

## **Ways of rethinking inclusion for disabled students in Higher Education**

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### ***Presentation abstract***

The word 'inclusion' now frequently appears in the marketing strategies of many UK universities, despite the equivocal ways the term is used across the sector (Koutsouris et al., 2022). For some of us in the field of disability studies, these ambiguities in the ways the concept of inclusion is used are one of the reasons why it has become emptied of meaning. While notionally disclosing the invisible work entailed in being disabled (Wertans and Burch, 2022), inclusion also implies a form of privileging: those on the inside determine who is included and on what grounds. This assimilationist discourse reproduces the socio-political structures and practices that categorise those who are outsiders (Biesta 2010; Biesta, 2019). Moreover, the technocratic nature of the current political context in which performance and its measurement are the main drivers of how higher education (HE) is required to address *underrepresented* groups and their performance (Peters, 2020; Supiot, 2021), for example, through access and participation plans, not only homogenises disability but inevitably excludes others (Evans and Zhu, 2022). For example, this may happen to postgraduate students, international students or those who, because of the discrimination and stigma they experience, choose not to disclose a disability. This presentation explored the problematic nature of inclusion in relation to disabled students in HE and how it might impact on the work of learning developers. The paper explored Biesta's concept of 'transclusion' as a way of transforming and rethinking how we conceptualise and enact equality of access, participation and social justice and what this could mean for practitioners. It highlighted the extent to which we, as practitioners, could contest and respond to the complex demands of inclusion in ways that might help change institutional cultures and thinking about disability so that disabled students (and staff) remain less invisible.

**Keywords:** inclusion; disability; social justice; minoritised; invisibility; exclusion

### ***Community response***

This was a very full, informative and thought provoking session that gave the audience a tremendous amount to consider, both personally and professionally, about their approach to and opinions of disability. In particular, Julian's point around the systemic and institutional challenges that face disabled students – and also, as raised by a delegate, staff – as being essential to question and confront where possible was well received by audience members.

Personally, and for several others, the ideas around 'thinking inside-out' were also really interesting: the idea of not just bringing those on the periphery into the status quo but challenging the status quo and who is an 'outsider' was a watershed concept in my thinking. Looking in more detail at Biesta's (2022) ideas has been useful since the session, as he places great value on asking different questions, rather than finding new answers. As well as that question, 'who is an outsider?', Julian's presentation has also made me ask, 'what does it mean to be included?' And, 'who gets to do the including?' These aren't questions that are going to be answered any time soon, but I think the principle behind Biesta's provocation is that they needn't be. The point is that we ask them. Then perhaps we can get a bit closer to understanding how we, as Learning Developers and educators, 'redefine [the existing sociopolitical order] in such a way that new identities, new ways of doing and being become possible' (Biesta, 2019).

### ***Editorial comment***

Julian closed his presentation by outlining what he sees as the wicked problems facing not just disability campaigners, but all of us as practitioners working within a diverse community. He describes them as 'critically problematic', in that only by tackling these (note: not *solving* them) will we be able to come to terms with the very nature of the issues surrounding inclusion as a concept, as well as their scope:

- Structural: a better understanding of inclusion potentially undermines the invisible structures of power and control.

- Socio-political: revaluing care and the affective domain; our social order of neoliberal financialised capitalism has hollowed out and exhausted care work (Lynch, 2019; Dowling, 2021, Fraser, 2022).
- Making the invisible visible: enabling unheard voices to be heard.
- Advocacy: thinking from the inside out.

### **Next steps and additional questions**

The audience were keen to understand how these concepts might work in practice – how can we, as practitioners, take these theoretical ideas and use them in our work with students? What does transclusion look like in our day to day work?

### ***Author's reflection***

I have noticed over the years that when attending higher education related conferences, sessions on disability are always the ones with the lowest attendance. Whereas if the theme were decolonising the curriculum or addressed gender, the numbers were much higher. I know partly why this is (and it is not just educational trends): the subject of disability and disabled people themselves do not have the positively framed activist movements such as the Black Lives Matter or the Me Too awareness campaigns. In the 60s there were disability rights groups that tried to create such a positive activist movement, and there's Crip theory within the Disability Studies discipline and beyond. But these are unfamiliar to most. I wonder how uncomfortable people are in their encounters with disabled people, the judgments they make and assumptions they bring. As Donna Williams wrote in 1996, "...right from the start, from the time someone came up with the word 'autism', the condition has been judged from the outside, by its appearances, and not from the inside according to how it is experienced."

As well as opening up a space for dialogue and challenge, one of my intentions was to make visible what is so frequently overlooked and masked in the cultures and practices of education when it comes to equity of participation and social justice for disabled students and staff (and other minoritised groups). My intent was to begin to foreground some of the complexities that underlie these debates.

How do you define and understand inclusion? It is not straightforward. Are we ever going to move beyond just questions of 'access' (i.e., ramps, the physical environment, etc.), which should not even be in scope, as these are legal requirements? To what extent do the curriculum and practices in your institution reflect and promote the interests of those with more power and voice? These questions point to what I mean about sustaining the invisible structural inequalities that can occur in the way the discourse of inclusion is manifest and deployed in HE. I am persuaded by Gert Biesta's arguments for a transformative inclusion, a transclusion, as a way of questioning and thinking about how we change the terrain and power structures, while ensuring authentic equity and social justice in education.

Where possible, I avoid using the word inclusion, which is one of the concerns I have with the concept of and arguments for transclusion. However, if I were pushed to define it, I would articulate it along the lines of a radical provocation and call for social justice.

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