

# Academic Ableism in Higher Education

**Dr. Shrehan Lynch (Guest Writer)** - Senior Lecturer in Secondary Initial Teacher Education at the University of East London

**Dr. John Macklin (Guest Writer)** - Director of Careers & Enterprise at the University of East London

'The ethic of higher education still encourages students and teachers alike to accentuate ability, valorize perfection, and stigmatize anything that hints at intellectual (or physical weakness)' (Dolmage, 2017, p. 2)

## Introduction

In this piece, we argue that universities and by extension all educational establishments need to address inequitable systems and pedagogic practices to ensure they promote inclusive opportunities, where achievement and success are available to all students and staff. Part of this process includes reflecting to ensure we do not replicate cultural and societal norms concerning disability.

'Disability is one of the most frequently forgotten forms of social, political and cultural oppression' (Christensen, 1996, p. 63)

Disability is a socially constructed term; it denotes a difference whereby specific groups are given unequal values. Sensoy & DiAngelo (2017) refer to this as a social stratifying strategy that societies adopt as norms; this creates oppression due to the way we organise specific groups of people. Our society is designed for/by, built for/by, and controlled for/by non-disabled individuals: this excludes disabled people (Swain et al. 2003). Consequently, people with disabilities have been unfairly and unjustly treated in our societies for centuries and there continues to be a lack of clarity on what is unjust (Rizvi & Christensen 1996).

## Ableism

Ableism, we argue is the conscious and unconscious favouring of those perceived as 'able' over those perceived to be disabled, or indeed those assessed as disabled. Ableism positively values able-bodiedness (Dolmage, 2017). Anyone deviating from the norm is considered 'tragic', 'dangerous', 'inferior' or 'less than human' (Swain et al. 2003). As a society, being disabled has a specific stigma attached to it and ableism reinforces that stigma. However, individuals are not just disabled, identity is multidimensional (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and complex. Thus, while our focus is on ableism, we recognise that individuals could also be part of another minority group e.g. female, trans, Muslim, and/or a person of colour, etc. Thus, as educators, we take into consideration the intersecting elements of a person's identity with various forms of oppression.

Ableism is reinforced at universities because they are set up hierarchically, organisationally and architecturally in ways that reflect society (Dolmage, 2017). The academy is a site of class privilege that excludes certain students (hooks, 2015). Dolmage (2017) illustrates barriers to university with the visual of steps leading up to the entrance of the university creating a physical barrier to access. This helps understand the ways in which the architect of the university space is exclusionary. This paper illuminates ways that we have observed universities being ableist from an academic ableism perspective. Academic ableism recognises the inequitable material structures of universities but also seeks to critique ways of learning, assessment, pedagogy to persuade organisations and individuals to make change (Dolmage, 2017). We intend to disrupt the knapsack of unearned advantages and entitlements (McIntosh, 1988) that educators may or may not be conscious of that enables students/ staff to succeed easier than others. Said another way, the issue for universities and schools is they are adding useful tools to the able students' knapsacks and filling the 'others' with unnecessary items that hinder success.

Further, we position ourselves as somewhat knowledgeable regarding academic ableism as we are considered by our university as disabled. Although not visibly obvious, we are neurologically different; Shrehan dyslexic and John dyspraxic. While physically privileged and our 'hidden specific learning disabilities' only represent one viewpoint we are educators and researchers of the matter, which helps deepen our understandings to a certain degree. In what follows we present several considerations and issues that we have come across and consider to be academic ableism. These anecdotal examples are by no means an exhaustive complete list, but they are from our experiences, students/ colleagues/ friends whom we have had the pleasure to work with and share narratives.

## **Pedagogy**

In universities just like schools, under the Equality Act 2010, students with a disability are entitled to support and should receive funding so that they can effectively learn. However, the support can be seen as a retrofit and only requires academics to adapt a part of their pedagogy without questioning their underlying practice and how something might be considered as ableist. While we are not claiming individual educators are ableist, we are suggesting that not having inclusive pedagogy as a requirement for teaching highlights how the institution works in ableist ways. Furthermore, for someone to receive support, the requirement enforces that they have a diagnosis. For John, after struggling during his doctoral work, he was diagnosed with dyspraxia. Being undiagnosed meant he missed out during his formal education years (school, undergraduate, postgraduate) on provision and support which could have affected his life choices.

Educators have a responsibility to ensure their practice is inclusive; putting all learning materials on the university learning platform, using captioning for videos, encouraging 'jazz hands' (hand waving) instead of clapping for non-neurotypical students. However, such practices are not occurring as standards practice. The emotional toll for students is exhausting especially constantly asking for recommended practices suggested by disability services to be adhered to. The reality is that many lecturers have received no formal training regarding inclusive practice. As schoolteachers, we were trained to support all learners in our classroom spaces, but how can we expect colleagues that come directly from industry to know how to adapt their pedagogy?

It is common knowledge that lecturers can have microaggressions (everyday sensitives) to minority groups (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and this can be displayed by reinforcing traditional pedagogies such as 'chalk and talk' or otherwise known as standing behind the lectern and reciting information to students. In an ideal higher education situation, on day one, lecturers would share that they acknowledge and appreciate all students and ask them to share via surveys or a 1:1 meeting how they would like to learn and what the educator can do to accommodate. Of course, this means a radical rehaul of standardised module delivery, flexible courses, small class numbers, and listening to students' voices. Such an idealised view contradicts the consistency, monitoring and accountability systems neoliberal universities enforce.

## **Curriculum & assessment**

Intellectual ability is foregrounded in higher education (Dolmage, 2017). Academia, by nature, privileges and reinforces specific intellectual abilities and ways of knowing. Most commonly written text is the most valued form. We see this in the continual setting of academic texts as a requirement, reading lists, and students completing examinations and essays for grades. Educators are looking for a specific type of language in the writing. This has been termed linguicism, which is discrimination based on language or dialect. Linguicism privileges neurotypical ways of knowing that do not suit minority groups, not just those that are disabled but English additional language learners. Moreover, short blogs, podcasts, poetry, spoken word, and film can be adopted rather than setting traditional academic texts. Authors of these forms are imaginative and release their intellectual mind through alternate ways. These examples could also be one way that assignments are submitted – disrupting the status quo. When academic text is a requirement, for example, for English literature courses, drawing on individuals that the students identify with is important. Not only people with disabilities but people from an array of minority groups that reflect our diverse society.

## **Space**

The material and physical space of universities privileges one group over another. This means neurotypical staff and students get unearned advantages in education systems and social institutions become discriminatory (Goodley, 2011). As an example, here are some of the ways space (libraries, classrooms, lecture theatres, offices) privileges one group over another:

- Light brightness
- Light switches out of reach
- Lifts being out of action for extended periods
- Cold/hot lecture theatres
- Hard, uncomfortable seating in classroom spaces
- Access to ramps
- Long lectures (1 hour plus)
- Narrow spaces e.g. space between bookshelves in the library
- Clothing requirements (smart versus comfortable)
- University buses being out of action

How examples affect individual groups was intentionally not described because the examples can affect an array of people with alternate needs. Institutions that seek to make their spaces more inclusive should consider doing a needs assessment of staff. If institutions do not look after staff, how can adequate provision be provided for students? This is the same for recruitment processes, people with disabilities may feel like they do not want to apply to work in spaces that they know are not inclusive, consequently, it is the universities responsibility to encourage applicants and openly state how they will ensure the applicants' needs are met.

## Research

Students and staff are required to research in higher education. However, much of what is produced is not accessible to the masses and filled with academic jargon (hooks, 2015). The text becomes obsolete to thousands of individuals. We have a responsibility as academics to ensure that knowledge is shared through accessibility forms of knowing. Moreover, the people we are writing for can access it.

Importantly, we have recognised a lot of research still 'on' target groups rather than 'with' individuals. This has been the case for disability, children, people of colour, etc. When research is done on groups, there is a hierarchical approach to the research process and the researcher is removed from the everyday lives and voices of the participants. Furthermore, the researcher makes specific judgements and positions the researched group as the 'other', many academics have claimed this is unethical and groups should be part of the decision-making/ research process. This type of research takes more time and care and cannot be done quickly.

The reality of many academics is the pressure of producing research articles is monumental, it means academics are judged on the capitalist notion of productivity and rather than the quality of articles produced, quantity is sought. This has several knock-on effects, first, not all academics can produce fast articles – research takes time and people write/ understand at different speeds. Second, individual workloads in universities are constantly increasing yet the expectation to research continues at the same pace. It can become overwhelming to juggle the teaching, research and service requirements of universities. Additionally, shared office spaces can significantly reduce work productivity. As lecturers, we work in a shared space, as neurologically different to our colleagues we find that concentration is hard, constant disruptions and conversations occurring in the space are distracting and the environment is not always conducive to industrious work. If institutions want to continue in capitalist lines of work, they must support staff in ways of working that suit them.

## Concluding thoughts

This paper has indicated some of how people with a disability are disadvantaged in academic spaces through the lens of academic ableism. The Equality Act (2010) cannot and should not be the only reason that we change practice and our institutions. Higher education should be a place where difference is encouraged and all students are catered for – structurally, physically, sensory, and emotionally. We have the agency to challenge the institutionalised oppression deeply rooted within the structures of the academy. It is up to us, to create the change. First, we must begin by asking questions, to ourselves regarding our pedagogy, curriculum/ assessment, space and research then seek input from minority groups. Only with collaboration can a prosperous inclusive future occur in academia.

## Supportive websites/hashtags that may help you:

- The dyslexic academic: <https://www.dyslexicacademic.com/blog>
- Office for Students: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/support-for-disabled-students/>
- Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence, government document (2017): [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/587221/Inclusive\\_Teaching\\_and\\_Learning\\_in\\_Higher\\_Education\\_as\\_a\\_route\\_to-excellence.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/587221/Inclusive_Teaching_and_Learning_in_Higher_Education_as_a_route_to-excellence.pdf)
- Twitter: @everydayableism, @academicableism, #whydisabledpeopledropout #academicableism

## References

- Christensen, C. (1996) *'Disabled, handicapped or disordered: 'what's in the name?'* In Christensen, C., & Rizvi, F. (ed.) *Disability and the dilemmas of education and justice*, pp. 63-78. Bristol: Open University Press.
- Christensen, C., & Rizvi, F. (ed.) (1996). *Disability and the dilemmas of education and justice*. Bristol: Open University Press.
- Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*. University of Michigan Press.
- Hooks, b. (2015). *Feminist is for everybody*. Oxon: Routledge.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack*. New York State United Teachers.
- Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2017). *Is everyone really equal?: An introduction to key concepts in social justice education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Swain, J., French, S., & Cameron, C. (2003). *Controversial issues in a disabling society*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill.