Accessibility must be more than an add-on to online pedagogy

If we are serious about accessible online learning, we must talk openly about disability as if it is right here, right now – because it is.

By CHELSEA JONES | AUG 21 2018

Recently, I attended a conference presentation ostensibly about accessible online learning, where I watched a man we'll call Steve fumble over gadgets at the podium. After a few assurances that we would get started right away, folks, a woman's face appeared on a large, projected screen. Catherine (not her real name) was introduced by Steve and began talking. The trouble was that nobody could understand what she was saying.

Catherine's voice was a loud, jarring hum of electronic crinkles, like a jammed Skype call. It was impossible to understand her, not because of her speech impairment, but because the presentation was inaccessible. She was the epicenter of a technical disaster and there was no transcript to support the audience. Even so, we got the message from Steve's quip: "What I love about Catherine is that she's a real go-getter!" Catherine, a disabled woman, completed an online degree program. She was an inspiration. But what was she saying? Something about discussion boards, maybe. This went on for 10 minutes. Astonishingly, at the end, people clapped.

As online learning becomes the norm across Canada, faulty conversations about making online learning accessible are cropping up in higher education conferences. These conversations fall short when they fail to uphold standards of inclusivity that are at the heart of basic, proactive Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies – that is, when they do not include gestures of access such as transcripts, live captioning, or American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation. Or, when they present disabled people in stereotypical ways. In this case, Catherine was served up as a "supercrip" – a term commonly used in disability studies to describe someone who is celebrated for overcoming impairment by performing like a "normal" person.

Her story, though distorted, was the predictable, tokenistic tale of overcoming barriers to learning through her own hard work and perky resilience, rather than through any university's meaningful commitment to removing barriers. The audience's applause spoke to the room's low expectations of Catherine. I did not clap. When a supercrip story becomes the marker of accessible online learning, the bar is set too low.

As an instructor teaching online in community services, I am aware that building accessible online pedagogy means diving deep into difficult conversations about accessibility. These conversations are ones which must involve social movements and the academy. We – educators and institutions – must acknowledge that disability is more than an add-on to already established pedagogy. Rather, disability is a significant, ongoing part of our scholarship that is crucial to any conversation about accessibility.

Planning pedagogy that takes accessibility seriously means noticing how disciplinary fields that study disability invest in accessibility as a critical topic. Disability studies, deaf studies and mad studies, for example, trace the eugenic histories of universities, pointing out that disabled people have historically been unwelcome in the academy. They teach us to be critical of institutions that lean on buzzwords like “inclusion” while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge historical and contemporary failures to make programming accessible. They also caution against reinforcing negative stereotypes about disabled learners and teachers, such as supercrip tropes. These disciplines also teach us the basics of access: when there is no ASL interpretation, for example, we send the message that we are not expecting Deaf people to be here, learning and teaching alongside everyone else.

If we are serious about accessible online learning, we must talk openly about disability as if it is right here, right now – because it is. Contact North, a provincially funded online education non-profit in Ontario, estimates that Canada has 1.3 million online course registrants each semester. By Statistics Canada’s count, the enrollment of disabled people in postsecondary programs is growing slightly, but the prevalence of accommodation services across Canadian campuses suggests a steady flow of disabled learners ready to hit the books. Disabled instructors are teaching and researching in the university, too. It’s time to plan pedagogy that acknowledges that disability, and disabled people, are in our classrooms.

We can make pedagogy more accessible by recognizing ableism in our individual and institutional practices. Ableism is a type of discrimination that privileges non-disabled people, and accessibility is concomitant to acknowledging ableism. In much the same way that conversations about decolonizing classrooms must mention colonization, or conversations about race must speak to racism, conversations about accessible learning are conversations about ableism.

Here’s how ableism creeps into online course delivery: when we think that disability is getting in the way of how online courses could run because we’ve only been anticipating “normal” learners, that’s ableism. When students don’t seem to live up to the smart, energetic, social, independent, self-starters we were expecting online, that’s ableism. When we wait for students to “come out” as disabled and request reactive accommodation, that’s ableism. But, when we plan for and embrace disability, we counter ableism by building content everyone can tap into (even in the event of, say, technical disasters).

We can also resist ableism by listening to what disability communities are telling us about education and by being wary of moments where disabled people’s stories are co-opted for institutional gain. Disabled people’s ongoing struggles for access and accommodation on

campus are well documented. So, too, are tokenistic stories that “cash in” on disability as cultural capital in order to promote classes, programs and software. Alyson Patsavas explains “cashing in” as parading disabled people’s stories around without sustained engagement with disability movements or with their respective scholarly fields. A supercrip story is a cash-in story, and disability movements across North America have been protesting such stories for decades. In other words: our ableism is showing and has been for some time.

Accessible online learning is a noble ambition, and it’s not easy. Even with captions, transcripts, and other access features paired with a healthy dose of good intentions, we still might fail because ableism is alive in higher education, even online. However, we can work on creating more accessible practices by including access, fessing up to ableism, and consulting disability communities and scholarship. In these ways, we can move beyond supercrip stories to expect and include disability as it is right here, right now.

Chelsea Jones an instructor at Ryerson University’s faculty of community services, where she has been teaching online courses in disability studies for seven years. She also co-produces and cohosts a podcast about teaching and learning called “Podagogies: A Learning and Teaching Podcast.”

Other stories that might be of interest:
« Previous article