

Ableism in the Curriculum: A roundtable conversation

University of Westminster

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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 closing comments

Jennifer Fraser

I think one way to do it is to give each of the speakers, starting with Becca-Grace because I know you need to leave early, a few moments to sum up your thoughts, try to answer any of these excellent questions, if you can. But don't feel pressured to answer everything, or sum everything up. We'll just start with Becca-Grace and move around the table and then is it ok if we end with you, Fiona?

Becca-Grace Schrader

A lot of questions so I might miss out a few, if I do, please remind me. Just before I actually start speaking properly – I will leave my e-mail address with Jennifer just if anyone wants to contact me if you have any further questions or I didn't answer your question, please feel free to do so. I'm happy to respond and talk to anyone about things.

So I'm completely lost right now! Talking about the elections that you mentioned. It's not necessarily about making it non-ableist, it's about taking steps to reduce the ableism because yes, it is extremely difficult to make university and the curriculum etc. etc. completely non-ableist. We all said it's not possible, not in today's society. So it's about taking steps to reduce ableism. So it's just making sure that things are known to them. That you are able to make these reductions.

I'm forgetting what questions there were.

Jennifer Fraser

Just feel free to sum up your thoughts from the afternoon.

Becca-Grace Schrader

So ableism is something that is engrained in university. It's something that is difficult to remove completely, it's impossible but if we can take steps to reduce it, that's all we can do for the moment. That's my standpoint in general really.

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you. Fiona would you like

Fiona Kumari Campbell

They were great questions and I wanted to focus on the ones that I am more familiar with. The question of – what this discussion really is a bigger discussion about; what is the

purpose of universities. And I think the first person who asked a question about the universities are there for the purposes of knowledge production and some of the rationalities around that. What does it mean to be human? And I think that's where, again to emphasise what I spoke about if we are talking about challenging ableism in the curriculum, or indeed changing ableism in universities, we need to kind of get some commitments within the university. Particularly from the people around power, about engaging with a different kind of ethos. Because it does have a kick on effect and that raises another question somebody else responding to the whole issue about the practices of precariousness, how people use time. How the whole university system is actually structured because as I said, there have certainly been a number of US cases around the impact of adjustments and accommodations and what the impact is on, for academic workloads.

The good thing, I think one way we can approach this in terms of summary is we need to think more about what the practices of ableism are. I keep talking about practices because there are practices and processes. We need to be able to not be fearful and this is really hard stuff. Ableism is a complex reality, it's a complex reality and so we need to be able to, through teaching and through research, explore that reality.

If I can get a little bit of a plug in here, one of the things that I've been doing, because I'm a social theorist and often people say we navel gaze and what's it got to do with reality? What has it got to do with practice? And some of my theoretical work around studies in ableism, I've now been developing into a research methodology so that practitioners – and I come from a community development and social work background – so that practitioners can develop interventions.

So, I'm happy to share my e-mail addresses there. Because why I'm saying this is, I think part of the skill is to look at what conditions are in place that either foster ableism or in fact what conditions are in place that enable space to challenge it. We've got lots and lots of work to do and I think it's fantastic that this roundtable was put on today. The organisers should be congratulated for that.

Jennifer Fraser

When you feel ready to drop out, just feel free to drop out of the connection and we'll pick up later.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

Thank you, I probably will, it's the time my drugs wear off so I'll start not being able to communicate. So thank you very much again for the opportunity to participate in the great questions.

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you. So which of the three of you would like to go next?

Rachel O'Brien

I'll go. So I'm not going to attempt to answer all of them because I could write an essay on each of them. I guess, talking about student's unions because I spend a lot of time having to do things with student's unions. I think student's unions have the potential to have a hugely educating and empowering role when it comes to disabled students both in terms of rights and facilitating conversations around social models. I like the political education aspect as

well as proactively going out and fighting and campaigning for the rights of disabled students in a variety of places, both on campus, wider society, so on and so forth.

I don't think, and I'm not talking specifically about Westminster Students Union because I don't know the specifics, I'm talking generally, so I'm not at you. I think student's unions can also be one of the most disempowering and disabling places for disabled students. But that's my experience and that's what I've been told by many many disabled students. They have the potential to be hugely progressive organisations, that does not mean they are. And I know for a fact that generally the understanding of disability in student's unions is one, patronising, apologising, and two, very rarely is any attempt made to understand what disability is in any other sense than the very predominant understanding of society. And even if you don't completely agree with the social model, you still need to at least know what it is. Right?

So once again, the potential is there, they can be huge mechanisms for good. Right now most, I'm going to be honest with regards to disability, aren't.

So yeah, that's kind of my thoughts on it and I think where inclusive curriculums and inclusive delivery and content and stuff will come from is student unions. And unions generally actually I think, that's where student staff solidarity, particularly when it comes to precarious workers, it's incredibly important. But I think is going to take a lot of work to get to that stage where students unions are like proactively fighting for disabled students' rights in a more holistic way I guess.

On precarity, I agree. And I think it's really important – changes need to be structural and institutional. It should not be down to one lecturer to make everything on their course perfect. But there is of course some responsibility there. But actually when it comes to things like different formats and stuff, if you're not being paid to do it, actually – that's the university is in the wrong there for not paying their staff properly or having them on a casual contract where they're not paid for that time. As opposed to that individual staff member who is actually a lot of, particularly early day researchers, who have a second job because otherwise they can't pay their rent. These are material conditions which you've got to account for.

So I think another potential for student's unions that would massively help disabled students is that student staff solidarity and working together in order to facilitate an environment and working conditions where lecturers can actually deliver on, like accessible environments. So that's my thoughts. I've got many more but...

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you.

Sarah Golightley

Yeah, I totally agree with everything you just said. Particularly with the staff student solidarity and a need for re-thinking how staff members are treated, particularly I'm a tutor now and I've got chronic fatigue. I'm also a student and I want to make it as accessible as possible but the amount of energy that that would involve for me would be disabling for me.

So I think the more that I've got involved in disability studies the more that I've had to grapple with contradictions. And I think that's one of the things that I like to take away from it is that – things are difficult and as you were saying in the back about the difficulty with

making these ideologically driven changes to reduce ableism in the curriculum. And how that can grate with the job market and what does that mean?

And I think these are all really difficult things. We have to always be dealing with, to what extent is this going to be disabling in the future? And there isn't really a proper answer to that, except for a complete social revolution. But I'm not sure we're gonna achieve that here today.

And the other thing that I wanted to say, picking up from a few points, one of the people has left now. Is being careful about co-optation of disabled peoples and disability movements. And that parts of the social model have been appropriated by the Tories towards saying oh its empowerment now for you to do things independently, which we could go on about for a very very long time.

And I think that there are elements of co-production that can do that as well, although I do think there's potential there, possibly done delicately. And I think that social work sometimes, well often does this in terms of presenting itself as very progressive and inclusive by having two service users who come in and speak to their class.

But then I would like to flip that and propose that potentially even if we can't make the university free of ableism, perhaps we can co-opt the university and co-opt its resources. And make it a tool for us, even if it's an imperfect and problematic one.

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you.

Nicole Brown

I've tried to scribble down my thoughts and it looks like I'm trying to answer five questions. So the first one, I was just going to rattle through them really quickly.

The first one, disability studies outside of London, I agree with you. I know that there is some movement in some universities here in London to actually offer something. I know that the GDI hub at UCL is trying to look at creating an MSc for Disability and Innovation, something like that. Disability, Design and Innovation, something like that, I'm not quite sure.

But I think what I'm trying to say with this is at the moment I agree with what you said but at the same time I do think that there is movement and it's not – this is not the end, it's something that's happening.

You mentioned about capturing the voices. So I agree, again I agree with you trying to capture the voices and that's really important. And again, I go back to who the peripherals are and often we are overlooking the ones that are actually, elite people and they still are peripherals or marginalised at the same time.

My own work is actually about developing methods of methodology to try and capture these experiences that go beyond the words and often can't be explained by words. I also know the University of Kent is very good at exploring options for visually impaired people and they are actually trying to use an app now where you can basically, it's like a walking app thing. I'm not completely involved in that but again, there is movement.

That brings me to the next point, the assessments question. And negotiating the requirements with the ideal of letting people choose. Now the requirements - I know that

because I've looked into it! The requirements are indeed saying that you need a written assessment but it doesn't say that it has to be summative, it can be a formative one. So that's one way around it already.

The other way around it is also not every module needs to have everything. So for example, at the moment within UCL there is a guideline that says every programme, every course, so for example every Masters or every undergraduate course should have a group presentation. That doesn't mean that my module needs to have one, if some other module has. And that gives the variety to the whole process.

So there are ways of negotiating that. Again there is movement and I think you get the drift now of where I'm getting to.

And that takes me to your point about the idealism and the pragmatism. There is movement, let me put it that way. Yes, I agree with you there are tensions, there are certain things that we are never going to achieve. And yes we do have to prepare our students for the real life. And that is a life of deadlines, a life of writing reports in some jobs but then it's not for everybody. My point is let's look at where they need to go and let's prepare them in that way. And if their job doesn't require them to write a 5000-word essay, then let's forget about the 5000-word essay. That's the point that I was trying to make.

That brings me on to the fifth point. I think as we can see, there is movement, there is something happening. I'm not saying it's gonna happen really quickly but I do know there are several events that are similar to this one. There is this one today, there is a myth busting one at UCL coming up in February. I myself am organising an ableism in academia event which is happening in March where tickets got sold out within 24 hours. I then moved it to a bigger location and within the next 24 hours all the tickets were sold. I have now got 80 people on the waiting list. I am now looking at other ways of integrating how we can do that so I've actually got now a way of live streaming it where the University of Kent is looking at putting on an event on the day so that people can just turn up and watch the live stream together and have a workshop happening there together. So clearly there is a lot going on in that area. There is a lot of movement here.

And I think that's the important part here. At the moment I think that ableism is very much internalised, not just within academia, not just within the curriculum, it's internalised within every single one of us, within society. And we all are trying to enhance ourselves to become more productive and even within academia we take pride in working beyond our minimum working hours.

So it's all of that is kind of part of the culture. And obviously cultural changes don't happen overnight. But as we've seen with all those things that I've just listed, there is movement there. And I think we can't beat ourselves up about the changes not happening quickly enough. I think we are able to just do a little bit everybody, eventually we will get there. We won't achieve the perfect state because that was one of the questions as well was is a non ableist university or curriculum possible? It probably isn't, a completely non ableist one is probably not possible. But let's try to get as close as possible to that.

And I think that's what I would like to take away from the day, too.

Jennifer Fraser

I think it's up to me to say thank you to all the people who participated in the round table. To all the people who attended, made their way to Westminster, for all of the questions and all of the thoughtfulness.