An exploration in the inclusive teaching practices within a New Zealand university – Part one: Inclusive assessments

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This demonstration is intended to relate some of the initial findings of research into the issues surrounding students with a disability when undertaking assessments.

Keywords: students, assessment, alternative, inclusive, disability, technologies

Introduction

The motivation to engage in this research partially arose due to the experiences of the one the researchers during early 2012 when a student with a disability requested if some of the learning materials could be made available in an alternative format that would be suited to his particular disability. The researcher had not previously thought in terms of how her learning environment catered for students with a disability. Discussion about both researchers practices, and reviews of relevant literature paved the way towards an understanding of the need to think 'inclusive' when designing a teaching programme. To enhance knowledge as to effective inclusive teaching practices, with the object of incorporating these practices in the researcher's university (Massey University or 'MU'), the researchers propose to explore current university policies, teaching practices/attitudes, and the experiences of learners with a disability. This research will begin by looking at assessments then later expand to incorporate other areas of teaching and learning and is a progression from prior research conducted by the researchers (Sayles, F.J. & Te Wiata, I., 2011), as a main focus will be on the use of technology to enhance inclusive learning.

Brief Summary of Literature

The ability to negotiate assessments and learning environments suited to students with a disability may not only be influenced by university policies but also the attitudes of those working within the university system (Bessant, 2012). This can include a reluctance on the part of the learner to request additional assistance, particularly if (s)he perceives it as enhancing difference between the learner and other learners (Seale, 2012). Developing assessment and learning environments that take account of students with a disability *at the start* of the planning stage can assist in overcoming some of these difficulties and may also enhance the learning experience of non-disabled students (Ball 2009). Part of improving this accessibility includes the use of technologies (Ball, 2009) in enhancing the student experience.

A quick overview of the literature on university students and their relationship with technologies shows a mixed picture of success regarding their learning experiences. This is illustrated by many researchers including, Bessant, 2012; Deepwell & Malik, 2008,Garland Thomson, 2012; Goode, 2007, and Kenney, 2012. Despite these mixed experiences, the role of technology in teaching has increased in the design of the learning environment.

Given that the technological abilities of students without disabilities play an increasing role in shaping how universities develop their approaches to teaching and learning support (Seale, 2012), the discourse surrounding students with disabilities also becomes important in understanding how university policies and practices are created. As Seale (2012) highlights, the discourse surrounding the technological abilities of the 'normate' (Garland-Thomson, 2007) student, is largely positive, (focused on what the students can do) whilst for students with disabilities the discourse is negative, focusing more on what they cannot do, and what is required to improve their accessibility to university teaching, learning and assessment practices. It has also been recognised (Ball, 2009) that one of the voices missing in this discourse and in the subsequent development of policies and practices is the voice of the student, as such any further research in this area should seek to provide a vehicle for these voices to be heard.

Methodology

In determining our methodological approach and theoretical framework for this project, we are drawing on the work of Bessant (2012), who, using an auto-ethnographic approach, studied a group of Australian university students with disabilities and their experiences in negotiations for alternative assessment practices. Using case studies and focusing on the perceptions of staff and students, both cultural and practical issues were identified, along with ideas on what needed to be done if a university was serious about addressing equity and inclusive education. The advantages of using the same approach as Bessant (2012) are twofold: the first is that we hope to increase our understanding of how well MU "measures up", and second, we can compare the experiences of various key parties of one NZ university with an Australian counterpart.

An auto-ethnographic approach follows the tradition of ethnographic research. (Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.), but whereas the researcher is an "outsider", becoming an "insider" only as situation allows, an auto-ethnographic researcher recognises that she or he, is the "insider" (Duncan, 2012) . This then enables her or him, to embrace personal thoughts, feelings and observations as a way of understanding the social context which they are studying (Ellingson &Ellis, 2008). The selected sample of case studies we have chosen for this poster aims to provide insight into the worlds of students with a variety of disabilities using this approach. In following Bessant's framework, we intend to highlight some of the different wisdoms, irrationalities, feelings and biases which inform both judgment and action regarding students with disabilities by also using the personal pronoun model of Elias (1978).

This particular analytic perspective enables us to apply an, 'I', 'we' and 'they' model to our cases. We are however, cognizant that as the experience of students in our study increases and alters over time, the contexts will also inevitably change, thus we will need to be consider how much we are able to apply this model.

We also hope that like Bessant (2012), the use of the personal pronoun perspective with our case studies, will provide insights into what each of the key parties (students, staff and administrators) may be benefit from in working in an inclusive environment. Whether for example, support for staff is required in recognizing and appreciating their legal obligations, or professional development is needed, we hope that the results of this study will offer the university a way forward in improving the opportunities and learning experiences for all of its students.

Conclusion

This research project was initially started due to a personal interest on the part of one of the researchers to develop a more inclusive learning environment for her students. However, initial discussions with some key stakeholders have revealed that the research could have importance for the wider university as it progresses its vision for future, which includes an increasing expansion into attracting overseas students who are used to a different level of inclusive education.

Enabling students with disabilities to better connect with learning through the use of technologies may address some concerns, (it could be argued somewhat simplistically). However, our starting point for understanding what is happening or needs to happen at this university (MU), so as to create an equitable and inclusive environment for students, begins with a study which focuses on the assessment and students with disabilities. We intend to use the perceptions and experiences of students with disabilities, in negotiating alternative assessments (including the use of technologies), as a "vehicle" to inform both our own assessment practices, and the on-going development of university policy and practices. In doing so, we hope to initially help make assessments more student centred and inclusive, than what they are currently.

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