Walk in My Shoes

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You say you understand
what it's like for me.

What it's like
to want to be active and fit
but not being able to
for the pain.

What it's like
to want to participate in social events
but not being able to
for the sounds and smells.

What it's like
to want to be equal
but not being.

You say you understand
you empathize
you'll walk in my shoes.

Thing is
you can step out.

When I was approached to contribute a commentary or response to "Fostering Inclusive Learning Communities Together" (Tong, 2023), I jumped at the opportunity. Not only had I undertaken my doctoral studies as a person with disabilities, but I am also now working in higher education and have been involved with advocacy and activism around ableism in academia for several years. I thought it would be easy to come to this critical reflection task taking my personal experience and professional knowledge into account. After all, I had completed several research projects, numerous publications, and countless presentations and workshops on the topic (e.g., Brown & Leigh, 2020; Brown, 2021; Brown, 2022; Brown & Ramlackhan, 2022). However, I soon realized that my own positioning and positionality did not matter quite as much once I considered the student views. So many elements from different contributions resonated in various ways. The piece that stayed with me the longest and most vividly is Nicola Cook's Water (Cook, 2023). For days after having read her poem, I found myself returning to that first line: "I ripple down pebbles at first then over stones that hurt."

Nicola talks about "environmental, social, and economic policies, cultural representations, and individual attitudes" pulling and pushing us all into different, often opposing directions,

when it comes to supporting individuals with disabilities. Her call for a more holistic view of the person(s) is a rational—and dare I say justified—conclusion.

When it comes to my own research and activism work, I often experience tensions that are complex and can barely be reconciled. The strongest forces I encounter are the push and pull of idealist activism and pragmatic realism. The disability studies scholar in me wants to break down all societal barriers and obstacles so that disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent people may access higher education equally and equitably. My educationalist 'I' tells me that I should not wait for this ideal situation and make changes now to develop inclusivity as and where and to whichever extent we can. But then the disability scholar becomes increasingly unhappy because interventionist strategies and quick fixes often gloss over structural oppression, the result of which is that fewer longer-term solutions are sought. To that the educationalist responds that they cannot stand by and watch how the current generation of learners are disadvantaged for the benefit of the greater good in the long-term, whenever that may happen. In short, in attempting to foster inclusivity, accessibility, equality, and equity, I myself become that body of water "squeezing myself through spots murked with moss and land spilled over," as Nicola so powerfully expresses in her poem.

My response to this dilemma is to try to find a balance, even at the risk of upsetting the disability scholar and the educationalist simultaneously. I draw on arts-based methods for data generation, analysis, and dissemination. Within the context of social sciences and humanities, arts-based approaches are increasingly commonly used for their powers of expression, evocation, and illumination (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2015). The arts speak to us on an instinctive and intuitive level, and as such enable us to connect to experiences and topics in ways that scholarly writing or lobbyist activism for example cannot. Through using artistic forms of expression, I attempt to attract people's attention, captivate their curiosity, and engage them emotionally to foster empathy and understanding at a much deeper level than the cognitive could. The disability scholar may see this as a cheapskate trick that will not actually convey the full reality and profoundness of a disability experience. Yet, the educationalist feels they can shock the world into action, even if that action does not lead to the absolute extremes the disability scholar is asking for. I am not sure if this is the right thing to do or not. Yet, in my experience in teaching, research, and activism, it usually helps to explain what you do why and how. And in responding creatively to the creative pieces, especially "Water," I hope to be able to raise a little more awareness of what may be required for fostering inclusion.

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