"I Can See What You Mean": Encouraging Higher Education Educators to Reflect Upon Their Teaching and Learning Practice When Engaging with Blind/ Vision Impaired Learners*

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Abstract

This article seeks to take the positive learning from the challenges faced by students with disabilities engaged in higher education - in particular those who are blind and vision impaired – and use it to shape practice for educators who seek to engage positively in their pedagogies with these very students and their peers. The article begins by citing some of the factors that have influenced the changes in the student demography within education since the turn of the century. The challenges faced by students with disabilities are well researched and the move from add-on supports to a more inclusive approach is afoot. This however now presents challenges to the professional educator and 'begs' the question – 'Do I, as an educator, need to change my practice?' Such questioning can realign the focus of education and further prompt us to ask 'Is the learner the only learner in the education relationship?' While the result may be more questions than answers – the authors seek to position the learning so that educators 'will be able to see' where to position their professional development now and in the future.

Keywords: Inclusivity, professional development.

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1 This article is not setting out to tell any educator how to do their job better: rather, it is reflecting and combining the experiences of three very different but engaged professionals. Mary Quirke is currently a PhD candidate in the School of Education Trinity College Dublin (TCD). Her primary research interest is professional practice development focusing on student inclusion and engagement in both transition and education. Dr Patricia McCarthy, on the other hand, brings the personal experience of a registered blind student. Dr McCarthy has also undertaken life-history research with blind and vision impaired people exploring their educational and transitional opportunities. Finally Dr Conor McGuckin, an Assistant Professor in Educational Psychology at TCD, and a Visiting Research Fellow of Glyndwr University (Wales) with special interests in Education, Inclusive Education, Social Media and Professionalism among Educators and allied professionals lends the voice of the professional academic. Each bring their own philosophy in the hope that they can convince others to consider how they engage in teaching practice.

1. Introduction

There has been a history of exclusion and missed opportunities for blind and vision impaired young people within all realms of education. In the past, these children and young people were mainly assigned to particular types of education, based on their impairment. This type of provision led to groundless suppositions about the learning capabilities of this student cohort and suggested that because of their impairment they inevitably had more apparent learning needs than their peers (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007). Restructuring of the education system commenced in Ireland in the 1990s, resulting in significant changes in special education, including a language of inclusive education within policy initiatives. Therefore, these children and young people are now educated within general education settings and: "have become the responsibility of everyone in the education system" (Griffin & Shevlin, 2007, p. 3).

The number of blind/vision impaired young people making the transition to third level education remains consistently low, with (AHEAD, 2008) identifying that vision impaired young people were 50 per-cent less likely to continue to third level education than their able-bodied peers. It is recognised that this low level of entry to post-secondary education among this student cohort is not about their ability, but is a consequence of a dearth of learning opportunity and supports (AHEAD, 2015). However, the numbers of students with print disabilities is significantly higher and the range of teaching and learning approaches taken to ensure their success can in fact work for all student cohorts. Johnson and Fox (2003, p.14) explain that: "just as it is more cost-effective to include ramps and include accessibility into the design of a new building, it is also more cost and time effective to consider the flexibility of learning materials when designing a course than in trying to provide individual accommodations after the fact". This approach encourages an anticipatory approach to curriculum design and embeds the view of disability as an aspect of difference that can enrich the lives of all.

1.1 This frames the question – do I, as an educator, need to change my practice?

(Michalko, 2009) reminds us that: "disability is here; it is in our societies, in our cultures; it is in our organizations, our institutions and in our everyday lives; disability is in our world; it can be nowhere else" (p. 66). Furthermore, he cautions us that: "how disability is made to appear to and for us influences greatly how disability will participate in our individual and collective lives" (p. 66).

Ireland has witnessed substantial developments in how we think about and respond to disability as a public issue. One of the areas where this has been particularly evident has been in relation to the inclusion of students with disabilities within higher education (HE). The reality of this for lecturers is that, across all courses and faculties, there is likely to be a student with a disability in the lecture hall. Many factors have contributed to this increasing visibility of students with disabilities in HE, including legislation that underpins a policy of inclusion, the implementation of government sponsored access policies, and the increased level of supports available to students with disabilities. The Fund for Students with Disabilities was established in 1994 with the explicit goal of supporting students with disabilities in further and higher education (Higher Education Authority: HEA, 2005). This policy decision recognised that students with disabilities lack sufficient opportunities to access and participate fully in HE (HEA, 2008). In 2009 the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) was launched nationally. DARE is an admission scheme used by colleges and universities that offers places to students with disabilities on a reduced score on their Leaving Certificate

portfolio of scores.

All of these advances at the national level have been directly influenced by the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation: UNESCO, 1994). The Statement has been a significant development as it promotes a move from “integrated” to “inclusive” education. In June 1994, Ireland was one of ninety-two governments that adopted the Statement. The Salamanca Statement advocated the need to provide opportunities for equal participation for all students and called on governments to: “adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise” (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix). This has resulted in a greater number of students with a disability engaging with the Leaving Certificate curriculum and aspiring to attend HE just as their peers and siblings do.

For many issues that impact upon the lived experience of individuals in society and education, national and international “aspirations” are often very closely aligned. The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) advances these underpinning principles by maintaining that States shall guarantee that persons with disabilities receive the requisite supports within the general education system to promote their education. Furthermore, it affirmed that effective individualised supports are available within settings that: “maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion” (United Nations, 2006, Article 24[e]). (Wright, 2010) correctly reminds us as educators that: “inclusive education is now established as part of a global agenda and as such national governments, and their agencies, strive to produce and implement policies to promote inclusion” (p. 153).

In Ireland, significant legislation has been enacted since the 1990s that is germane to children and adults with disabilities to support these aspirations to uphold the rights of students with disabilities to an education that is appropriate to their needs, and to ensure statutory protection for their rights to such an education. Equality legislation (2000, 2004, and 2008) identifies that educational establishments are required to: “make reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities in their education, examination and accreditation systems in order to facilitate equality of participation in the education system for these persons and to ensure that they achieve appropriate learning outcomes” (Kinsella & Senior, 2008, p. 53).

1.2 This prompts us to ask - Is the learner the only learner in the education relationship?

The classification “disabled student” can be “problematic”. There are many reasons for this – e.g., determining who is recognised as disabled, and by whom, and for what purposes. One of the significant factors associated with such classification is that while an individual’s personal experience of a disability may have little significance on how they perceive themselves, it can be a significant factor in how others conceptualise them (Skär, 2003). Therefore, whilst an individual might not identify as a disabled person, society may identify them as such because of the powerful social constructions of disability (Cohen & Napolitano, 2007). There has been a dearth of research undertaken which focuses on the educational experiences of blind/vision impaired students (AHEAD, 2008; McCarthy, 2013). However, it is recognised that blind/vision impaired students have the same curriculum needs as all students, but due to vision impairment can experience difficulties when traditional method of teaching and learning are used (Spungin & Ferrell, 2007) in isolation from innovative practices.

Participants in (McCarthy, 2013) research regarding the experiences of individuals with visual impairments in Irish HE articulated a view that people regularly placed particular emphasis on the blindness/vision impairment to the exclusion of any other identifying factor. This is

relevant when we consider the issue of "disclosure". Disabling societies are not always conducive to facilitating disclosure as there are frequently negative connotations associated with disability (Matthews, 2009). There is a profound difference between having visible and invisible impairments (Lingsom, 2008) and, as (Reeve, 2002) asserted, having a visible impairment provides others with: "privileged information and therefore power about that body" (p. 499). However, while (McCarthy, 2013) identified that there was often a reluctance to disclose, many of those who participated in the research recognised the need to disclose if they wished to obtain the supports and resources necessary to participate within institutions that were not always designed to meet their needs. It is imperative to recognise that blind/vision impaired individuals are recognised as individuals with unique needs and that the supports they require can vary - depending on situation and location (Dale, 2010; Douglas *et al*., 2009).

Where it is apparent that these 'blind/vision impaired individuals' are in fact just students seeking to engage in learning; in that they are similar to any student seeking to learn be it with or without accommodation – the educator can find themselves challenged when they rely on traditional pedagogical practices. New pedagogical relationships demand learning new technologies and consideration of innovative teaching and assessment approaches – all in all redesigning pedagogical practice in an effort to include.

1.3 Show me and I will be able to see

The focus in education is generally placed upon the learner, and traditionally where students with disabilities are concerned, a learner centred approach is encouraged. This approach works on the assumption that the learner is the "driver" for action. However, while this is appropriate when the focus is on the learner's narrative, what if the focus is upon the educator? This article places the educator at the centre, as it is their environment and recognises that they can be the drivers for change as we progress to a more inclusive education system.

While this article sets out to "see things" from the educator's perspective, it takes its learning from the experience of students who are blind/vision impaired. Many of the challenges experienced by these students can challenge assumptions with respect to inclusivity in the lecture hall and beyond. By way of example, let's consider the printed word.

Print material is an inherent component of the education system and one's ability to access it is essential to access the curricula. The greatest challenge for a student who is blind/vision impaired is "seeing" print material. What is interesting is that these students share this common challenge with many other students, including those with a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, and international students where English is not their first language. Thus, this article demonstrates how we may understand the challenges and learning from one cohort of students while recognising that many other students will benefit from the ideas being proposed.

1.3.1 Think ahead about the tools you use – be prepared

One of the biggest issues raised by students who are vision impaired is the lack of preparedness of institutions in providing basic things – like hard copy - on time (Lewin-Jones & Hodgson, 2004). This is not a whimsical concern – it is significant because students with a print disability need timely access to the textbooks and written materials required for their courses if they are to compete on an equal basis with their non-disabled peers (Harpur & Loudoun, 2011). Producing lecture notes or additional readings in an alternative format is not simply a matter of scanning a book and handing the scanned document over to the student

with a print disability. (Harpur and Loudoun, 2011, p. 156) rightly remind us that:

> *"Students do not just read textbooks from cover to cover. Students are required to navigate the textbook so that they can identify footnotes or endnotes, read prescribed pages or pinpoint pages within the text. The latter requirement is especially important as all faculties instruct students to use pin point referencing in assignments which requires students to be able to identify what page a quote comes from."*

While accessing print material in alternative formats has advanced considerably in recent years due to developments in technology, the actual process of turning a print document into a format that can be utilised appropriately within academic settings is still a time-consuming process. For example, whilst screen reading software can be used to convert document or web page text into audio output, this precludes the opportunity to skim read before committing to a full read of the text. Consequently, appropriate preparation - on many levels - including the individual level, academic staff level, and support level, are required to ensure that the barriers experienced by those who require their text books in formats other than standard print are minimised.

With the increasing use of virtual learning environments (VLE) in education, it could be assumed that centralised and electronic access to notes and files would aid students who are blind/vision impaired. However, quite often these mainstream products are not completely compatible with assistive technology and software. Indeed, many of these VLE environments are simply structured storage systems, with the truism of the computer programming adage: garbage in - garbage out. That is, if the material uploaded to a VLE is not in an accessible format, then retrieval will be problematic.

1.3.2 Think about the tools students use to learn

It is essential to identify that equality of access should not stop once a student with a disability has gained entry to the educational setting; these students also require equality of condition and equality of outcome to ensure equal opportunities and experiences. As afore stated, print is an integral part of our daily lives. Subsequently, there is a: "requirement for efficient and flexible reading strategies to participate and manage independent living situations" (Vik & Fellenius, 2007, p. 545).

(Harpur and Loudoun, 2011) suggest that reading lists should be finalised at least six weeks prior to the start of a semester. However, they also recognise that enforcing such procedures is difficult, demonstrating how policy and provision can significantly impact on the ability of students with print disabilities to perform on a relatively equal level with their peers. The reality is that: "students with print disabilities continue to experience barriers which the wider student cohort does not confront" (p. 154).

1.3.3 Consider making learning available on-line

The contemporary world of the HE student requires adoption and adaption to e-learning approaches (Fichten *et al.*, 2009). The addition of e-learning approaches and storage platforms can be utilised successfully to facilitate the inclusion of students with visual impairments in the educational process, giving them greater access to class notes and handouts. However, the individual variability across learners who have visual impairments means that e-learning should not be seen as the "easy solution". (Fichten *et al*., 2009) found that whilst many forms of e-learning that participants with low vision found moderately accessible were not accessible to the participants who were blind. E-learning comes with an additional caveat. While the approach is increasingly prevalent, there has been little direct attention to understanding the functionality of the technology as applied to students with a

disability. In the absence of basic ergonomic design principles, the very real potential of e-learning technologies, both at a hardware and a software level, may be inhibited, thus leaving blind/vision impaired people excluded from what should be easily accessible materials.

1.3.4 Don't just prepare your lectures – prepare your learners

At a very basic level, making learning materials readily available in a timely manner may mean that students who might otherwise require "special" provision may no longer have the disadvantage of requiring additional supports in that setting" (Matthews, 2009). This is just one of many basic planning issues that are indicative of how policy and provision can be either an enabler or a disabler to students with additional requirements.

1.3.5 Allow assistive technologies – while respecting their place

The utilisation of assistive technology is a compensatory skill as it allows blind/vision impaired people to undertake tasks that are frequently performed by sighted persons (McDonnall & Crudden, 2009). However, there are often the false assumptions that assistive technologies level the playing field and that by deploying them, ". . . the aim of access is achieved" (Söderström & Ytterhus, 2010, p. 311). Whilst undoubtedly valuable in their functions, assistive technology is generally ". . . reactive in design, and by the time accommodations are made mainstream technology has moved another step forward" (Söderström & Ytterhus, 2009, p. 311).

1.3.6 Reconsider assessment

Formative assessments, including examinations, are an integral component of most education courses. Standard examination formats and procedures may pose particular challenges for blind/vision impaired students, resulting in them being unable to demonstrate their abilities under standard examination conditions (Douglas et al., 2011). Therefore, accommodations are intended to be "legally reasonable" and to allow the student the opportunity to perform on an equal basis with their non-disabled peers (Kinsella & Senior, 2008). That is, they should be allowed to: "show what they know, without being impeded by their disabilities" (Steer *et a*l., 2007, p. 170).

In essence, we would seek to remind colleagues that when considering assessments for students who are blind/vision impaired, that each student is seen as unique and individual, rather than as a cohort of "sameness". Individual needs assessments will set the requirements and contextual differences that may require a more nuanced approach – e.g., the same accommodation for a text based assignment may be different than for a maths or science based assignment.

1.3.7 Teach so students will learn

Teaching and learning practices can present significant barriers to the learning opportunities for students with disabilities (Powell, 2003; Rioux & Pinto, 2010; Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Consequently, it is essential to recognise that adjustments to teaching and learning methodologies are paramount (AHEAD, 2015; McCarthy, 2013). This necessitates a multiplicity of flexible and supportive teaching approaches (Matthews, 2009) at all levels of the education system and requires that educators need to ". . . commit to facilitating a barrier-free curriculum" (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010).

While a student's ability to read printed material or diagrams may be challenged, these students have successfully navigated the educational system up to this point. By way of example - students with vision impairment may access information in a variety of ways - Braille, audio, or enlarged print. Very often it is these methods of learning that can demand new flexibilities on behalf of the educator to ensure the success of the learner.

1.3.8 Allow for time

Time - together with a recognition of the effort and resilience it takes for the student to participate - can go a long way to support a student's learning. For example, braille readers are unable to skim-read and may take up to three times as long as other students to read a text. Whilst some students may be able to read print, they will probably need to pace their work carefully so as to avoid fatigue or eye strain and the headaches that are often the result of eyestrain. These factors may significantly reduce the study time available to these students.

Extra time may also be required to:

- Start writing because of the additional time required for reading;
- Locate words in a text when shifting from one reading medium to another.

1.3.9 Recognise that others may also be involved

Students with limited vision may be large-print readers or may only be able to read using special computer software or equipment. Many vision impaired students prefer material in an electronic format and often use a "screen reader" to access material. Some students may need material reformatted into alternative formats. Where there is more than one person involved in the collation of accessible learning materials, students are often kept waiting for significant periods of time for the material to be produced for them. Other areas where blind and vision impaired students rely on others include:

- Finding books in the library;
- Reading examination questions and handouts in standard print;
- Note-taking;
- Proof-reading written work and putting a bibliography together;
- Presentation requirements may not be met unless the student has support in doing this.

1.3.10 Universal Design for Learning

The field of ergonomics is concerned with two important considerations that are useful for our discussion here. First is the quest for the notional "average person" who is average in every dimension – whether popliteal height, finger span, seat pan width, etc. Knowing that no such person exists teaches us that we really are truly individual. Secondly, ergonomics helps us deal with the query as to whether we "fit the person to the desk" or "fit the desk to the person". This acceptance of individuality and the need to alter the work environment is a fundamental underpinning of the concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Like any useful design approach, UDL is for all students – not just those with a disability. The UDL framework is "best practice" and we would encourage colleagues to seek the resources that are available to support their professional and academic activities, so that they are responsive to the needs of a diverse student body.

1.4 Conclusion

Education is recognised as a fundamental human right and while access to education has been enshrined in policy internationally and nationally there also needs to be an emphasis on: “the right of quality education and the right to respect in the learning environment” (Rioux & Pinto, 2010, p. 622). Factors of marginalisation can relate to: “curriculum, school or classroom organisation, assessment, or more generally, to cultures, policies and practices” (Petrou, Angelides, & Leigh, 2009, pp. 439-440).

For any young person, educational performance and examination attainment is an important indicator of lifelong choices and, as McDougall (2007) argues, to be young should mean having a future of possibilities. There is a strong relationship between level of education and access to employment (Friehe *et al.*, 1996; Turmusani, 2001; Watson & Nolan, 2011). For students with disabilities, successful inclusion and participation in education is an important enabler of social and economic inclusion for adult life (Shah & Priestley, 2011). The challenge for everyone involved in education and society more broadly, is to continue to adapt to the needs of young people who have a disability and to accept their differences - while enabling them to maximise their achievements (Watson & Nolan, 2011). This challenge is often cited as being one for the learner – while in reality it, as we have discussed, it may also be a challenge for the educator.

Much of this article has focused on directing the educator and those they engage with “to be prepared”. It did not however speak about the students that are also engaged in the learning relationships and where they also play a part. Perhaps this then raises the question – now that we are preparing the educators, do we also need to consider how we prepare learners as they seek to choose what course of study they take, in this new world of learning? Will it make a difference if they know what to expect from the teaching and learning experience in HE? Do they, and those professionals they engage with now need to look at the future in a different way?

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3. Appendices

Resources For Higher Education Staff

On-campus professionals who may be useful:

- Disability Officer or Access Officer
- Librarian
- Assistive Technology Officer
- Teaching and Learning Services Officer
- Examinations Officer
- Graduate Studies Officer

Off-campus professionals who may be useful: National Organisations

- AHEAD www.ahead.ie (AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability is an independent non-profit organisation working to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation.)
- National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (NAIRTL) www.teachingandlearning.ie (The National Academy works with Irish higher education institutions to develop, implement and advance effective research-informed teaching and learning practices to enhance the student learning experience at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.)
- The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design http://universaldesign.ie/ (The Centre is dedicated to the principle of universal access, enabling people in Ireland to participate in a society that takes account of human difference and to interact with their environment to the best of their ability.)

Disability organisations

- Deafblind Ireland: www.deafblindireland.ie
- Féach: www.feach.ie (Féach is a support group for parents of children who are blind/vision impaired).
- Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind: www.guidedogs.ie
- National Centre for Technology in Education: NCTE: www.ncte.ie
- National Council for the Blind of Ireland: www.ncbi.ie
- Child Vision Ireland: www.childvision.ie; www.robobraille.org (National Braille Production Centre)