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Peckitt, Gillan Michael

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‘Feel Free to Disagree with Me’: Having a Dialogue About Disability as a University Lecturer with Disabilities

Michael Gillan PECKITT (Doshisha University)

Certainly, classrooms must be physically safe places. For dialogue and inquiry to occur they must be emotionally and intellectually safe as well. In an intellectually safe place there are no putdowns and no comments intended to belittle, undermine, negate, devalue, or ridicule. Within this place, the group accepts virtually any question or comment, so long as it is respectful of the other members of the circle. What develops is a growing trust among the participants and with it the courage to present one’s own thoughts, however tentative initially, on complex and difficult issues. (Thomas E Jackson, 2006:84)

“noun: safety 1. 1.

the condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury.”

Oxford English Dictionary

It is difficult to begin this essay without giving a brief autobiography. My name is Michael Gillan Peckitt, I usually go by the name ‘Michey.’ I have been living in Japan for over a decade and teaching at universities in Japan for most of those years, usually teaching English for Academic Purposes, Philosophy and sometimes Disability Studies. I also have disabilities. One is physical in nature and clearly visible, I have a version of cerebral palsy, specifically left-sided spastic hemiplegia and other (mostly) invisible disabilities.

For the last few years, I have been teaching an ‘Intensive Advanced English’ course at a private University in Kyoto and a Disability Studies course at a government funded university in Kobe.

It can be difficult for both student and teacher to interact if the teacher (or for that matter the student) has a visible disability, and there can be further complications if the

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subject of the course is itself about disability.

In this essay, I shall describe my experiences teaching at universities in Japan as a person with disabilities whilst often teaching about disability. My experiences of teaching at universities in Japan, as a kind ‘phenomenology of teaching’ have led me to think about Thomas Jackson’s ideas about physical safety, intellectual safety and about the concept of ‘safety’ in general.

Certainly, classrooms must be physically safe places.

It may seem a very obvious statement to make, but as a university lecturer whom has a physical disability, and at one point a university student with a disability, I have always wondered why, in Jackson’s work, the subject of ‘intellectual safety’ has so many paragraphs devoted to it, but so few words are devoted to the issue of physical safety in the classroom, except notably, for one sentence:

“Certainly, classrooms must be physically safe places.”

So, we might ask, what does it mean to be ‘physically safe’ in a classroom? It is obvious and also too easy to say that it is to be “protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury” whilst in the classroom, as such a definition of ‘physical safety’ assumes that we have been physically able to enter the classroom, a task which not all students and teachers can always accomplish.

I think Thomas Jackson is correct. Dialogue is only possible if the classrooms are “physically safe places”. However, I ask what does it mean to be ‘safe’ and for whom do we wish it to be safe?

At one of the universities I work at, where I teach a Disability Studies course, I as an academic teacher with disability find it difficult to enter my classroom, as I would most classrooms at that specific university, as it is difficult for someone with my physical disability to enter the classroom because of the layout of the classroom. The chairs and tables are too close together, making it difficult to walk between tables, to give one example. It would be physically impossible for I, a mere walking stick user to walk in-between the tables, I don’t see how a wheelchair user could enter the classroom where I teach this class.

If the environment of the classroom is so crowded, it can intimidate some students. The classroom might be too crowded, too full of tables and chairs with no room to walk, the

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‘sensei’ will, by default, be too close to students, which can be intimidating to the students. To avoid the possibility of such intimidation, the ‘sensei’ will have to stand at the front of the classroom, as if she or he is giving a lecture, which is fine, if it is a lecture, but less useful if it is a seminar when students are meant to talk to each other, rather than look to the ‘sensei’ to acquire wisdom.

Concerns about ‘physical safety’ in the classroom environment is not just about the lecturer/teacher of course, but if a ‘university teacher with disability’ finds it difficult to enter a classroom, and the class is about disability, it will hardly encourage students with disabilities to take a course about disability issues if the classroom is that inaccessible. Dialogue about disability cannot even begin as the relevant participants - students with disabilities as well as their lecturer or teacher cannot even enter the classroom.

After the COVID19 pandemic, I say after, COVID did not just go away, but because of the pandemic, we can now use ZOOM and other software to teach and communicate with students with disabilities remotely. However, what if a student with disabilities or that that matter a lecturer/teacher with disabilities does not want to use such software?

Of course, some students and lecturers/teachers might prefer to use such software, but we can ask this: Could having to use technology like ZOOM, rather than entering a classroom ‘in the real world’, be considered as a ‘risk to physical safety’, and therefore as a kind of violation of Jackson’s principle that “Certainly, classrooms must be physically safe places”? After all, any environment a person does not want to be in, might be considered ‘unsafe’. In whatever fashion the ‘classroom’ environment is designed - whether it is physical - i.e. in a classroom in a physically existing university (notice I am not saying the classroom physically existing makes it ‘real’) or in the virtual world via ZOOM and other similar software, it is surely up to the participant (student or teacher) in the ‘classroom’ whether they feel ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’? Any environment will feel unsafe to someone.

‘Intellectual Safety’ with a Disabled ‘Sensei’ and Students

Let us assume that both students and the ‘sensei’ have been able to enter the classroom and this class is about disability and the ‘sensei’ is himself a person with disabilities.

After the apparently easy bit of actually getting people into the classroom, having created a “physically safe place” we (well, I as the ‘sensei with disabilities’ and the students) will now have a dialogue about disability studies in what will hopefully be ‘an intellectually

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safe place’.

How can such safety be achieved? Well, the students must feel comfortable both with their surroundings and with the class material - the handouts and material that the ‘sensei’ gives them to read - and they must feel that they can either challenge, where ‘challenge’ can mean to disagree with some material or offer comments in support of the class material. Depending on the topic, to disagree or offer support for a certain idea or issue concerning people with disabilities can be difficult for students if their ‘sensei’ has a visible disability. The students may feel that they have to guess what their ‘sensei’ thinks about an issue and that feeling from students might make dialogue between students and other students as well as with their ‘sensei’ difficult to achieve.

I shall outline difficulties I have experienced holding classes about disability as a person with disability in Japan.

I have found that many, if not most of the reasons that prevent dialogue between the ‘sensei’ and students as well as ‘student to student’ dialogue, sometimes comes down to a concern about the teaching material used in the class.

Teaching a class can be difficult when a subject is political or ‘sensitive.’ For example, whilst teaching philosophy both at the University of Hull in the UK - where I was a tutorial assistant and here in Japan where I sometimes teach philosophy - I often shy away from teaching about the ethics of abortion, even though some students have requested that I talk about it. I worry that I might be insensitive when discussing the issue or that some of the students might respond to the material in an insensitive way.

I also often think that discussing such ‘sensitive’ issues becomes even more difficult when the ‘sensei’ embodies the issue being discussed, I am a person with disabilities teaching about disabilities, and this can cause a hesitancy to discuss matters in a frank way from both the ‘sensei’ and the student.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this hesitancy or difficulty in holding a class about disability studies as a ‘sensei with disabilities’ is the issue of assisted dying and euthanasia. The problem often manifests itself in one of two ways: (1 The student says nothing, or makes some very non-committal statements, because they are trying to guess what the ‘sensei with disabilities’ philosophical position on the matter is and do not want to offend the ‘sensei’ or (2 the student takes a position which is very much in for against assisted dying,

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when (often over-confidently) expressed can shutdown dialogue between students and might make the environment ‘intellectually unsafe’.

I have no ‘answer’ or ‘solution’ to these difficulties a ‘sensei with disabilities’ such as myself faces when trying to hold a class in which facilitating dialogue between sensei and student and more importantly, between students amongst themselves is the point of the class. However, to conclude this essay, I ask this: (1 has the importance of ‘physical safety’ been slightly overlooked & (2 Have you any advice about how a ‘sensei’ whom embodies the issue they teach about, teach whilst keeping the classroom ‘intellectually safe’?

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