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Supporting all learners in higher education

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A bucolic education...





“Bath Spa University is a leading university in creativity, culture and enterprise. Our students – whether studying arts, humanities, sciences or social science – work in an environment where creativity in its broadest sense is valued and nurtured.” – Bath Spa University prospectus, 2015

Supporting our learners

- Our Creative Writing Department at Bath Spa University.
- We have students with a range of disabilities and a sizeable number who experience poor mental health. Each student has the right to access a high-quality undergraduate degree programme. Currently, most are entitled to Disabled Student Allowance but this is being cut in stages until its complete removal in 2017-18.
- To prepare for the loss of DSA, we are undertaking a research project to explore how we support our vulnerable students more effectively, enabling them to reach their academic potential. As well as working on our pastoral systems, our focus will be on developing a universal, inclusive pedagogy for our teaching.

Equality Act 2010

As an institution we have a statutory responsibility under the Equality Act of 2010 to provide access to education without discriminating against our disabled students. According to the government's own guidance under the Act:

“You're disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.”

This definition includes our students who are struggling with poor mental health. It places upon us a duty to provide our students with equal access to learning so that they can reach their full potential, whatever that is. The DSA has provided significant support to universities to enable them to fulfil that duty to date. Its removal forces us to examine our classroom practice and take steps to open up teaching and learning so that we can ensure that all students are able to participate and benefit from it equally.

Hypothesis

As DSA reduces and our disabled students receive less and less direct support to enable them to access learning in our department and our teaching rooms, it is up to us as course leaders and teachers to ensure that our pedagogy meets the needs of our students.

By testing, adapting and evaluating teaching and learning theories and practice connected with inclusion and critical pedagogy, we will create a pedagogy that meets the diverse needs of our learners and creates a more inclusive and involved learning environment for our creative writing students.

Our theoretical starting points

- Universal Design for Learning – Meyer, Rose and Groison. Applying the social model of disability to learning.
- Neurodiversity – Pollack. Asserts that dyslexia, dyspraxia, Asperger's Syndrome etc. are examples of neurodiverse development, labels for atypical neurology and not to be pathologised.
- Inclusive Institutions and Inclusive Teaching and Learning – Hockings (HEA) and Tilly Mortimer (BSU).
- Post-Detraditionalisation and young people's sense of self – Thomas Ziehe
- Critical Pedagogy and Inclusive Educational Theory – Freire, hooks, Goodley, Liasidou.

- What do we mean by inclusive and who are we labelling as vulnerable?
- How can we change our teaching methods to avoid excluding those with invisible or undisclosed needs?
- Can we develop a learning theory that supports the needs of our discipline in particular?
- What can youth work teach us about a universal pedagogy in higher learning?



Cheerful Graduates

What do we mean by inclusive and who are we labelling as vulnerable?

Prof. Dan Goodley of MMU, in his unit on a critical pedagogy for marginalised learners, cites Len Barton (2004):

“For many observers the word ‘inclusion’ is synonymous with the education of children with impairments, disabilities and special educational needs. But, inclusion is a broad category. The sociologist of education, Len Barton (2004), has argued that social and educational exclusion has many compounding forms of differing exclusions; is not a natural but a socially constructed process; has no single factor that can remove it and is in constant need of conceptual analysis. For our purposes, then, while disability and SEN analysis are important it is crucial that we keep a broad view of the kinds of learners involved in debates about inclusion.”

Our work is focused on our disabled students, including those who are affected by poor mental health. However, we are keen to keep in mind that by aspiring to develop an inclusive teaching and learning pedagogy, we should be seeking to develop practice that is accessible to all socially and educationally excluded students.

Goodley:

“Inclusion relates to much more than adapting education to the specific needs of particular students. It also highlights the extent to which educational policy, pedagogy and teaching practice are ‘socially just’ in kindergartens, schools, colleges, universities and the wider community. Inclusion demands changes at:

- The macro level: government policies and initiatives promote the social and educational inclusion of people who have historically been marginalised
- The meso level: educational institutions develop inclusive forms of organisation, curriculum and pedagogy which include diverse learners
- The micro level: teachers look critically at their practice in order to include learners within the classroom.”

Can we develop a learning theory that supports the needs of our discipline in particular?

Our aim, particularly with creative writing, is to enable our students to know themselves better, find their writing voice and develop the craft they need to pursue their art independently. For our publishing students, even in an environment that is heavily geared towards the industry, our aim is to enable their self-discovery, ensuring that they have experiences that help them understand their own skills and talents and see a pathway into a creative career in the publishing industry.

Our challenge is to create a pedagogy that enables all our students, regardless of their starting point, to access that experience throughout their time with us at the university. This is why we think that in applying a learning theory that borrows from critical pedagogy and inclusive practice, we can place our students more firmly at the centre of our classroom teaching.

What can youth work teach us about a universal pedagogy in higher learning?

Paulo Freire's and bell hooks' work on critical pedagogy and transformational learning link very naturally with theories of inclusion.

Ross-Gordon et al (2015) describe research exploring transformational learning with graduate students:

“Graduates teaching at universities and colleges reported that they worked to develop relationships with their students as a first step toward fostering the students' transformative learning. A participant reported, ‘That's one of the things that I've pushed myself to do—establish rapport with the students. Not just my students, but any student. I stop and talk to people. I ask them how they are doing. I'm really concerned about their well-being. And I tell my students I care about them more than just as students.’”

How can we change our teaching methods to avoid excluding those with invisible or undisclosed needs? – A quick and dirty research plan! (Part one)

- Input from student services and Widening Participation team on intake of first year creative writing and publishing students.
- Anonymous survey CW&P during core lecture one - learning styles, preferences, concerns, self-determined support requirements.
- Recruit students as peer researchers for the project to design and undertake surveys, run focus groups and one to one interviews.
- Recruit students to project focus groups to run throughout 2015-16.

Research Plan (II)

- Use whole group lectures to provide information on the project, get feedback
- Work with teaching staff of CW&P core modules to develop teaching practice and activities, share ideas to test, test and evaluate teaching methods, approaches. Also to work on learning theory relevant to vulnerable learners in our discipline.
- Review, reflect, impact: how will we know how we're doing? NSS, student feedback and departmental surveys, focus group and interview data, quality of work (and marks) in comparison to previous year, numbers of students requesting mitigating circumstances and evidence of changing practice and pedagogy in our classrooms (teacher observations).

Help please?

This is a new project and a big challenge for our department.

We'd love your ideas, your suggestions, your brilliant research tools, your reading lists!

Please drop me a line if you have something to share. Perhaps we can collaborate on a wider project?

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Thank You

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