Bringing Disability into the Conversation: Creating Anti-ableist Community at Your Institution

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Instruction librarians have a difficult job. They are frequently asked to teach students everything they need to know about conducting library research, critically evaluating information, and how to participate in the scholarly conversation—often in a fifty-minute session. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that instruction librarians rarely receive pedagogical training before they step into the classroom (Brecher & Klipfel, 2014) and implementing new techniques and approaches can be intimidating and time-consuming. Because instruction librarians frequently visit a class only once or twice a semester, they may not know the individual needs and disabilities of students in their classrooms. Trying to anticipate all the potential needs of multiple groups of students can be frustrating and overwhelming.

Despite these challenges, instruction librarians strive to be excellent instructors and to provide an engaging instructional experience for all students; one that makes every individual feel welcome, included, and empowered to achieve their academic and personal goals. Often lacking the time or resources for formal training, librarians draw on the knowledge and skills accumulated in this profession: in literature, online, at conferences, and from each other. One of the most valuable ways librarians can expand their pedagogical knowledge and improve their instructional approaches is to work within a community of practice (CoP). In this paper, we will highlight why we feel more librarians need to consider disabled students when creating their instruction lesson plans, and how librarians can establish a CoP to support the implementation of inclusive practices as they bring disability into the instruction conversation.

Background: Disabled Students in Higher Education

In the 2015-16 academic year, 19.5% of undergraduate students reported having a disability, up from 11% in 2011-12 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). More disabled students are attending higher education, but many universities have not yet adjusted to ensure the success of these students. Most of these disabled students, almost 70%, have what are known as "invisible disabilities." Invisible disabilities include many medical, learning, emotional, and psychological conditions, which are not always (and indeed may never be) visible to an observer (Kattari et al., 2018). These students, who are not traditionally thought of and accommodated as "disabled," are often overlooked by librarians when they think about making their spaces, programming, and instruction accessible. Librarians are an integral part of university support systems that welcome disabled students and help them to succeed; it is critical that librarians are prepared to meet the needs of this population.

Many librarians assume that all students who have disabilities in their sessions are already receiving appropriate accommodations from their institution's disability services department, but research shows that a majority of disabled students do not disclose their conditions to their institutions (Newman et al., 2021). Many disabled students, especially those with invisible disabilities, choose not to disclose their disabilities or seek personal accommodations out of fear that they will be judged. For example, invisibly disabled students may be called "lazy" or encounter faculty members who refuse to provide them with accommodations because they are not obviously disabled (Kattari et al., 2018). Though choosing non-disclosure is understandable, it prevents these students from accessing institutional supports. This results in poorer grades, added stress, and worse higher education experiences for these students (Clouder et al., 2020).

For these reasons, disabled students are more likely to graduate when they make use of universally available support that does not require disclosure of a disability (Newman et al., 2021). This support can take many forms, including peer mentoring or tutoring, faculty help sessions, and consultations with writing and math centers. Library instruction and research consultations are also freely available institutional supports that can serve as important resources for disabled students regardless of their disclosure status. By addressing aspects of library services and instruction that hinder the learning of disabled students, we can create positive change and make libraries more accessible for all members of our educational communities.

Improving Instruction

Few instruction librarians have in-depth knowledge of pedagogy, much less an extensive understanding of the educational needs of disabled students. Despite requests for pedagogical knowledge and skills in many librarian positions, few LIS programs require–or even provide–courses on instructional theory or practical skills for teaching information literacy. Brecker and Klipfel (2014) add that when instruction pedagogy is taught in LIS programs, it is often "outdated and inadequate" to meet the demands of many teaching librarian positions.

As the number of disabled students in higher education increases, instructors must make their teaching more accessible for all students. In particular, disabled students benefit from adaptable classroom practices such as those established by CAST in their Universal Design for Learning framework (UDL) (Whitver, 2020). UDL practices aim to improve learner outcomes by providing more flexible ways for students to engage with educational content. Ideally, this also reduces the stress on instructors to change lesson plans at the last-minute to accommodate students with specific educational needs. Designing instruction to be as flexible as possible from the outset allows students with undisclosed and invisible disabilities the agency to engage with library instruction on their own terms. It is important to note that employing UDL may help instruction librarians to begin their teaching with a more inclusive mindset but will never eliminate the need for individual accommodations for learners. In a justice-minded classroom, as Anne-Marie Womack (2017) writes, "consider first how to include individuals typically excluded, how to make the 'normal' more inclusive, but then also leave room for changes to be negotiated later" (2017, p. 500). Ultimately, disabled students are the best judges of what support they need to be successful.

UDL is one tool librarians can use to make their instruction

more flexible and accessible. However, librarians will likely also want to read pedagogical scholarship, consider recommendations from activists and innovators in education, and collect feedback from class participants. The process of absorbing this information and implementing changes to lesson plans and library policy takes further time, reflection, and careful effort. Even when an instructor fully believes that making changes to their pedagogical approach could benefit students, they may lack the time and personal resources to implement changes. Additionally, instruction librarians may not see results from instructional changes if much of their instruction is conducted in a "one-shot" format. This lack of assessment information contributes to the barriers instruction librarians face when attempting to make long-term improvements to their teaching.

It takes time, dedication, and resources to understand and address ableism in our institutions and in our work. Fortunately, librarians need not address these issues on their own. Like many social justice activists and pedagogical innovators who have come before, librarians can draw on the strength and wisdom of their community. In a CoP, librarians can create a safe environment where they can learn, share their knowledge and experiences experimenting with new methodologies, and offer and receive support from others.

Communities of Practice

Key Elements

The term "Community of Practice" comes from Lave and Wenger's anthropological work observing situated learning in social groups. In a subsequent article, Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner identify three main features of CoPs: domain, community, and practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). They define the "domain" as the shared field of interest members have in common. For example, the domain could be pedagogy, library instruction, or social justice. The "community" consists of individuals united by the relationships, interactions, and learning that they do with the others in the group, which helps to guide everyone's development and skill in the shared topic or area of interest. A community could consist of staff from across a university working within their institution or include members from libraries in multiple countries, as long as they meet regularly to engage and learn together. Finally, "practice" refers to the shared knowledge, tools, and ideas that are workshopped by CoP members with the goal of implementing these insights into their work.

Community organization and interdependence are foundations of disability justice. As disability justice pioneer Mia Mingus (2012) writes, "coalition building, collaboration and building alliances across movements" begins in engaging with each other. We find it appropriate and fitting that librarians, when seeking to address ableism and reframe the concepts of access and inclusion in their work, should do so in a supportive community setting.

An anti-ableist CoP offers a space to shed the judgment that flourishes around intellectual privilege in academia (Lyubov, 2012). Each member who comes to the CoP comes on equal ground. Those who have a wealth of knowledge on a topic share their resources and those who come to learn should not be shamed for their inexperience. Within a community, participants can express their excitement and frustrations, share tools and knowledge, acknowledge their interdependence, and develop supportive relationships. CoPs allow peers to learn from each other, with each person bringing their unique experiences and insights to the solving of identified challenges and problems. CoPs can be large or small, in-person or virtual, and participants can be identified in many ways. Importantly, everyone should have a good understanding of the group's purpose so that the community can remain focused.

Key to the success of a CoP is the designation of a facilitator. Pedersen, Boyd, Rooney and Terkes (2017) note the important role of the facilitator in CoPs, who can fill many roles: administration, communication and relationship building across the group, planning and organizing meetings, as well as promoting ongoing participation and activities for the group. These authors recognize that the pivotal nature of this role seems incongruent with the idea of a CoP, where all members contribute to the content and activities; however, they point to well-established research that recognizes groups can lose inertia and membership without a consistent leader. It is important to consider carefully who will fill this role when establishing a new CoP. A good facilitator will build trust and rapport among members from the very beginning (Pemberton et al., 2007). Trust is the foundation of individuals coming together in a vulnerable space to share their experiences and ideas with other interested people. Without a sense of trust and safety, the group cannot achieve their objectives. Once the CoP is successfully established, the facilitator can then engage other members of the group to take over some of the essential tasks of maintaining the community.

For CoPs concerned with ableism, it is important to consider who should be in a leadership role. One consideration is personal experience and knowledge. Disability justice activist Patty Berne (2015) states that leadership by those most impacted, working "as agents of change from within our respective communities," is a critical part of building a group that resists oppression. Berne argues that when possible, leaders of anti-ableist CoPs should be "disabled people of color and of queer and gender non-conforming disabled people" (Berne, 2015). We recognize that academia has traditionally been a space where disabled people have been excluded, and this holds especially true for disabled queer or gender non-conforming people of color. Seeking out and bringing these voices into the community, and to the forefront of the conversation, should be an important first step. However, organizers should be wary of slipping into the assumption that all marginalized people are experts in social justice work and that they have the space, time, and energy in their lives to take on the demanding labor of leadership. Although leadership of those most impacted may be ideal, passion and capacity for leadership is also needed to succeed.

Benefits

The collaborative setting of a CoP offers many benefits to participants. Membership can help new librarians to develop a sense of belonging and connection to their peers and organizations, as well as provide them with informal mentorship (Carroll & Mallon, 2021). Carroll and Mallon also found that CoPs offered library instructors effective ways to encourage each other and share their experiences when trying to support students in novel situations, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, engagement within a CoP provides a way for instructors to distribute the labor of finding resources and collecting information about a topic across the community, allowing everyone to work together to find new ways to meet the needs of students.

Additionally, CoPs can provide a space where many different people in an organization can come together. When CoPs involve a variety of personnel—for example, librarians working alongside (non-librarian) staff—the diversity of perspectives leads to more productive conversations. Prioritizing the inclusion of library staff, who may be treated as lower stature than faculty-equivalent librarians (Hosburgh, 2009), aligns with the disability justice mindset of redefining "value" and challenging the valorization of "social capital" (Lyubov, 2012). Participants in anti-ableist CoPs should be viewed as having inherent value from their unique lives and experiences, not from their job title, academic degrees, or earned certifications.

Challenges

Although CoPs have great potential to help instructors learn and implement new ways of teaching, pitfalls and problems can interfere with their success. In their critical assessment of CoPs, Pemberton, Mavin and Stalker (2007) point out that the overall structure as well as the individual members of communities can greatly impact their effectiveness. They warn that when powerful members of an institution's hierarchical structure participate, they can dominate the conversation and agenda. Their presence may feel intimidating, which can make others feel unwelcome or less inclined to participate. There is also the risk that powerful members of a group may make the group seem exclusive or privileged to non-members. To avoid these issues, we recommend establishing discussion ground rules and group norms to make it clear to all participants that all ideas and participants are equally valued. The facilitator can also play a role in helping to manage activities and discussions. Progressive stacking, in which members of marginalized groups are invited to share first in a discussion, is one possible method of ensuring equal participation (Wright, 2018).

The intimate setting of a CoP can also be surprisingly personal and emotional, which can be uncomfortable for some participants (Pemberton et al., 2007). Maximini (2018) writes that the leadership of a CoP can help foster a safe learning environment where participants feel comfortable sharing their experiences and knowledge. Facilitators may lead by example, demonstrating their willingness to share their own experiences, vulnerabilities, mistakes, and frustrations. It is also good practice to offer multiple ways of engaging with the group; for example, an online board where members who are uncomfortable with in-person communication can participate.

Conclusion

Librarians have worked to make our spaces and services welcoming and accommodating for all people. It is important for us all to continue to break down barriers that prevent people from benefitting equitably from our services and instruction. Ableism, like all forms of discrimination, cannot be solved overnight. "Doing the work" of social justice is an iterative process of learning, self-reflection, listening to feedback, and continual change. We know that this process can seem overwhelming, and it can feel like the improvements to one's instruction will ever be enough. But it does not have to be undertaken alone. Within a CoP, librarian instructors can share successes and failures, learn from each other, and draw from the wisdom of the disability justice movement by embracing our interdependence. Together, we can empower and transform our academic communities.

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Appendix A

Creating an Anti-Ableist Community of Practice: Insights from Disability Justice

- Keep in mind the ten principles of Disability Justice, by Patty Berne (2015). "We cannot comprehend ableism without grasping its interrelations with heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism and capitalism, each system co-creating an ideal bodymind built upon the exclusion and elimination of a subjugated "other" from whom profits and status are extracted."

    Intersectionality

    Leadership of Those Most Impacted

    Anti-Capitalist Politic

    Commitment to Cross Movement Organizing

    Recognizing Wholeness

    Sustainability

    Commitment to Cross Disability Solidarity

    Interdependence

    Collective Access

    Collective Liberation

- Community is the foundation of justice and liberation. When building your community of practice, reach out to as many people as possible: other library staff, staff working in academic support services, faculty, students, community members working on similar projects, peers at other institutions. Call on the experience of other communities of practice that may already exist (critical pedagogy, anti-ableist, DEI) and see how you can engage and learn together. As Mia Mingus (2012) writes: "This is where coalition building, collaboration and building alliances across movements begins: with each other."
- Demand accountability, from each other, from faculty peers, and from your institution. Naming a problem is the first step to addressing it. More important is the follow-through and the dedication to correcting a problem after it has been identified. Check in with those originally impacted and respect their thoughts on whether the issue has been adequately addressed.
- Embrace different forms of communication and participation. Some people may not wish to participate verbally or in a group. This does not mean that they should not be included or their thoughts are not valuable. Actively solicit the perspectives of all community members and indicate that they can contribute however is comfortable for them.
- Understand intellectual privilege. Academia is biased towards those who can express themselves in traditionally "academic" language. Disabled teachers and learners are quickly labeled as unteachable, unmotivated, uncollegial, and disruptive. Reflect on how disabled folks are "othered" in the academic spaces and how institutional traditions and practices disable students.
- Move from accessibility to wholeness. Disability justice is not about the logistics of making individual accommodations for every need, and your Community of Practice should not be either. Disability justice is about creating a culture where every body and mind is considered valuable and whole on its own terms. How do we create a community that is barrier-free for everyone?