

Building inclusivity: engagement, community and belonging in the classroom

Interview with Ann-Marie Houghton, Lancaster University

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Introduction

My name is Ann-Marie Houghton and I work at Lancaster University for a research group called REAP, which is Researching Equity, Access and Participation. And that has links with two of our centres: the Centre for Social Justice and Wellbeing and the Centre for Higher Education, Research and Evaluation.

What is inclusivity and why do we need it?

Inclusivity has often been associated with disability, certainly from a school perspective, it is special educational needs, inclusion, inclusivity. However, for me, inclusivity is much more than just disability. Inclusivity is about how *all* students, and staff actually, are enabled to be able to participate in terms of a teaching and learning experience. It's about enabling students and staff to access their entitlement: from a student perspective, to engage in the learning, and from a staff perspective, to be able to impart the learning and facilitate the learning of their students.

Why do we need it and why should all students be able to engage in higher education? Well why not? Otherwise it would not be fair. So, inclusivity is also about fairness.

How can inclusivity in the classroom be created and sustained?

I think there are lots of different ways in which one might create inclusivity. I think developing the ability to have a genuine interest in the students, creating an environment where they feel that they are welcomed, where they feel that their views are valued, where one feels that it's more than just doing one's job. I think there are ways in which one can organise the way desks, resources, the actual environment is organised. That can influence inclusivity. I think the material that one uses can help to create an inclusive approach to the course. I remember somebody talking to me about even the images that they used in a PowerPoint presentation. They were a sports science lecturer and they said it made such a difference when they started including some photographs of some gay football teams. They didn't mention that they were gay football teams. They just happened to have those as images in their presentation. And actually that then engendered a conversation. So it can be as simple as just the images that we include.

Inclusivity – there is a lot of information in terms of delivery and strategies that can be used to make the curriculum inclusive for students with certain impairments, perhaps making materials available through maybe a virtual learning environment [or] making sure that handouts are available beforehand. Or, of course, it's always important in terms of inclusivity that it isn't always the same strategy that's being used. So a lecturer may have a very valid reason for why they don't want to make that material available. If students, perhaps because of their statement to do with disability, are used to having resources made available, then the lecturer needs to discuss with the student why it won't be available on this particular occasion, talk about what the impact might be for that particular student, and whether actually there is an alternative way in which they could approach things, so that the lecturer doesn't forego the surprise element that they might want to engage in in their lecture or the other strategies that they want to cover.

How can it be sustained? Well that's the second part. We can create it, but how can we sustain it? Well, I think we sustain it by thinking about it in an ongoing way, but actually also by engaging our students in that process. And I think, I suppose, one of the key elements of sustainability is about the extent to which it's built into the design process. In terms of inclusive curriculum design, which I think is one way one might be able to sustain things, some work that we've been doing at Lancaster that I did with some colleagues, Hannah Morgan, Rebecca Marsden, Steve Dempster and Amy Burgess, that was actually working and gaining a whole series of examples from across the sector where actually one was gaining ideas from different disciplines. And I think there, that's a mechanism for sustainability, because actually it's about drawing on the ideas that are already in existence. And then thinking about how those ideas can be passed from one set of colleagues, one department to another.

What are the challenges to inclusivity and how can they be overcome?

Well I think there are lots of different challenges to inclusivity. I was at a conference where somebody was talking about it in a sense [that] everybody's *for* inclusive education, you know, there's nothing against it. But actually in some respects that sort of 'we must be seen to support such a good and noble idea' almost becomes part of the obstacle. So I think partly an attitudinal objection to inclusivity because there's that support for it and yet, at the same time, okay we support it but actually do we need to do anything about it? So I think that can be part of the challenge. I think there are also a number of practical problems or challenges with inclusivity. So they could be the practical challenges of how do you get the resources ready. "I haven't got enough time. How do you make the resources suitable or appropriate, prepare materials, sort things on a VLE, virtual learning environment? I don't have the technical skills and I don't have enough time."

I think there are other aspects in terms of, well, you know, "I'm interested in this, I'm not particularly interested in looking at this particular topic from lots of different angles", which would be one way in which one would actually try and make something inclusive.

How can those challenges be overcome? Well I've said myself, in a sense, it's partly by staff development. But I don't think staff development just in a formal sense, as in going on a course, although I do think that that can be important, particularly when perhaps staff development or educational development, as I would prefer to say, provides opportunities for colleagues from across institutions, particularly different subjects and disciplines, to work

together and learn from one another. But I think, in addition to that, I think there's the informal – so how many times do we sit down and have a cup of coffee and actually talk about our teaching and learning, gain ideas?

I'm often known for saying "I'm a thief", perhaps an admission you don't want to say too often! But actually what I mean is I'm a thief of other people's good ideas. And I hope I do acknowledge those. I can't always remember where I've got them from, but, you know, ideas are about sharing. And I think one of the ways in which inclusivity can be addressed is by, in a sense, sharing those ideas and actually addressing some of the challenges, whether they be time, technical, practical or whatever. I should also say that I'm very happy to steal from students as well, because I think, in terms of inclusivity, our student population is probably more inclusive than our staff population. And so, in many respects, our understanding of inclusive issues are going to come from our students as well as from our colleagues. And, of course, research and literature et cetera.

How can inclusivity be mainstreamed?

Well I think it has to be institutional. There has to be institutional commitment to the whole idea of inclusivity. And that means more than just having it on a checklist. It means more than having a question in the validation process, although I do believe that the validation process, in terms of courses and programmes that are being designed and developed, can make a real difference in terms of mainstream, because that can be a really useful starting point to encourage staff and colleagues to think about ways in which their curriculum can be inclusive. At the planning stage, the design stage, they can be engaging with students, people who might gain from the outputs of a particular course. So a student project, I remember reading somewhere, somebody had got some students to design something for older adults, I think it was to do with kitchens and different products that they could use within the kitchen. Well, talking to older people about what their obstacles and issues were, could then be fed into the course. So I think inclusivity at the design stage can be looked at in a much more creative and expanded manner.

Other ways in which it can be mainstreamed is that I think actually having a culture and an expectation that things *will be* inclusive. I think it's about celebrating and making public and sharing the good practice. So when people are inclusive, actually thinking about creative ways of publicising those ideas. You know, often they're not about rocket science. They're often just very simple things. And again back to being a thief. You know, one can steal those if one knows about them. So it's creating a situation where people can exchange information. So I think mainstream – Higher Education Academy obviously has played its part in terms of some of its support for inclusive curriculum projects and developments. Then I think it's on an institutional level. But at the end of the day it's down to the individual academic. And that isn't just about what they're doing in terms of teaching and learning, but it's actually about giving them the time to be able to perhaps do that. And I guess the wider sector is also about valuing the teaching and learning as well as perhaps valuing some of the research. That isn't to say that the research isn't key and crucial. And actually perhaps valuing research into teaching and learning in a way that that could then be recognised in things like the REF [the Research Excellence Framework] so that people who are enthusiasts, both of inclusive curriculum provision and other aspects of teaching and learning, their work and enthusiasm could be valued and then shared more widely.

What are my hopes for inclusive teaching and learning?

I suppose I do hope that teaching and learning can be inclusive. Why? Because that's going to make education available for all students. Many years ago I applied to be a primary school teacher. And I can still remember my interview. At that stage I was wanting to be a primary school teacher, upper primary. And I remember talking about the importance of trying to retain the motivation and enthusiasm and interests of children, because, in a sense, at that age, they still have that love of learning, that sort of the wonder of the world, that opportunity to learn. I think sadly, perhaps, some of our education system can beat that out of it. But I think the intrinsic love of learning and the potential power that that can have and bring in people's lives – not just in terms of employability, although obviously that's important – but I think the power of education, whether it be basic skills in terms of literacy and the way that opens up the world for people.

So my hope is that education does become increasingly inclusive, that there are people who perhaps haven't had an opportunity to engage in higher education. It's critical thinking, it's ability to question, the confidence it can bring, the skills it can develop so that they can engage and enter into the world – perhaps all pie in the sky, but nevertheless I do have a hope for inclusive teaching and learning because I feel that that is going to enable people to gain their entitlement to education.

It's not about just *supporting* people, it's not about helping them, it's not about people who can't make it on their own, it's actually about giving everybody an *entitlement* to education which, for me, has made such a difference in my life and I feel makes a difference in everybody's.