

Teachability

- Rationale, aims and objectives
- Progress
- Future challenges

In terms of planning and disability in higher education, I don't think there can be a more important area than the curriculum, which is at the heart of what higher education has to offer, and what disabled students, and all students are trying to access.

As most of you know, the Teachability Project has been funded by SHEFC for some years to develop and promote an understanding of curriculum accessibility for disabled students.

And I have been asked to say something about its rationale, aims and objectives, progress made, and future challenges.

I plan to spend a little more of time I have on the first and less on the second and third in the hope that by the time we get to future challenges you have decided that working with the project by encouraging staff to take advantage of what it has to offer is your future challenge.

Teachability - Rationale, aims and objectives.

- To provide resources - information, questions, challenges - for academic staff to use to evaluate curriculum design and delivery from the angle of accessibility to disabled students
- To develop awareness of barriers to disabled students' successful completion of courses of study in higher education

It's quite salutary to have inaccessible features of buildings and landscapes pointed out: a lecture theatre which only has wheelchair access at the back; footpaths with bollards; stairs without highlighted nosings. And by and large people accept the sense of the questions, for the architect, When you designed that space – the lecture theatre, the footpath or the staircase, did you consider its use by disabled people? Do you understand what it would have meant to consider that?

In its simplest form, the Teachability Project raises with academic staff comparable questions about the design and delivery of what is at the heart of higher education, namely courses and programmes of study. The comparable questions are perhaps, When you designed your assessment, or your seminar, or your lecture, or when you wrote your course description, did you consider their use by disabled people? Do you understand what it means to suggest you might?

And the Project aims to (a) hand these questions to academic staff, (b) gain their acceptance that the questions rightly belong to them, and (c) to explain, for each element of curriculum, what it MEANS to consider disabled students trying to access it.

Another way of saying this is that it is asking academic staff to look for barriers to disabled students trying to access courses of higher education, and to think about what they can do to reduce such barriers.

Of course no one is suggesting that people deliberately set out to create obstacles so that study is made harder for disabled students in particular. Not talking about hurdles that are the right and proper demands and challenges of higher education: this is about removing needless, usually inadvertent barriers, without diminishing the core academic task in any way.

We've probably all experienced barriers when we've been trying to access something – and sometimes within the HE setting. Dense overheads, of A4 sheet of text reproduced onto acetate, masquerading as an overhead, which perhaps no-one can read. Or a lecture that didn't just have complex content, but a structure that was badly sign posted, and needlessly difficult to follow.

Teachability is trying to give pointers to academic staff about the more numerous practices and arrangements which might inadvertently get in the way of disabled students' learning, practices it might be possible to do something about.

[Teachability - Rationale, aims and objectives.](#)

- [Teachability and the DDA Part IV](#)
- [An accessible curriculum is one in which reasonable adjustments have been anticipated as far as possible.](#)

The Project and the original materials were devised and written well before the DDA Part IV. But the goals of each are related: the duty to make reasonable adjustments is explicitly not a reactive duty. It's an anticipatory duty. This sometimes raises in people's minds the seeming impossibility of being ready in advance for any disabled person who might want to take their course.

But another way of coming at this is to start not with the impossible itemising of all the things that disabled students might conceivably need on courses.

It's to start rather with what you normally expect students to be able to do. And then go on to think about what you could do to prepare for the possibility that some students who may be disabled might not be able to do that or these things.

At one level, this is no more than asking education providers to plan what they provide with diverse learner needs in mind. The effort required is in figuring out what exactly that means, and that takes some appreciation of the sorts of requirements that disabled learners might have, an appreciation which the written Teachability has tried to convey.

So having introduced the idea that there can be 'barriers' getting in the way of disabled students' learning, what sorts of barriers do we have in mind?

Teachability - **Potential** barriers:

- Exams which privilege aspects of attainment such as speed, recall or dexterity
- Rigid attendance requirements
- Lectures unsupported by web or other materials
- Videos without subtitles or transcripts
- Placements only full time

You might react to this list by pointing out all sorts of good reasons why what I've listed as barriers are absolutely appropriate for all kinds of reasons, and indeed, you may have had occasion yourself to insist rigidly on student attendance, delivered an inspirational off the cuff lecture without supporting written materials, or expected students to recall all manner of things in an exam, at speed.

But all I am suggesting is that these features of various aspects of courses might appear to some disabled students as barriers, just like the densely packed, illegible to all, overheads.

And this then raises the QUESTIONS about whether anything can routinely or exceptionally be done about it, IF some of these course features are problematic for some disabled students.

- **Can** the exam which privileges speed actually be adjusted to be taken more slowly?
- **Is** it possible to revise or make exception to the regulations which require attendance?
- **Can** lectures be supported by web-based or equivalent materials?
- **Is** it possible to subtitle videos?
- **Could** placements be provided part time as well as full time?

Only a few examples of the sorts of adjustments which might be requested by or on behalf of disabled students.

In themselves, these questions have nothing to do with disability.

Teachability

- Limits of accessibility - or scope for adjustments? - a question for academic staff
- Consequences? -
 - for course descriptions
 - for student admissions

Of course it does not follow because we can think of an adjustment that it would necessarily be appropriate, or permissible or useful in its context – and this is why the DDA Part IV Code can't just list 'reasonable adjustments'.

The earlier example of subtitling a video illustrates this point. Maybe you use the video to extend students aural comprehension in Modern Languages, and if that is its purpose, then subtitling could defeat it.

Then again, while it may well be true that speed or recall could create real difficulties for some disabled students in some subject, it might be that speed and recall are critical in the context.

So you can't give students extra time to carry out some of the tasks in medical education, such as sedating angry cats, filling teeth. But essays on ethical issues in medicine - does speed really matter? Does recall of formulae matter in Chemistry or Physics, or is what is really core to these subjects the application of formulae to practice?

These are not questions that can be answered by Disability Services, who might well SUGGEST adjustments from their knowledge of what has been agreed to be acceptable in comparable academic contexts.

But they need to be answered by academic staff with an understanding of the significance of their answers. Decisions NOT to make adjustments to lecturing practices, exam arrangements, and even the content of exams, might well effectively exclude some disabled students, or make sure that they will never have the same chance of doing as well on a course as their non disabled peers.

And such decision also have obvious consequences for admitting students, as well as for describing courses. Worst of all is when a disabled student comes on a course **uninformed** about whether, given their impairment and how the course is taught, they may never hope to pass, or succeed as well as non-disabled peers.

Progress?

- Legislation has increased likelihood that adjustments will be made, especially to assessments, and staff less likely to refuse a requested adjustment outright
- BUT still reactive and ad hoc rather than anticipatory

So what progress has there been? The legislation has probably made people less likely to refuse to consider a proposed adjustment, like allowing a student a rest break in exams, or allowing a student to record a lecture.

Perhaps there is less evidence of **anticipation** of the likely future needs of disabled students. Although there are developments such as increased use of the web to support students' learning which have perhaps inadvertently been very helpful for those disabled student who for many different reasons might need a text based resource to derive benefit from lectures.

If progress is to be more than chance or haphazard, though, then there is a need for greater self conscious awareness of the particular value to disabled students of some of the practices already in place for all students.

If you **already** distribute lecture outlines and overheads to ALL students electronically in advance, then the student who MUST have this because they would otherwise be unable to lip read effectively, or follow the thread of the lecture, don't even have to ask for it. If there is already some scope for flexibility about the scheduling and timetabling of placements, then the disabled student who needs that is easy to provide for.

Teachability - progress?

- Many academic departments have sent representatives to Teachability workshops
- Many academic departments have carried out reviews of accessibility
- Some institutions expect all academic departments to review and report on curriculum accessibility
- Many academic staff have read the Teachability materials

We've lost count of the number of staff who have taken part in Teachability workshops, although the past two months have not been untypical with a total of 187 attending 12 workshops run in that period. Hopefully many more have read the materials.

Two years ago, we knew that in excess of 70 departments carried out whole department audits of their practices from angle of accessibility to disabled students, and we have copies of all their reports.

Some institutions thereafter developed a rolling programme of expectation that departments would evaluate and report on accessibility of their courses from this angle.

One University has a Teachability committee which receives departments' Teachability audit reports, and takes up the wider institutional issues reflected in these reports, such as the provision of staff development, or cross institutional issues, which may be beyond the ability of the department to resolve, such as perhaps room bookings, exam timetables.

Teachability – progress?

BUT, the task is enormous:

- Perception of disability as students' 'problem'
- Entrenched ideas about who with what impairments can do what courses
- Sheer number of staff in number of roles

So why does the task appear to be enormous? Partly because there are fundamental shifts in thinking involved. We're asked to think of all aspects of higher education as service delivery – and that's new. And the law suggests that service delivery to disabled students should be thoughtfully prepared for disabled students.

If a lecture or an overhead or a textbook or a video or a web-site is to be accessible to disabled students, then it's the people who create overheads, or recommend textbooks, or use videos or design web-sites who need to know what to do. It's not the student that needs to change, but the provision.

And this takes us to the third point here, about the vast numbers of staff. A post graduate teaching assistant's seminar should be as accessible as possible to disabled students as the tutor can make it; so also should the Principal's address to first year students; the guest lecturer's speech and the social work placement – and so on.

This suggests the need for a great many staff to look at practices from this angle, and in sheer terms of staff numbers, there is much to be done. Although how much depends on what practices are already in place, and which of these already serve disabled students well.

We also still hear expression of entrenched opinion about what it is possible or not possible for disabled people to do, despite the DDA insistence that blanket exclusion of disabled people, by category of impairment, from courses is unlawful.

And to address this, a different approach is needed: I might not be sure **how** this applicant with their impairment will do what is demanded on this course, but I can at least be clear about what IS reasonably demanded of students. I can also be open to the possibility that there could be equally valid alternative ways of students meeting the course demands.

Future challenges -

- Achieving consistency of thoughtfully accessible curricula
- Achieving acceptance of responsibility for disabled students by all staff
- Management responsiveness to identified problems
- Promotion of models of accessible practice
- Checks and safeguards to ensure that accessibility is understood and valued

So what should we highlight as future challenges?

I've made various suggestions on the overhead. But perhaps the best way to summarise the challenge is by quoting an academic member of staff from a department which has made exemplary use of Teachability:

'Adapting the Geology/Geoscience curriculum, with its traditional image of physical challenge, to make it accessible to the whole range of potential students is far from straightforward. Nevertheless the experience gained on this Teachability project suggests that much progress has been made and with some thought and modest resources a lot more is achievable. Although many recent changes have been introduced in response to new legislation it will be to the benefit of the subject and to society at large when barriers to accessing the Geoscience curriculum have been removed, or at least made manageable, so that the whole community is soon represented among its graduates.'

The future challenge, then, is to ensure proper representation of disabled students as graduates of higher education, and the serious, self conscious and informed commitment of all institutional staff to achieving that.