Accessibility of Anatomy: A Proposal for Change

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Description | What was done?

This short **video** outlines a 'proposal for change' which was developed during enrolment of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) 'Leading Programmes' course.

This proposal highlights and suggests areas of an anatomy course that could be developed to enhance student experiences, as well as helping and encouraging educators to consider approaches to module accessibility. For example, the 'Gaps and Pressures Analysis' by the University has made note that the diversity of students on campus is becoming more apparent. This diversity of student should be celebrated and embraced. It can help shape change and reform in policies and approaches to teaching. For example, with regard to laboratory-based science practical classes, there is a perception that visually impaired students may not be able to access these easily. However, there is evidence in the literature of effective ways of making changes to laboratory-based subjects that allow visually impaired students to take part and achieve the Learning Outcomes of the course (Sozbilir, 2016).

Motivation and Aims

The original basis of this 'proposal of change' stemmed from the use of videos to help supplement student learning. Since the implementation of the accessibility requirements in September 2018, the content of our lecture content and other teaching materials has had to be more accessible by making it 'perceivable, operable, understandable and robust'. One important aspect, with the use of videos in teaching, is the need to include a transcript of the voiceover, for students that may have hearing impairments. In the limited examples produced to date, feedback has been positive. Interestingly, some comments made note of the fact that the script could itself be used as a revision aid, aside from its intended use (with a few minor tweaks). Despite having some success in this area, there remains other difficulties in other accessibility areas.

Anatomy is a very visual subject to teach, and relies heavily on the ability to see, identify, and understand spatial relations. For those who may have a visual impairment, depending on the extent, this could prove quite difficult. However, the impetus remains on the staff member to ensure that the content can still be taught. For example, books in braille are available. When it comes to images or practical elements however, this can bring up more obstacles. Some safety concerns can arise when there is a need to dissect using sharp scalpels, or the inclusion of "Identify the structure" questions in class tests can soon become an issue. It is reasonable to assume that individuals would be able to make known their own limitations but given that as part of the Academic Year structure, staff members do not usually know the mix of students ahead of the start of term, it can prove difficult to account for every possible scenario arising. While it may not be possible currently to deliver, it should be part of our collective responsibility, to make provision and try to facilitate the student learning. There may be ways in which this apparent obstacle, in fact becomes a signpost to improving the way we teach and deliver programmes.

By being considerate and thoughtful in our approach, we promote an "equality of opportunity", which allows everybody to have an equal chance of opportunities, or to contribute, and then to help each other make full use of the opportunities given to us, to fulfil potential.

Successes | Challenges | Lessons Learned

This exercise in reviewing the accessibilities of anatomy, and the potential for change, helped build understanding of how students from a large scale of diverse backgrounds, can often come up against issues in fulfilling their university experience.

To date, I have not had experience with working with students who register as blind or visually impaired. However, this is not to say that those students have not been present in my classes; it is perhaps that I was not aware of them. In a recent 'Gaps and Pressures' analysis carried out by the University, it was recognised that increasingly, the diversity of the student population is becoming more and more apparent. While this increases diversity in the University and the student experience, the report was acknowledged that this also presented challenges which the University was not necessarily prepared for.

Personally, and from my background in youth work, there should be no perceivable reason for visually impaired students not to enrol or attend our courses. However, through talking with colleagues about how accessible (or a perceived lack therefore) our programmes are to students with disabilities, it is apparent there are currently some practical issues; both regarding teaching approaches and estate. It is only right to celebrate diversity in our student cohorts. These students can have a lot to offer their peers, as well as staff and indeed the University. They can help to drive policy and enact change right across the board: from pathway to institution level. Therefore, there is a lot of potential for change. The current approach is likely going to take a longer time rather than any instant change, but importantly, it is about changing perception and approaches. It will take time to plan and discuss with outside bodies, as well as being mindful of what we can do and achieve within overarching governance and legislation e.g., Section 75 (NI Act).

Scalability and Transferability

This approach is not limited to anatomical sciences. Indeed, any subject where there is a reliance on the need to 'observe' any element, is ideal. This could be in subjects with a practical element, such as the sciences, where laboratory classes or demonstrations are commonplace. However, it could also be in subjects more aligned with Arts and Humanities. There really isn't a limit to the application. The main focus is that we try to ensure accessibility in our courses, and how we can go about implementing these.

References

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4