

Ableism in the Curriculum: A roundtable conversation

University of Westminster

16 February 2018

Roundtable participants:

Jennifer Fraser, University of Westminster (Chair)

Rachel O'Brien, National Union of Students

Fiona Kumari Campbell, University of Dundee

Sarah Golightley, University of Edinburgh

Nicole Brown, UCL Institute of Education

Becca-Grace Schrader, University of Westminster Students Union

Transcript of audience questions

Question 1

To be honest it's not really a question as such, it's more of an observation. I think because when I came here thinking about the curriculum I thought it may be in a sort of narrow sense and what is being taught, what knowledge is produced and what is the foundation actually of a university. And I think the foundation of a university is knowledge and knowledge production among other things.

And which is really closely linked to rationality and rationality is very closely linked to disability. And as far as – I'm a sociologist so my perspective is maybe a bit marked by that. But I think to base the question central in the curriculum is about what does it mean to be human and it's thinking about the selves, and as I said about the bodymind split and about centering rationality, and a specific type of rationality and a specific type of cognitive capacities, marginalising emotions and the body and all these other sort of things.

But I think the question is, is a non-ableist university or curriculum, is that possible? Quite frankly in a way it's impossible because the whole foundation of knowledge production is ableist to such an extent that you can't undo it, you can only produce other knowledge and do knowledge production differently and do university or universitising in a different in a way. I think that it has to go a bit to the core I think as well of that, research but it's also teaching obviously.

Question 2

The point of observation, linked into a couple of points but particularly around the time around making practical changes and the tension that exists within precarious academics and making those changes, whether or not as I'm an hourly paid lecturer myself at the moment, I'm very aware that making the changes, for example, having multiple formats of lecture slides available takes time and time that we're not necessarily paid for, but also time that we don't necessarily have. So I wanted to just pull that out and wave it around and also to consider as well how those practices of precarity are disabling practices for teaching staff and researchers as well and again how that pulls into and presents challenges.

Question 3

I had a question that was something about navigating the tensions between the idealism of trying to change the whole system and the pragmatics of people surviving in every day. So

I'm thinking, I work in a law school and in my law school we have a very high number of disabled students. And our students, many of them want to be lawyers and that is a very elite profession and I want to support those students to become lawyers because that's what they want to do and they want to have a secure job and all that kind of stuff.

So, when you think about things like deadlines, if they can't meet deadlines they won't be able to get a job. The system won't adapt to them; the system is – on the one hand we want to be challenging the legal system as well as the whole infrastructure to make it a more accessible framework. But when we think about the pragmatics of, and struggle around wanting to say we don't need to have deadlines or we can have flexible deadlines. But also if we're not supporting our students to be able to manage deadlines, so for us we try to be flexible as much as possible but moving towards getting students to a place where they can manage things so they can meet their deadlines by the time they finish their 3 years of the degree or the 4 years of the degree.

But it's again that tension between those ideals of wanting to say overturn the whole system but also not wanting the disabled students to be unable to get to the jobs because of the ableist requirements in that field and how do we – I struggle a lot with how we navigate that tension in an everyday kind of way.

Question 4

I have a question and not specifically but mostly directed at the student's officers. Somebody mentioned about grassroots, and the idea that students themselves have to understand the rights of disabled people to be able to effect change. And my observation is that sometimes students have internalised so much ableism that they find it difficult to advocate for themselves.

So I'm wondering what role student unions have in making students aware about things like the social model, indeed the limitations of the social model so that they feel best able to advocate for themselves because in my experience working in the university, students affect change more than well-meaning staff trying to do the same thing.

And just a little add on to that, I'm particularly interested in course rep models and what course reps have as a role in feeding back on teaching practices, and observing teaching practices as accessible and how that could be used.

Question 5

I've listened to what has been said today, and the feeling that I have and what we talked about in the break actually, co-production, co-design of the changes that you want to make. If you don't consult your disabled students and your disabled staff about their needs, the things that they want, you are going to give them reasonable adjustments that don't work, aren't fit for purpose, that don't work in the timeframes that they have. And to put resources on line that nobody can use or actually only works for about 3% of the students. There's no point asking for a slide in 8 formats when that's not what they want.

Question 6

Just an add on to the question around student unions and how we can better support students and work with the universities around recruitment of new officers for example. So, I know Becca-Grace, you're a disabled students officer at the moment, but every year we face the same challenge of a lot of our students will identify as being disabled and having experienced ableism and disabling mechanisms from the university who want to come up

and challenge that, but because of their own disabilities, they do not feel able or that there is enough support to run for election. How can we better support that process and ensure that we're not expecting the same metric of work or measuring the metrics that a disabled student officer is doing but on their abled peers for example. And how do we make sure that those students are aware that we are happy to support them and how do we build in reasonable adjustments for example without making them reasonable adjustments.

Question 7

I just wanted to ask something. Nicole mentioned about choice of assessment and I agree that students should be given choice of assessments. However, in conversation with colleagues in the Quality and Standards, apparently there are certain parameters there that everybody has to follow. So you have to have a written part to it and you have to have a practical part. So how can we balance that if you as a lecturer are willing to give a choice of assessment but the Quality Standard says no, you have to have a 3000-word essay. So, it would be good to discuss that.

Question 8

I can't remember who it was who was speaking about the practices of teaching disability studies. I wanted to add even when it is taught explicitly, we can consider where it's taught. I research in disability studies and I tend to find that while I'm based down here in London, most universities that engage with disability studies are based very far away from here and there's geographical – and how that feeds into accessibility as well. So, it's interesting to consider from that standpoint as well.

Question 9

I've got a very unfinished thought. I'm moving in a very strange space in terms of looking at things. And one thing that I heard a lot of people talking here, was embodied experience and I work in the disability advisory service and we talk about data a lot. And how you have to collate data in order to prove that we are doing is great. And I always feel that we need to look at maybe more ethnographic approaches or actually at approaches that capture the voices of the people who are affected by the things that we do. At the same time, I know that there can be so much pain and vulnerability so I think I have maybe an ethical question if anyone can give me any advice in terms of do you see a possibility to do that in a way that raises awareness, what it actually is like to move in different kinds of marginalised bodies through the university. What does that feel like that? But to do that in a way that is ethically ok and doesn't really expose people. Does that make sense?