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IDENTITY-FIRST EDUCATION

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Glossary and Abbreviations

Person-first language: intentionally putting a pronoun or name before their diagnosis (e.g., *a person who is deaf*).

Identity-first language: intentionally putting someone's disability identity first (e.g., *a deaf person*).

Non-binary: a person whose gender identity is not entirely man or woman.

Ableism: discrimination against someone because of their disability.

Xenophobia: discrimination against someone because they are from a different country.

The Student Identity

I am a disabled student, a transgender non-binary student, a queer student, a carer student. Identity-first vs person-first language is an intense topic with no real correct answer as it will always depend on the individual. However, in higher education you very quickly notice that your identity as a student completely overrules any other identities you may have, both within the institution and outside. You're a student—never a person who studies. Within education, the language moves from person vs identity to student vs identity. I want to not only recognize this change but also call for identity-first education over student-first education.

Person-first language gained traction in the 1970s in an attempt to focus on the individual and show that their disability or disorder isn't their entire identity, that they are whole beings regardless of their condition (Vivanti, 2020). Person-first language has become an international standard in many areas, including education. However, in recent years, disability advocates, specifically those focused on autistic liberation, have pushed towards identity-first language. Their main arguments are that autism, or any other disability, is a defining feature that cannot be separated from a person and that person-first language is stigmatizing. Gernsbacher (2017) writes that person-first language is used more often to describe children with disabilities than those without, and that it is also used more often to refer to children with the most stigmatized disabilities.

A similar phenomenon is "I don't see color" when discussing race. On the surface this seems to mean that if you do not acknowledge someone's race, you couldn't be racist. However, in a

world where the white West is the standard that society is built for, ignoring race not only ignores the systemic oppression that BAME individuals face, but also continues colonization by overlooking our racial, cultural, and ethnic differences.

Regardless of an individual's language preference, these examples are a symptom of the larger issue that separates people from their immutable identities and experiences, and which is prevalent in further and higher education today. Many universities boast of their inclusive and diverse communities—for example, through their marketing to prospective students. Yet many students feel they are implicitly expected to mask their other identities for the comfort and benefit of others, because they are now part of the university community—as if acceptance onto a degree course is the 'great equalizer' and continues to be so until graduation.

My Experiences

Academic staff must ask themselves, “who does my learning material represent?” As someone who has studied both fashion design and fashion communications and marketing, I know the goal is to always appeal to a potential customer. I have sat through hours and hours of lectures about men and women, what they like, their needs and desires, and how they are cardinally different from each other. I have been taught to pattern cut and style, again for men and women, and at no point was I given the education to appeal to my community of non-binary people. This isn't to say I wasn't given the option to target any chosen community or niche, but consistently I had to teach myself how to do so, as identities outside of white, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, able-bodied people were rarely centered.

In my and many others' experience, centering people's identities and experiences does not always come from the intent to include, but to exclude. Suddenly becoming a disabled person in my first year, I was incredibly let down and failed by my teaching staff. No one told me who to speak to regarding my access needs. I was denied a Disabled Student's Support Recommendations (DSSR) report, as a letter from my surgeon wouldn't suffice. Goalposts were constantly moved, so I finished the year having not done any of the essential practical work. I wasn't allowed on an international trip, and it was repeatedly recommended to me that I should just leave the course. None of this was for lack of trying on my part, as it is with most people: students do not sign up for thousands of pounds in student loans and leave home to not want to be there and succeed.

The question is: would this have happened if that course had been designed with disabled people in mind? If we had been considered from the start, would we be pigeonholed as either a typical student who should just 'get on with it' or as someone who simply doesn't belong because of their disability, race, gender, etc?

Decolonize the Curriculum

When we speak about decolonization, it immediately implies properly representing race throughout history. However, decolonization could go much further than that and liberate the

curriculum from patriarchy, ableism, transphobia, homophobia, racism, and xenophobia. Most of these systemic oppressions exist because of colonization. As we remove colonial influences and bias from the curriculum, so teachers are forced to properly represent people and cultures across all backgrounds and experiences.

Decolonising is not just about bringing in minority ethnic writers and texts, but also how we read ‘traditional mainstream’ texts (Gokay and Panter, n.d.).

To be ready to graduate into a socially and professionally global world, we must prepare students to think globally. There is no use in analyzing content created by a Black woman from Nigeria if we are only taught to look at it through a Eurocentric lens, effectively blocking out all context. Expecting everyone to have a Eurocentric perspective also hinders students who aren’t from Europe or who have a different cultural background, simply because an academic may not understand it. Instead of taking the opportunity to learn and create an identity-first education, academics misrepresent their ignorance as being the only correct option (Shay, 2016).

It is the responsibility of university staff across the board—teaching, administration, and management—to recognize and center their students’ immutable experiences and identities. Seeing everyone as a ‘regular student’ may seem fair and just at first thought, but this overlooks the institutional barriers many of us face. Treating everyone the same when so many students are starting from completely different points, and essentially running completely different races, is not equality—it’s willful ignorance.

Person-first vs identity-first language is incredibly personal. While there’s no correct answer, the answer cannot be to remove the person in favor of the student identity. I cannot just be a student with disabilities, a student who identifies as transgender, a student with caring responsibilities—nor can other people be students who experience racism, students who come from abroad, and so on. Regardless of whether we prefer identity-first or person-first language, we must focus on identity-first education.

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