

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 discussion of question 2

Jennifer Fraser

Shall we move on to try to address the second question, although I realise they are so big questions.

Nicole Brown

We'll try to do it as succinctly as possible.

Jennifer Fraser

You are doing really well. So we are thinking about what are the ethical and social considerations that we need to address in order to think about countering ableism in the curriculum.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

Do you want me to have a go?

Jennifer Fraser

Yes, thank you Fiona.

Fiona Kumari Campbell

I think one of the things that in order to address the ethical issues how do we counter it, we need to recognise the fact that disabled people and other peripheral communities, so they are now extending the concept of groups that have traditionally been marginalised or excluded, experience microaggressions. These are day to day business as usual assaults on people's being that's either conscious or unconscious. I mean there's a complexity in the concept of microaggression.

Why I am mentioning this, because I think people and students don't come into university as blank slates. They carry with them, we carry with us, our histories of oppression, histories of exclusion. What I call the residual effects of ableism. So it's like – and someone was explaining it to me the other day – it's kind of like that drip drip drip effect of constantly having to deal with barriers, covert barriers as well as more overt.

So I think one of the ways that we can counter ableism in the curriculum - now that's a question, can we counter it? That's the other thing I want to put out there. But I think that's our third question, but I think we actually need studies on ableism but particularly if people are doing broad degrees where everybody has to do the same module. We need

something like studies in ableism to critique and explore instances of ablement within universities and within neo liberal societies. We need those spaces built into all modules in all our teaching, not just special interest subjects. Because I think that one of the speakers talked about, firstly we are now experiencing a decline in the offerings that many universities, the modules that are around critical theory or marginal peripheral groups as it is. And it would be interesting to see audit wise how many universities in the UK even teach disability studies, in order to, and of configurations.

So often students, actually all students resent, why do I have to do something like disability? So we can turn this around, and this is where ableism offers opportunities, studies in ableism that is, to have it centralised, to look at the concept of ableism. Every one of us, every student, every teacher, every general staff member has an investment in ableism. Ableism entitles people, it also oppresses people.

So we need more spaces built into our modules and I guess – this picks up on something one of the other speakers said earlier and because I can't see you it's hard to identify people with voices. But one way that I've been doing in my work here is to make sure our modules actually preference the scholarship, preference the voices, of peripheral communities. So often there are case studies, the kinds of readings that we do that we use, the kind of multimedia we use as being from majoritarian people or from an ableist perspective. So it's bringing in alternative voices and making them central to the curriculum. And so then you can kind of unpack some of the kind of processes of ableist thinking.

Jennifer Fraser

Would anyone else like to contribute?

Rachel O'Brien

I think what you are saying about marketization and privatisation and how that needs to be considered when we're countering ableism in the curriculum, it's really important. Because higher education in the UK is being marketised, it's becoming a competitive business model, this is in my opinion a very bad thing for many reasons. But one of the reasons why you do see the closure of more critical courses and modules and amongst those disability studies but also gender studies, race studies, things like that. And so I think when we're talking about introducing studies of ableism and disability studies and things like that, we need to consider it in a context where universities are being marketised and privatised. These things are not separate, they must be tackled together.

I would also add that even if you did introduce a module on disability politics or theory, whatever, that actually I think often in universities, marginalised groups are presented as a homogenous group, which is not the case. I can tell you now, I spend most of my time arguing about other disabled people. And as a community, there is not one social model, there are like 20 social models, they all have things in common like as a theory of barriers. But I think it's very important that these modules and courses start being introduced but actually it is very clear that we are not a homogenous group, we all think different things. There are different models, well there are different theories even within the social model and that actually, disabled people aren't just disabled people, there are also women, also trans, also LGBT, also black and so on and so on and so on. There are differences amongst disabled people that makes our experiences of society very different for a range of reasons. And as part of that, it is necessary to – not in the sense of picking... but studying embodiedness, different experiences of disability.

And I think when it comes into non-specialised courses, so a non-disability studies course, which has overlaps with bits of disability studies. So, for example, I did this module in philosophy a few years ago called The Ethics of Killing. There was the euthanasia debate and it's just like actually, I walked into that module and I use a cane, it's pretty obvious that there is a disabled person in the room. I also walked in late so it was more obvious than usual because everyone saw me come in. But I had to sit through this debate on my continuing existence.

So actually I think it's important as well that disability studies or at least the consideration of disabled people is integrated into every other module out there because the fact of the matter is that we have to live these experiences as well. It's not just about having your week on disability studies, or your one module on disability studies. It's about integrating it into everything else as well because that was a really unpleasant experience, I didn't go back.

Jennifer Fraser

Nicole, did you want to respond?

Nicole Brown

Yes, I've got two points to make and then I'll respond to the question as well. First of all, in response to what Fiona said about the peripherals to the community. Fiona knows my standpoint on this. There are sometimes people that we consider as privileged and their voices are equally unheard. So even within the peripherals, they're not all people that we consider unprivileged people.

So for example, academia. My work is with academic staff and everybody would consider anyone who is working within academia to be quite a privileged person. And yet their voices, when I'm interviewing and working with them on my research for fibromyalgia, that's the first time they're talking about it. For a lot of them they haven't even spoken to their line managers.

So it's something that – even within that so called privileged area, there are peripherals and I just wanted to make that point. Fiona knows that I've made that point before as well!

Fiona Kumari Campbell

Yes, it's really important.

Nicole Brown

The other thing I was going to say was about the modules and the teaching that you were mentioning. I agree with that but I also think that when you have a module like I'm teaching on a module at the moment which is called Literacy, Language and Communication, it's got nothing to do at all with any kind of disability studies or anything because it actually comes out of the BA in Education Studies. So it's got nothing to do with disability studies or studies for enablism. And yet, I think that we all have a duty of bringing the ideas into that so even if it's something that's not a module that's about disability studies, actually we have to bring awareness in.

And, that is for me the third point that I would like to make is what are the considerations that we need to address to counter ableism?

To me, it's about raising awareness. It's raising awareness amongst staff and students that we all have troubles. And yes for some of us it may only be a temporary thing but for some

of us it may be a chronic thing and it may be something that's a chronic illness, a neurodiversity. So in a way it's about creating an environment where the so called deficiencies aren't any longer any deficiencies, that we just see them as differences.

Again, and this is me talking from an education background. In the past there was this discussion or this great thing about learning styles and everybody talks about all these learning styles that we have. Now, I know all about the critiques of the learning style debate as well so I'm not going there. But my point is when as a society we have been able to accept that people learn in different ways, why can we not expand that then and say ok, people learn in different ways and that will mean we have to do something to include everybody. And that to me is truthfully what we have to do in order to counter ableism.

So it's not just about pointing out well we're now doing a disability studies course or we're now doing a disability module, it's about having this environment where it is truly inclusive. And to be honest, I'm working at UCL, there are so many buildings and rooms that are completely inaccessible and it's that side of it, yes it goes back to the social model of disability. But they're not just inaccessible in the sense of there being steps, They're inaccessible because there's no hearing loop. They're inaccessible because there is nobody there that would potentially be a signer. They're inaccessible because I can't have captioning sorted out in advance. And that side of it is more to do with what I see trying to counter ableism in the curriculum. So it's not just about trying to point out what we now are learning about disabilities. Actually this is what we naturally have to do.

Sarah Golightley

I'd like to join in there. I agree to some extent; I think that social work is actually kind of an interesting model to look at in this context. Because in social work it's supposed to be an explicitly anti-oppressive course, which is what brings certain people like me into it.

But then a lot of the courses in the UK have this idea that anti-oppressive practice will be integrated throughout, which means that people come in, they all agree that they're not going to discriminate against anybody and very little is done. So I think there really does need to be quite a bit of scrutiny about how so-called inclusion works throughout a curriculum, particularly also like in social work we will have the lecture, probably for each module, about disabled people and working with disabled people. And sometimes they will bring in service users to talk about their experiences and sometimes they are challenging but it's usually pretty gentle.

So I think what is also really important if we're talking about including disabled people's voices is thinking about who becomes 'the deserving' disabled. And who becomes – bringing in this agreeable client and still thinking about how social work props up certain ideas of the family, what constitutes a family, who should have a family. And so they can bring in all the people that they want but without really integrating these more kind of like fundamental structures, we're still leaving intact systems that are very much from a legacy of not only ableism but colonialism, cisheterosexism and beyond. So I think that that's something that I really think needs to go further than just consulting with some disabled people because social work already does that and it's definitely not where it should be in terms of being an anti-ableist curriculum.

Becca-Grace Schrader

I study film and in my class we had, we're actually currently going through a module about representation within film. And a class I had only a couple of weeks ago was focused on

disability representation within film. And I sat there and my class is very small, I know all of them individually and I was the only disabled person in the room. And each person was giving an opinion on whether that representation was a good representation or not. And that alone, it's so wrong. A person who is not disabled cannot say whether it's a good representation or a bad representation because they don't know what it is to be disabled. Does that make sense? So for me, the ethical consideration is the opinion in a way. The opinion is what matters. That's what needs to be changed before anything else can really be changed.