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Composing inclusive learning and teaching culture: a case-study

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Abstract

We have reacted to the voices of inequality by the ideals of the Equality Act (2010). The task is no smaller for us than designing curriculums that attempt to consider in the United Kingdom over 350 mental disorders (WHO 2010), 50 religions, 85 ethnic groups, 100 languages; and dozens of gender, marital, maternal, disability and sexuality identities across the life-span (ONS 2011). How can we avoid these issues being reduced to the question of the numbers? It remains a key consideration of such topics that the statistical differences embedded in our constantly changing constructed values and political interest will guide much of these decisions.

Creating inclusive learning and teaching culture has become one of the top priorities to widen participation and foster diverse communities. Yet, the way to reach it remains complex that the case study of Maya, Jack and Phantas Magnolia aims to illustrate. The way forward could be moving away from the desires of single and universal solutions towards learning and teaching environments that are open, fluid and transparent to the inherent difficulties and conflicts in an attempt to compose inclusivity.

Key words: inclusivity, disability, higher education, case study, actor-network theory

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Introduction

An inclusive learning and teaching culture in UK Higher Education has become one of the top priorities to widen participation and foster diverse communities (Thomas and May 2010; Wray 2013; Department of Education 2017). It has been approached in various ways and is reflected in the wide range of literature available.

For example, it focuses on certain populations such as dis/abled students (Barnes 2007; Claiborne *et al.* 2010; Lourens and Swartz 2016), and ethnic minority students (Fielding *et al.* 2008; Gilborn 2009; Hughes 2016; Desai 2017); on distinct processes including recruitment (Abubakar, Shanka and Muuka

2010; Marginson 2016; Heaslip *et al.* 2017), assessment (Bessant 2011; Knauf 2015; Kaur, Noman and Nordin 2017), and curriculum planning (Carey 2010; Hockings, Brett and Terentjevs 2012; Holgate 2015); supported by various policies (Great Britain Parliament 2010; European Commission 2013; Great Britain Parliament 2017), and set practices (Barnes, Oliver and Barton 2002; Dias and Soares 2018; Morina 2017) and studied by diverse methodologies (Gibson 2012; Black, Weinberg, and Brodwin 2014; Morgado *et al.* 2016).

In order to demonstrate a systematic understanding of the current research

underpinning and affecting student learning and inclusive teaching practice, an Actor-Network Theory informed case-study on Maya (a mature dis/abled learner), on Jack (a dis/abled lecturer) and their experiences of inclusivity at Phantas Magnolia (a higher education institute) is used with the aim of directing the readers' attention to *the specific, the subtleties and the mundane*.

Methodology

Although case studies have been widely applied across the disciplines, it remains a controversial and debated methodology (Tsang 2013; Pearson, Albon and Hubball 2015). Whilst they might be used to explore complexities, associations and details (Donnelly and Wiechula 2012; Harland 2014; Atchan, Davis and Foureur 2015), convenient sampling and the lack of rigour are just some of the criticisms that present themselves in a predominantly positivist research culture (Corcoran, Walker and Wals 2004; Kyburz-Graber 2004; Tight 2009).

Maya's story as with that of the writer's, can be said to be epistemological, ontological positioning, and determined as noted in much of the classic literature on the phenomena (Fawcett and Hearn 2004; Rolfe 2006; Miskovic and Gabel 2012; Johnson 2015) and as such, Actor-Network Theory attentive as a means of focus on *temporality, compositions and fluidity* as opposed to *laws, universalism and linearity* (Law 2009; Latour 2013). In other words, inclusivity does not exist as a *priory* essence but in relation to others and things; having to be composed each and every time.

Decisions are not made in advance what makes up inclusivity, who are the agents, or how they affect each other. Inclusivity is an effect of the complex interactions of heterogeneous actors; humans, non-humans and objects within webs of connections (Law 1999; Latour 2011). The task is to follow the transformations that the actors composed in their stories (Latour and Woolgar 1979;

Latour 1993). In short, Maya's inclusion can be explored as performance in context and relevant to the many modes presenting as accessibility to Higher Education, but first, we need to meet Maya and Jack.

A confusing term: inclusivity and the Equality Act (2010)

The growing drive for including students with dis/abilities in mainstream education and services can be traced back at least to the middle of the 20th Century and has gradually evolved over the decades (Oliver and Barnes 2006). When considering accessibility to Higher Education the various actors that have affected its development collectively such as legislation, human rights movement, third sector activities; research, scientific discoveries and the digital age need to be uncovered. It follows, depending on what actors are highlighted and the specific order constructed from them will result in a specific history of inclusive education. Holyoake (2014) laments, it is like a museum with carefully positioned exhibits dependent upon context and lens.

When Maya was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome, or autism according to the latest diagnostic manuals (WHO 2010; APA, 2013), the notion of inclusivity was found to be problematic. In terms of definition, conceptualisation and implementation writers such as Skelton (1999), Ainscow, Dyson and Booth (2006), Gordon, Reid and Petocz (2010), Brown (2016) note that inclusivity only exists in connection to the excluded. Therefore, the need to be suspicious when someone or something is defined and justified by binary opposition should be raised. Furthermore, such broad understandings can result in confused professional practices and misconceptions as argued by Whitty (2006) and King-Sears (2008), whilst tending to gloss-over the awkward ideal that narrow definitions create rigid tick-box exercises which lead to even more prototypes and banality affecting students, including Maya's learning process and Jack's teaching practices

(Evans and Waring 2006; Berlach and Chambers 2011). So, what and how do these prioritising binary positing voices impact on the scape of inclusivity for Maya?

First, the Equality Act (2010) aims to provide legal protection for people such as Maya and Jack from discrimination in wider society including higher education institutions (Government Equalities Office 2011). Second, the public-sector Equality Duty means that institutions like Phantas Magnolia (although legally an independent-private organisation) have to consider all individuals when carrying out their day-to-day work (Government Equalities Office 2011a). Third, there is a legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments (Government Equalities Office 2010). The Equality Act (2010) replaced nine previous laws such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (in England, Scotland and Wales) with a single Act, making the law easier to understand and strengthen protection.

This means, Phantas Magnolia needs to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations for all – employees such as Jack, students like Maya, and all the partners. Reasonable adjustments cover a wide range of adaptations such as to the way things are done, to the built environment and to provide auxiliary aids and services.

The complexity of inclusivity for all, *id est*, the ideals of the Equality Act (2010)

It is well evidenced that the learning and teaching experience starts well before the first session in the classroom (Jackson, Fellows and Leng 2010; Madriaga 2010). The whole journey up until this point and beyond will influence the students' learning process as well as the teaching practices (Parker 2001; Gavira and Morina 2015; Molina *et al.* 2016.) The following complexities will demonstrate how the Equality Act (2010) might travel differently to various places composing differing realities, in this case study, different

realities of inclusivity. In other words, how an actor is defined by its network (Law and Hassard 1999; Law 2004), and a network is fully defined by its actors (Latour *et al.* 2012).

- Maya's Case:**
4 complexities of inclusivity
- 1. Subtleties**
 - 2. Specificities**
 - 3. Composition**
 - 4. Fluidity**

Complexity 1 – binary oppositions against the subtleties

The higher education institute, Phantas Mangolia organised a pre-welcome week for students with additional needs as a reasonable adjustment supported by the Equality Act (2010). Maya was notified by the special team looking after special students. Maya attended the event in the hope that the enrolment and other official tasks would become easier to handle; she hoped to avoid the crowds and the accompanying noise. However, holding such a separate event remains controversial as it supports inclusion through exclusion (Goode 2007; Hilt 2016).

In other words, if a phenomenon is mostly used to support dis/abled people only as opposed to consequently using it for all people and their various attributes that in fact may accentuate stigma (Gernsbacher 2017). This adventure, an exclusive event for inclusion turned out to be Maya's very first lesson on the complexities of the Equality Act (2010), and the gap between theory and practice of inclusivity.

To start with, a timetable was circulated with all the necessary ingredients such as time, room numbers and activities. However, when Maya arrived in the evening there was no one around. She was left wandering in an empty and dark building, she had never been in before, trying to find a room that was hidden

on the second floor in a dead corner (for dis/abled students for easy access), with no signs or signals on the way, and she was unable to locate it without help.

Slowly forming her dis/ability and performing a growing level of anxiety and feelings of hopelessness. She was lost and confused until a security guide found her and showed her the empty room first then guided her out of the building. This is a complex problem when laws such as the Equality Act (2010) is frozen into policies, procedures and set practices to support specific groups as opposed to approaches that are open and flexible to the subtleties (Mol and Law 2004; Griffiths *et al.* 2010).

Complexity 2 – universalising the specificities

Maya went back the next day and a member of the special team responsible for helping special students was puzzled by why Maya had come to such event. “Why are you here?”. Probably, and as a result of her invisible dis/ability Maya responded with her quite capable appearance of independent living. Her blank stare was needed to question what had happened the day before. The team member’s answer told it all: “well, it was quiet, and anyway, I had to be here 8 am today. ... I need a rest too.” This is acceptable. However, don’t tell dis/abled students then that you would be there and later hold them responsible. Maya then asked about the timetable. “Where is the meeting point for the 4 pm Autism group?” “Oh, it is not 4 pm. They are meeting right now. The time has changed, it is 3 pm.”

This was the second thing Maya learnt about inclusivity, not to believe in idealistic narratives. The universalising slogans in the Baudrillardian sense offer more vulnerability than the condition itself (Baudrillard 2002; Simpson 2004; Hill 2014). Some in the learning disability profession would call this ‘setting up to fail’ (Marsland *et al.* 2007; Mason *et al.* 2010; Petner-Arrey and

Copeland 2014) that shows the fragility of the apparent specificities of inclusivity reasoning which cannot be achieved through universal tools, but through what Latour suggests as the subtleties and conversations (Latour 2013; Pernia, Salmon and Rada 2016). It is this potential that offers some hope and a possible solution to enhancing students’ learning.

It is like zooming from the grand narratives of the Equality Act (2010) enacted in institutions such as Phantas Mangolia to the unnoticeable, the unremarkable of the personal (Latour 1987; Law 2008; Beauchamp-Pryor 2012; O’Shea *et al.* 2016). Something that case studies like Maya’s do well (Byrne and Ragin 2009; Yin 2014) by extenuating the composite nature of accessibility *per se*. Later we will ask how lecturers such as Jack help contain the fragmenting inevitabilities of our inclusive influenced desires?

Complexity 3 – ReProducing composition dis/ability and inclusivity

Composition is made up of many parts and this reflects in the detail of student’s everyday lives. The apparent simple task of attending classes, for example, were not much easier for Maya. At Phantas Magnolia the mission statement includes sentiments such as: students will be understood, supported and enabled. Even the webpage states it is dedicated to students with special needs, to their composite desirability. This is the role of the special team: “for interpreting Disability Legislation (*i.e.* Equality Act 2010)”. Clicking on the provided link, what any good tracer would do, the government official website of UK legislation appears, in this instance the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which has now been replaced by the Equality Act (2010).

Networks do this; they lead to various places such as the information on what medical evidence is required from Maya. At the time of writing, the links relating to the required medical evidence are directed to the same outdated legislation, the “Disability

Discrimination Act 1995". Following other traces from the webpage of the special team, Maya quickly landed on a page about confidentiality which stated, "any information you provide Student Support & Wellbeing that relates to your sensory, physical or SpLD and/or your personal circumstances will be treated in strict confidence and with the greatest respect." To note the quote including SpLD is the actual text so if the average student isn't confused, or even if Maya isn't either, then the average tutor like Jack definitely would be.

Looking at the complexity of the words and how they aim to make up the above sentence it is not only the right to disclose that has been taken away from Maya but the access to meaning. This page has been created to support dis/abled student, yet it is in these pages, that the links and the words compose dis/ability. Hence the second key argument that dis/ability as well as inclusivity are not a fixed thing, an independent reality out there but it is constantly being PerFormed, DisSolved, and ReProduced (Goldschmied 2017).

Complexity 4 – fossilising fluidity

How can we promote inclusivity and equality if the very notion of dis/ability remains something that must be invisible and covered like a family secret? The idea is that confidentiality is a 'need to know' commodity and the special team makes every effort to ensure that only relevant information concerning reasonable adjustments is communicated. Whilst for most adhering to the ideals of inclusivity it should be Maya who makes the decisions about her needs and the visibility of her invisible dis/ability, Phantas Mangolia takes this away: "we understand that this information is regarded as sensitive and private and so is only accessible to those members of staff who are directly concerned with the provision of your support." Yet, Maya is allowed to give permission to share her secret, i.e. her diagnosis, with others (Martin 2010;

Claiborne *et al.* 2010; Cai and Richdale 2016; Jain and Meeks 2017).

For this reason, tutor awareness sheets have been produced as a mean to inclusivity. Strictly private and confidential. Whilst it can be the writer who misses it there is scant evidence to suggest different. The special team records Maya's individual needs, and the academic team can access them if Maya gives permission for this. However, this was not Maya's experience as Maya agreed for her sheet to be accessible, yet none of her lecturers noticed that the sheet was there or the messages it aimed to deliver such as the 7-day extension or taking a break from group working. Once again, we need to zoom from the grand narratives into the network.

The problem is that lecturers do not have access to the tutor awareness sheet, only module leaders have who do not or not fully pass on such information. Occasionally, lecturers get a list of names, some of them marked with asterisks to denote considerate marking. Despite the fact that Maya signed all the papers. Whilst this sheet, together with all the other forms, supposed to transform her dis/ability to inclusivity it merely transported mostly irrelevant, some personal information from the doctor, through Maya, to a special team finally landing in a folder on the cloud making visible an era of simulation, proliferation and fragmentation (Baudrillard 1994; Law 1999; Latour 2007).

Discussion in light of the Equality Act (2010)

So, what can Jack, Maya's autistic lecturer do for her? Whose needs come first? We have only discussed one student with one dis/ability so far; we have not touched upon her dis/abled lecturer or the wider spectrum of dis/abilities. How can we then resolve not only the problem of inclusivity for Maya but the staff including all the dis/abilities and the other protected characteristics defined by the Equality Act (2010)? And what about other needs that the Act does not even cover? Being

an international student for example? Slogans that hint the possibility of universal and grand solution do not work any longer.

Higher Education appears to have lost touch with the origin, or rather with the complex and the mundane (Baudrillard 1993; Baudrillard 2005; Pawlett 2007). Promises like printing the documents in as many colours as required foster the ideals of the Equality Act (2010). We need to note here that our discipline also governs many of our activities. It will not only provide professionals with the most fundamental philosophical assumptions, but some like nursing or social work are highly regulated and prescriptive.

Conversely, *a composer* will not have predefined answers. It will depend on the networks and the various actors. As it must be emphasised inclusivity for Maya does not exist *a priori*. It needs to be composed one by one out of the complexity of the context. In each situation different actors will become visible whilst others disappear (Latour 2004). Exploring the problem in its wider network it becomes evident that most of the present practices are about individualism, competition, becoming the best. None of which will foster the development of accessible higher education that needs to shift to the specificities, fluidity and temporality.

**Maya's Case:
3 key arguments of inclusivity**

- 1. Temporality**
- 2. Multiple realities**
- 3. Agency**

Implications for practice

Decisions need to be composed in context. The design of a curriculum cannot be anything else but a fluid construct where lecturers and students are in the position to discuss, create and change and where they are

able to negotiate their way to be felt included. It means various things at various times and various places: handouts, individual tutoring, different formats (Jones and Thomas 2006; Law and Moser 2012). We started to map out how the Equality Act (2010) that black-boxed dis/ability history, a team of advisers and their spokesperson in the form of a webpage and Maya's medical evidence that black-boxed her life history influenced by segments of research, current trends in advocacy movements and the latest news that made their way into the network compose dis/ability and inclusivity.

The concept of black-boxing is a term frequently used by Actor-Network Theory. It refers to the practices that once "a matter of fact is settled, one needs to focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity" (Latour 1999). In other words, once we have an end result such as the Equality Act (2010) we ignore the complexities, controversies and all the actors that made it. It needs to be opened up time and again to explore all the actors.

Making visible how inclusivity and dis/ability are produced and consumed can be a way forward for students like Maya and her lecturers such as Jack. Making visible the processes by which the visibility of invisibilities is obtained let us see the gaps. Between the complexity of inclusivity and the purified and sterilised responses of tutor awareness sheets. We focus on binary oppositions, exclusion and inclusion. Yet, in between, where everything, such as timetables, tutor awareness sheets and confidentiality arrangements happen, nothing occurs except an appearance of indefinable ranges of pity for students like Maya.

At Phantas Magnolia we tend to fail to explore the road between the poles as it can be difficult, complex and requires resources. We alternate between signalled virtues. Yet, it is not only the complex and the chaotic that might be found there but the potential for consensus too. So many controversies and

disagreement within each discipline, students, and organisations for Maya and even Jack to consider. This is the problem when the interpretation of a legislation such as Equality Act (2010) or inclusivity movements which concentrate only on the poles. Inclusivity has its own friends, purpose, values; assemblies, effects, enemies (Latour 2013a).

Whilst actors that compose inclusivity and the lack of it can be anything; hence the dangers of focusing on language, or assessment types or the built environment as a distinct entity claiming they have not been made, nor they are effects, but they are either meaning or essence. If everything in Maya's life is composed then the third key argument is, therefore, instead of moving along the chain of causes that naturally will land us on purified consequences, where no actions are required, the focus should be on agencies. On the continuity of all the agents playing a role in the composition of inclusivity, not as a given, a passive predefined thing, but something that has to be composed from discontinuous and fragmented pieces (Latour 2010; 2014).

Conclusions

We must be under no illusion that inclusivity as an overarching term, as a universal aim, may appear utopian, but it is one that cons us into believing it can be achieved by a set formula. Yet, like the aforementioned mirror and smoke of Baudrillard (2002) both Jack and Maya are confronted by its apparent myth. A simulation made visible by the Equality Act (2010) that has encumbered humans a protected character leaving the painful task of ranking equality to us: lecturers, special teams and the special roster of institutions like Phantas Magnolia.

How do we decide whose needs are more important? What do we mean by reasonable adjustments? We have reacted to the voices of inequality by the ideals of the Equality Act (2010). The task is no smaller for us than designing curriculums that attempt to take into account in the UK over 350 mental disorders (WHO 2010), 50 religions, 85 ethnic groups, 100 languages; and dozens of gender, marital, maternal, disability and sexuality identities across the life-span (ONS 2011). How can we avoid these issues being reduced to the question of the numbers? It remains a key consideration of such topics that the statistical differences embedded in our constantly changing constructed values and political interest will guide much of these decisions.

Maya and Jack showed that there needs to be a move away from ready-made solutions, grand theories and one-fit all solutions such as the tutor awareness sheet. They do not reflect students' individual learning processes or responsive teaching practices. Is an inclusive curriculum possible? Probably not. It is a rather idle solution. It represents that inclusivity can be reduced to blue backgrounds, bigger fonts or considerate markings.

Perhaps future considerations will expand on the potentials of fluid curriculums and consider how Maya and Jack resolve controversies of inclusivity? For now, they bypass it and live in a middle space between mirror and reflection, in the apparent harmony of faux conflicts and complexities. Each is negotiating their way every time differently in a debate discussing and compromising a reach towards a temporary closure, only for the pleasure to start it all over again.

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