
From Print to Practice: Five Key Influences on my working life with disabled students in Higher/Third Level education

By the time I retired from my full-time post at the University of Central Lancashire, I had accumulated over thirty years-worth of resources which I used to inform and support my work with disabled students, especially in organising and delivering professional development events and courses. These resources comprised audio-visual items such as videos and DVD, cuttings from the mass media and cartoons, and a huge quantity of print materials including government reports, institutional products such as information leaflets aimed at disabled students, guidance documents created by organisations such as AHEAD both in Ireland and the USA and Skill in the UK, and books. The quantity was such that all of it could not be stored at home and so I had to dispose of a lot of it. As I was doing so, it prompted me to consider what five books in particular I felt had influenced my pedagogical thinking and my classroom practices. Putting this a little differently, if I had to spend time at a university on a desert island, in addition to my selection of music, what would I choose to take with me as the most vital print-based sources of help and guidance. (I decided to focus on books only – no room for policies and pamphlets etc. and certainly no access to the internet!)

The oldest of my chosen five is ‘What’s the Use of Lectures?’ written by Donald Bligh and published in 1971. My working life began in school-teaching, first as an assistant history master and then head of the history department. Having completed successfully a Master’s degree, I left the school sector to take up a post in teacher education. It did not take long to become aware of the lifelessness of the majority of lectures (including mine) compared to the animation and discussion generated in seminars and tutorials. Wanting to develop my classroom skills, I discovered Bligh’s book. From then on, I tried to apply many of the key principles underpinning effective learning in my work, even in contexts where lectures remained in prime position vis-a-vis delivery of the curriculum and despite evidence about the percentage of the lecture content students take-in and remember. I tried to ensure that my sessions included

1. variety
2. that they were participative
3. that they were relevant
4. that they progressed from the students’ existing knowledge and experience, and
5. that learning can be a ‘fun’ activity

Subsequently, on visits to schools to observe students undertaking teaching practice, it was heartening to see that they too were making efforts to implement these principles.

Before identifying my second choice, I need to say a little more about my career. When I started teaching in third level/higher education, there seemed to be few students with impairments, both obvious and hidden. They were an invisible minority in the student body. However, in 1974, the first research-based survey on their participation rates in the UK was published and soon afterwards, the National Bureau for Handicapped Students (later to be called Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) was established. For some unknown reason, I had always had an interest in disability and I joined this new organisation, moving from being an ordinary member

to joining the executive group and subsequently serving as the elected chairman. During this period, I was also keen to further my academic career and so took what was the usual route by enrolling on a doctoral research programme. The focus of my investigation was a qualitative study of a small group of students with mobility impairments trying to obtain places in universities. I completed my study, was awarded a doctorate in 1990 and managed to have my thesis published in 1993 in book form as 'Steps Towards Graduation'. The reason that I have included this information is to allow me to admit a major short-coming in my work, namely my lack of use of a social model of disability to interpret the experiences of those students in my sample.

It was in 1990 that Mike Oliver published the first edition of his book 'The Politics of Disablement' in which he explored the inadequacies of the medical/individual approach and proposed the adoption of a social/political/educational model. This is my second chosen book. My familiarity with this changed thinking meant that much of my teaching and my professional development sessions became quite different from what had gone before.

Looking back on the decade between 1990 and 2000, I think it would be fair to say that my embracing of the social model was incomplete. The system of provision and the approach to funding in the UK was very much about individuals and about the 'reasonable adjustments' that had to be made in order for disabled students to participate in universities and colleges. The term 'reasonable adjustments' formed one dimension of the legislation in the UK – the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Actually, there was a very important second dimension, the need to anticipate in advance what disabled people need in order to participate fully in all aspects of society, but, in my view, this was overlooked (and continues to be to this day although there are signs of this being more widely implemented as will be shown later).

My third chosen book is 'Teachability: Creating an accessible curriculum for disabled students' which is the handbook and guide to the project which started in 2000 and was organised by Anne Simpson and Graham Charters and funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council. For me, this was the first clear step made in the UK towards the implementation of a social/educational model of disability. Staff in a range of academic departments in higher education institutions in Scotland were asked to address questions about their courses and study programmes - about the extent which these were accessible to students with a range of impairments, the barriers preventing participation, the ways in which the barriers might be overcome, the strategies needed to activate removal of the barriers. In fact what these questions prompted was an ongoing debate on what constituted the core, non-negotiable parts of the course and a discussion of competence standards and reasonable adjustments especially with regard to courses leading to entry to many professions. (See the Equality Challenge Unit's 2015 publication for the most recent discussion of this in the UK.) Bringing the story right up to the present time, changes to the ways in which financial support is provided for disabled students in England since 2014 prompted the Higher Education Funding Council for England to establish the Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group. Their first guidance 'Inclusive Teaching and Learning in Higher Education as a route to Excellence' was published in January 2017 and I find it sad and disappointing that not a single reference is made to the pioneering work of Simpson and Charters.

For me, this was THE key prompt towards a more dynamic promulgation of a social/educational model and through it, the spread of genuinely inclusive institutions and courses.

The fourth of my chosen books is 'Towards Inclusive Learning in Higher Education: Developing Curricula

for Disabled Students' edited by Mike Adams and Sally Brown and published in 2006. This is a collection of sixteen papers and identifies good practice in a wide range of aspects of provision for disabled students: entry and admission, curriculum design, delivery and assessment, postgraduate work etc. It can be seen as a useful marker of the progress made in the UK following the financial involvement of the national funding councils and the concern with quality assurance and quality enhancement. I found this a useful aid to thinking on a diverse range of course requirements such as placements, use of assistive technology, distance learning, etc.

What Adams and Brown offer are ideas and so to counter-balance this, **my fifth and final choice, is research-based**. The most upto- date research study of the real-life experiences of disabled students in the UK is covered in the book called **'Improving Disabled Students' Learning: Experiences and Outcomes'** and was published in 2009. The eight authors under the leadership of Mary Fuller use the words of the students themselves to describe their experiences in relation to, for example

1. teaching, learning and assessment
2. placements
3. fitness to practice
4. institutional structures and systems put in place to meet their needs

So, there they are – my five sources of support to aid me in my work at 'Desert Island University'

Actually, I would have liked to cheat because since my retirement, further progress has been made towards inclusive provision. This has been based on principles of Universal Design as applied to curriculum development, delivery and assessment. Hence I would want to smuggle in with me a copy of **Sheryl Burgstahler's collection of papers published as 'Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice'** (second revised edition 2015). If you want to know more about my enthusiasm for this book, please read my review in the previous edition of the AHEAD Journal (no.4). Suffice it to say here, that moves towards the application of Universal Design were being made in the USA in the 1990s and yet, for me, the first sign that the concept had spread across the Atlantic was the 'Teachability' project mentioned already. Interestingly, there is a paper included in Adams and Brown entitled 'Using Universal Design for Learning to expand access to higher education' (Hall and Stahl) although I am unsure about the extent of its impact on practice and provision.

I hope that readers find this account interesting and stimulating. I realise that access to advice, guidance, and support in the real world rather than my imaginary desert island has been facilitated and widened by the development of the internet and web-based sources. Given shortcomings in quality control of web content, I would argue that there is still a place for books. I hope that this view is shared by colleagues. Perhaps, my own musings have prompted others to think about what they would choose as their five key sources of support in their own 'Desert Island University'. If so, in the interests of disseminating knowledge and good practice, and of continuing collegiality I urge them to write an article or letter for the AHEAD Journal. I am sure that such contributions would be welcomed by both the editors and the readers.

I have shared my experiences, ideas and views. Now it's your turn. What would you want to have with you?

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Prof Alan Hurst

Alan Hurst was Professor of Education at the University of Central Lancashire. He has published books and articles, lectured and led workshops throughout the UK and in many countries overseas, been a member of several significant and influential policy groups, chaired consultative groups for a number of research studies and projects, and been the recipient of a number of awards for his work on the creation of inclusive education for disabled students in universities. He was also a member and subsequently a trustee of Skill: National Bureau for Students with Disabilities until its closure in 2011. He continues to be a member of the Editorial Boards of the journal 'Disability and Society' and is a free-lance consultant contributing to conferences and staff development programmes in a number of institutions.

