

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 introduction to the roundtable discussion

Jennifer Fraser

On your tables you'll see that there are some questions. There are some on yellow paper and some on white. They are exactly the same questions. They are the ones that we posed to the panel in advance and they are the ones that we were hoping to try to address in part today because we realise that actually they are really big questions and this isn't a conference of several days, so we'll only be able to touch on some of them.

One of the reasons we wanted to organise this event was I think Westminster has done a lot of really good work around making reasonable adjustments for students. But we think that we want to have more than that. We want to get to the questions underneath that about how is our curriculum ableist, what are the things that we should be doing in addressing long before interactions in the classroom or online begin to happen.

So thank you for coming. Thank you also to all our speakers in advance for your contributions. And also to introduce them briefly to you. So we have Rachel O'Brien who is the National Union of Students Disability Officer. Is that correct?

Rachel O'Brien

Disabled Students Officer!

Jennifer Fraser

Disabled Students Officer, thank you! Sarah Golightley, who is at the University of Edinburgh. Nicole Brown who is at the UCL Institution of Education. Becca-Grace Schrader who is our Disabled Students Officer here at the University of Westminster Students Union. And joining us online is Fiona Kumari Campbell from the University of Dundee.

Do you have any questions? Is there anything that you would like to know or have us deal with now before we begin? Just let us know if there is anything as we go.

Audience question

Is there going to be a break?

Jennifer Fraser

We are only running for 2 hours so I think we'll talk hopefully for about an hour and 15 minutes, have a brief break and then come back for discussion. *Discussing room details*

And, I also need to tell you that we are recording it. We are only going to put the round table conversation on line; we will delete any of the questions we discuss afterwards. That won't go online. Once that is transcribed and available online, we will send you all e-mails to let you know it's there with the link as well.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Fiona, can you hear us okay?

Fiona Kumari Campbell

Yes, I can hear you. I can see myself which is a bit tragic!

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you for doing that for us. Can we maybe start with you Fiona with an introduction of yourself and what you are bringing to the discussion.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

Ok, well my name is Fiona Kumari Campbell and I'm with the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Dundee in Scotland. I've only actually been in the UK for 12 months; prior to that I was working in Australia at the Griffith Law School. And also I'm also an adjunct professor in disability studies at the University of Kelaniya in Sri Lanka which hopefully you will hear about it more.

My background? I come from a background of 25 years' disability activism. I'm a disabled person myself and went into education in my late 20s, and then proceeded right through to a PhD and I've worked at several universities.

My disciplinary background is for people because disability studies is usually interdisciplinary. My academic background is sociology, law and theology. So that's probably enough now but my research specialisation in the last ten years has been developing an area called studies of ableism which hopefully you will hear about it more.

Jennifer Fraser

Thank you. And maybe we'll start with Rachel then work our around the people who are in person.

Rachel O'Brien

Hi, my name is Rachel O'Brien, I'm the Disabled Students Officer at the National Union of Students and I represent disabled students across the UK in higher and further education. I've just graduated in the summer from the University of Birmingham where I did a liberal arts degree which probably means nothing to most people in this room because it's a really odd degree. But I concentrated in gender studies, with like an emphasis on disability and gender, which translates basically to sociology and politics and a bit of philosophy.

A lot of the work I'm doing this year is on political education for disabled students and building grass roots disabled students campaigns and connecting them to wider disabled rights movement as well as anti-austerity campaigns that doesn't work around universal credit and anti NHS cuts as well.

And disclaimer, I've come here straight from Belfast and I've been awake since 6 am this morning so everything is a bit disconnected, that's why.

Sarah Golightley

I'm Sarah Golightley, I'm from the University of Edinburgh; I'm a PhD student there in social work. And I'm researching therapeutic boarding schools in the USA which are schools for

so-called troubled teenagers. And I'm doing this research from a critical mental health or mad studies approach. But I have broader interests in mad studies, crip theory, which I will explain a little bit more later. And challenging the way that the university system works and particularly how the social work is funnelled out to its students.

And I've just started tutoring as well so I'm going on that other side of the teaching. And I also identify as disabled both in terms of mental health and chronic illnesses.

Nicole Brown

My name is Nicole Brown, I'm from UCL Institute of Education. I'm a Lecturer in Education and I'm academic head of learning and teaching for my department, the Department for Culture, Communication and Media.

What I'm bringing to this is actually quite a wide range of different themes if you like into my interest of ableism in the curriculum. First of all, I actually had a career before academia, I was a secondary school teacher where I was interested in special educational needs children, in specific with ADHD and dyslexia. And that was just something that was new to me as a new teacher back then.

I also have a husband who is dyslexic who is a teacher. I have got a son who is dyslexic. My son is also bilingual so there are a lot of different needs around that too. And I've been teaching reflective practice in teacher education, that's one of the main things that I was doing. And I found that with the group of students that I had, I found that just using reflections with words wasn't quite the right way of approaching it. So I started looking at other ways to help people.

I'm also doing a PhD research in my free time and that's to do with academic identity under the influence of fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is quite a contested illness. It's probably, at its simplest it's similar to chronic fatigue which most of you would have heard of, but it's also associated with widespread pain, cognitive dysfunctions. And with that obviously I have come across, because it's about academics, I've come across a lot of these ideas of ableism and disability studies.

So that's my interest on a personal and professional level really.

Becca-Grace Schrader

I'm Becca-Grace Schrader. I'm a student here at Westminster. I'm currently the Student Union's Disabled Students Officer. I'm a part-time officer so I'm also studying at the same time and currently in my second year out on the Harrow campus, nowhere near here. So within the past year I've been working on working on mitigating circumstances, because we get a lot of complaints from students here about the system we have. So that's my main campaign.

I've also worked with some people from the disability service we have on getting a course design checklist to create a more inclusive system. We've also worked on getting our disability registration on line. And I created a panel of students who identified as disabled to make sure that I'm not doing what I want, I'm doing what the students need and want.