly being asked. So we need to look at our lives.

Not in the case of disability, but I used to teach a subject called Sexual Citizen and the Law. And we used to use, and it was in Australia, and instead of using Australian case law we used to use really obscure cases from India about Indian conditions. And we used them as central case studies. So the kinds of case studies that we used – and getting students to

think about different ways. And again as I said to you, I think the practical things we can have ground rules as to how we undertake discussion and communication in classes.

Even now, I think there's been a general awareness about calling out heteronormative behaviours but we need to be able to, I guess strengthen students' awareness and staff awareness of ableist practices. What is not acceptable.

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you.

Nicole Brown

I agree with what Fiona was saying. I have mentioned a few things already like descriptions of photos, captioning videos, recording lectures, the different fonts and sizes and colours. But it's also about, around changing the reading lists, making the reading lists available for example. But also there are two more points that I would like to add. One is the use of laptops and smart phones. I know myself a number of colleagues that are saying I don't want the students to use laptops in my classroom because it distracts them and they go on Facebook and Twitter instead of focusing on my lecture. That may well be the case but what happens, those people that need those laptops are actually automatically excluded. Unless you then give them permission to use the laptop in which case they stand out. And quite frankly, I wouldn't want to be one that stands out of a hundred that are sitting in the same lecture hall.

So my point is, well if somebody wants to disengage by going on Facebook, quite frankly in a lecture you can disengage by just daydreaming too. As far as I'm concerned, that excuse is no excuse for me. So it's that kind of attitude that we need to eradicate.

And the other point I was going to make is that we have to look at assessments, how we assess. So it's not just about the delivery, it's also about the assessment. Most of the assessments where I'm working at IOE, at postgraduate level, 5000-word essay. Now not everybody is good at English because some people come here and English is not their first language. For some people like my son and my husband, writing an essay of 5000 words is huge amounts of work, it's hugely difficult. And I'm kind of wondering why do we have to have that?

In my own modules, I've introduced things like group presentations. I'm introducing artefacts. I'm using Lego models and actually I'm currently – there are other colleagues that are doing blog posts, video production, film productions. There's all sorts of different ways that you can create assessments. Yes, they can perhaps be a little bit more difficult to mark and you have to find a way of how you can then grade those pieces. But that shouldn't stop us from trying these things out.

One of the things that I'm now actually trying to do is get my module validated for the student chooses assignment, which is basically they have to demonstrate to me the knowledge and understanding of the concept but in whichever way they wanted to put it to me. If they want to cook literacy for me, they can cook it for me. If they want to knit it for me, they can knit it for me. If they want to write an essay, they can still do that too and I think it's trying to give the choice and the agency and the responsibility to the students.

Jennifer Fraser

Sarah and then Rachel.

Sarah Golightley

I like that idea of letting students choose how they want to be assessed if indeed we do have to have assessments. But I guess I also want to refer back to the earlier idea that I'm just talking about students because part of my pedagogical thinking is breaking down the distinctions between teachers and students. So I'm a teacher, I'm a student, I'm a service user, I'm a social worker. I'm occupying many different spaces. And I think also that the universities go beyond being ableist; I think they are actually actively disabling and that the conditions and the pressure and the extended hours that they force many people to go through actually causes disabilities. Not everybody goes to the extent where it becomes a disability but it's bad for your health, generally speaking.

And certainly I was in bed for most of this week because I was doing too much with teaching and being a PhD student and trying to do events organising for the university. And even though people know that I'm disabled, that's still something that's always being pushed against. And I'm kind of acceptable as a disabled person as long as I can keep achieving at these otherwise kind of ableist norms.

But in terms of improving that, I think that there are several things that can be done. One is, I would like to see more online courses. I think that they have a lot of potential, particularly if they have quite brief or no reading material and its recorded lectures that can be watched at any time with subtitles and can be used alongside of assistive technologies. They also often can be free and obviously there are still problems of who has access to the courses to begin with and the internet connections etc., and who makes the courses. But I do think, I actually personally enjoy taking them aside things when I'm too tired to read.

And I think the materials that we're being assigned, we can think more creatively than just book chapters and journal articles. I think we can go to videos and cartoons, we can go to zines. And all of these have really interesting insight on a lot of topics that we might be talked about. And would also disrupt some of those hierarchies of knowledge.

I'd also like to see getting rid of reasonable accommodations. I just think that they're ridiculous in many ways and I think that we should just allow people to do what they need to do and not be present in the class if they're not present. And to offer support to those people rather than making people prove that they are disabled, which often includes quite invasive questioning and medical documentation. And also for non-disabled people or able bodied people who are going through stress in life, that they shouldn't have to say oh, well, a family member is dying or something like this. That the time is given to people when the time is needed. Those are things that I would really like to see shifted, I suppose.

Rachel O'Brien

Ideally, we'd like to abolish capitalism. But more short term, I guess short term practical things which could be like done in the classroom or at least policies that can be changed within universities. I agree, around mitigating circumstances, extenuating, procedures, those kind of things where more often than not it's disabled students having to access them because they've been ill for part of their course and not been able to hand in assessments and so on.

But actually, as Sarah was saying, actually mitigating circumstances are a nightmare. If you have any need to access them, if it's a case of you've broken your leg or you've got a spinal cord injury, even if it's acute, they are still a pain in the arse and incredibly invasive. So actually things like that, they're something which – like I wasn't able to hand in my essay

based on an extension, sure go for it. Everyone's got, lives outside of being a student. The phrase average student gets tossed around a lot. There's no such thing, right. Like we've all got things going on in our lives that we need to deal with.

I'd like assessments, yeah, I agree – at the very least like the provision of alternative assessments, if not the more detailed do whatever you want as long as you can demonstrate knowledge. I think this comes back to what do we actually want to gain, what does a teacher need to gain from a student's assessment? Do they want you to regurgitate 5000 words on a bit of paper? Or do they want you to show that actually you can take a theory or a concept and critically apply it to something. Because if it's the latter, there are 20 different ways – well hundreds of different ways – you could do that that don't include like a 5000-word essay. Now for some people, 5000-word essay I'd actually quite enjoy that because I'm a geek! But for a lot of people that's actually not how they learn and how they think about things. So yeah, there are lots of different ways you could go about that.

And I guess it's getting rid of hoop jumping, I feel that's what mitigating circumstances are. It's like how assessments currently work in universities. It's not a case of demonstrating that you understand something and that you can apply it to other things that aren't the direct example you've already been given. It's currently can you tick these boxes in the right order, which is – I guess it comes down to a more fundamental question of what is education for and how should we be doing it?

Becca-Grace Schrader

As everyone has mentioned, there are so many different adjustments that you can make. So I've written down a few, with film. So sub titles, unless it's a foreign film my tutors, they don't like have sub titles on because it's distracting for other students, which is ridiculous. It's something that is being sorted at the moment but to begin with that shouldn't have happened in the first place. Wider door frames. Note takers and a hearing loop. There's a classroom that I had a lot of my theory lectures in and it's almost like a theatre in a way, like a cinema. And it's almost like 'this' and I physically cannot get to some of the chairs. I need to leave the room sometimes. And if I sit for example on the end like you are, I can't easily get out of the classroom if I need to. And the teachers – because we have teaching assistants – they tend to sit on the end, always. So I always have to sit in the middle or the end and I can't actually get out.

There are so many things that you can do, that can help, practical things. So having the material that we're going to learn in class available prior because a lot of the time we are asked to discuss things within the classroom. But I need time to reflect and actually put it together in my brain to actually understand what's going on, understand what we are discussing. But I don't know – it's like walking into a blind exam, I have literally no idea what you know.

Someone mentioned about laptops in class; I'm not allowed a laptop in class – I am now but I wasn't allowed a laptop in class when we were watching a film because the light distracts. But at the same time I was supposed to write notes, I can't make notes and that's ridiculous.

I actually wanted to counter what someone said. I actually am only really recognised as a disabled person when I'm not actually achieving. Because if I'm achieving the same as others... she's doing fine, that's fine, she's good. But when I'm not achieving, they're like oh, what's going on? And I'm like hmm, well, I can't come to class, and things like that. So yeah, I actually disagree in that way.

Sarah Golightley

I think I meant that, maybe I misspoke.

Becca-Grace Schrader

Oh, okay.

Sarah Golightley

My apologies though.

Becca-Grace Schrader

That's alright. So it's not about not achieving in class because I go home and I study like crazy because I can't always go to class. I always feel like I'm behind. I think that was everything really.

Oh, one more thing. So my course is half practical, half physical and also speaking on behalf of someone else on a different course. We're not allowed to bring chairs into our studio, our film studio, because it damages the floors, because we have to have a smooth floor for rigging and things like that. So if I want to sit down for a two-minute break, I have to go and sit right by the door or in the corridor, not even in the classroom. And granted, for me that doesn't happen a great deal but my friend I've just met, I just mentioned, that happens every half an hour. And it's something that we're currently combating. There are so many simple things that can be done, it's not difficult when you mentioned about the marking – yes, it might take a bit longer but surely that's worth it to not have people who are excluded and made to sit in a corridor.

Rachel O'Brien

Just to add on to that, the more vocational – so one of the disabled students officers I've been working with quite a bit this year is at Leeds College of Music. So they're all being assessed based on music theory but also music practice. And one of his campaigns has been around marking criteria because of a very similar situation. What is considered professional is standing up for your entire recital unless it's to play the piano or something where you've got to sit down. But if you play any relatively small instrument you're expected to stand up throughout your entire recital. And he was just like I don't get that. How well you play the violin is not determined by whether you're sitting down or standing up. A different criteria is being determined on the basis of a very ableist standard of professionalism and tradition. So I think it's breaking down those ideas as well, it's like what do we consider to be professional?

That brings me onto the concept of fitness to study which I don't know if anyone has ever heard of? Fitness to study is like, it makes us so angry. Fitness to study is like a document that a lot of universities have or are introducing. The North West, the North East even, seem to have more of a problem with it than the rest of the country but it's springing up everywhere. Where it's standards of behaviour which you have to sign up to in order to basically be allowed to stay at university. It is explicitly disablist towards people with mental health conditions and like experience mental distress. And it's implicitly disablist towards every other disabled person.

It's things about, it twists the concept of independent living until it's unrecognisable. So for example, I'm going to name and shame Durham, who have worked this policy, they do not allow for a student to have a PA in halls of residence, there is just no provision for it whatsoever. However, -

Audience participant

That's illegal.

Rachel O'Brien

Yes. I've made that... I've told them.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

That's an American system, that fitness to study so we have to watch that. And I think also can I say it needs to be, which is why I said the commitment against ableism means to be built into the whole university because alternate assessment also is going to impact upon the formulas that are used for allocation of time for marking so there is a kind of kick on effect. So it has to be holistic because you don't want a system that becomes crushing for academics. There could actually be a backlash which is what needs to be a holistic system for tackling this.