



**GRIFFITH COLLEGE DUBLIN**

**Post-Graduate Diploma in Training and Education**

## **Inclusiveness in Training and Education**

### **Individual Work Based Case Study**

*'Enhancing the Learning Experience for a  
Student with Buerger's Disease'*

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**April 2016**

**Word Count: 2200**

(excluding bibliography)

## Abstract

*This case study aims to outline the learning environment for a student with Buerger's Disease, and any other wheelchair-bound student. Many factors need to be considered when assessing teaching methods for such students, not only in practical terms, but also ways to enhance the learning experience. The student in question does not have any obvious learning difficulties e.g. dyslexia, but does have practical issues to consider. By evaluating the learning experience for this student, it is hoped to improve one's own future teaching methods.*

## Introduction

Today's education system requires teachers and trainers to be more competent in instructing a wide range of students and learners. Access to education is increasingly paramount for different reasons. The term '*inclusion*' means concentrating on the needs of each individual in a class and ensuring that all learners can achieve their full potential throughout the course. '*Diversity*' relates to different types of learners from varying social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, gender, age, beliefs, as well as numerous mental and physical disabilities.

## Purpose

This case study will examine one particular student in the latter category mentioned above. Joseph West is 51, from Douglas in Cork, and suffers from Buerger's Disease. The definition of Buerger's disease is a chronic condition in which acute inflammation occurs and blood clots (thromboses) form in the small or medium-sized arteries of the hands, legs, and feet. The disease primarily affects medium-sized blood vessels. Buerger's disease is also known as *thromboangiitis obliterans* (MD Guidelines, 2013).

Joe was a student on a computer skills course which covered a wide range of subjects, from word processing to web design. His favourite subject was Excel spreadsheets. As Joe is confined to a wheelchair and also has limited use of his hands, certain considerations were required in teaching methods and facilities. These would apply to anyone in his predicament.

It is hoped in this case study to review Joe's learning experience and hopefully improve teaching methods for the next learners that are encountered with similar physical disabilities.

## Data

Apart from in-class feedback from Joe, a questionnaire was compiled and completed over a half-hour telephone call (*See Appendix 1*). Overall, Joe was satisfied with the course, but pointed out a few points of concern, which should be addressed in future pedagogy. These concerns were mainly regarding the classroom environment, notably the position of seating and the overhead projector screen. Joe had full attendance for the course and contributed as much as any other learner.

## Issues Faced by the Learner

Joe was assisted by his assistant, Maggie. Because the classroom was on the first floor, Joe and Maggie had to use the ramp outside the college entrance and then negotiate the lift with the help of the security personnel. This was not a problem, but in other circumstances, wheelchair accessibility would be a major consideration for any student in his situation.

Within the classroom itself there was one major problem to do with seating arrangements. None of the computer workstations were directly facing the screen at the front of the class, so all students had to turn their heads to see the whiteboard and screen. In Joe's case he sometimes had to move his wheelchair to properly see the screen.

Other types of hardware were adequate however. Joe was able to use the keyboard and mouse effectively, although he has limited use of his hands. Ergonomic keyboards and mice should be provided as an option for students with physical disabilities.

## Teaching Methods

In general the constructivist alignment method of teaching was used on this course, focusing on what the student *is*, what the teacher *does*, and then what the student *does* (Biggs, 1999). The students are given a task to do which is matched to the learning outcome. There was also an element of social constructivism because the students were asked to relate their own experiences with the new knowledge gained with each learning outcome. Vygotsky's three themes were employed in each class: Social Interaction, More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978).

From personal experience it is felt more focus is required on how the curriculum is designed. There is much that can be achieved by developing a curriculum for inclusive courses for students with physical disabilities (Adams and Brown, 2006).

Many useful methods to engage students in inclusive learning are outlined in ‘The Inclusive Learning and Teaching Handbook’ (Rodriguez-Falcon, E. *et al*, 2010), and some of these have been used in my own pedagogy already.

## **Assessment Methods**

Although there was not a summative assessment (at the end of the course) there were some formative assessments (during the course). Since most of the teaching methods were constructivist, students used their own previous knowledge combined with the appropriate learning outcomes of the subject at hand. Joe had no problems with any of these assessments, and could complete them as well as any other student. As mentioned previously, Joe contributed successfully to the class, and also related well with the other students.

## **Disclosure**

Some students who suffer from various disabilities or learning difficulties may not disclose them when they apply for a course. Although the subject of disclosure is an important component in inclusive teaching, in Joe’s case it was immaterial since he made his disability clear to the college before he started the course. Because of

relevant legislation, which is detailed below, the college are obliged to accommodate learners with all types of learning disabilities.

## **Attitudes of the Teacher**

Another important area to be considered with inclusive teaching is the attitudes of the teacher/lecturer. A student with physical disabilities should be treated equally with their peers. Some teachers could be criticised for being too discriminatory in their attitudes towards some students, either by over-compensating for the disability by attending to that particular student over and above the rest of the class. This was not a problem in this particular group as Joe was treated as an equal, however it should always be borne in mind that the teacher's attitudes towards learners with physical disabilities can cause problems.

## **Report Groups**

Since the Bologna Process was signed by 29 European countries in 1999 to ensure fairness and equality in higher education, a number of reports were initiated (EHEA, 2013). The HEA (Higher Education Authority) initiated a report in 2001 entitled '*Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education*'. Since then the HEA

produced a valuable report entitled '*Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland*' (HEA, 2004). A number of goals were set:

1. Communicate the rationale for equity of access to higher education.
2. Create a national framework of policies and initiatives to achieve equity of access.
3. Open routes of access and progression to higher education.
4. Develop a broader range of teaching and learning practices in higher education.
5. Obtain necessary financial support and resources.
6. Learn from experience what works efficiently. (*HEA, 2004*)

Further to this was the '*National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2008-2013*' (HEA, 2008). This report outlined a number of policy objectives and targets aimed at increasing participation in higher education by people with disabilities.

## **Legal Considerations**

A number of statutes are relevant to inclusive education for people with physical and mental disabilities, as well as other diverse groups. The Disability Act 2005 outlines a number of statutory obligations on public service providers including educational institutions. Under this Act, people with disabilities are entitled to have their health and educational needs assessed, and have individual service statements drawn up

determining which services they should receive. It also requires people with disabilities to have access to independent complaints and appeals procedures. Most importantly, it requires that people with disabilities have access to public buildings (including educational institutions).

The Employment Equality Acts of 1998 and 2004 stipulate that there should not be any discrimination in employment or education. The Equality Authority provides resources and information for people with disabilities.

Another important piece of legislation is the Universities Act of 1997. This outlines policies of quality assurance in the area of higher education. Section 36 of this statute specifically relates to inclusive education in that it stipulates '*access to university education by economically or socially disadvantaged people, by people who have a disability, and by people from sections of society significantly under-represented in the student body...*' (Irish Statute Book, 1997).

The legislation relating to students with disabilities is overseen by AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability). This non-profit organisation provides support to teachers, guidance counsellors and families of students with disabilities, as well as being a valuable resource for the students themselves ([www.ahead.ie](http://www.ahead.ie)). AHEAD organises careers events for students and graduates with disabilities and/or specific learning difficulties through the 'Get Ahead' initiative and the WAM (Willing Able Mentoring) work placement programme.

Other initiatives include the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE).

## **Optimising the Learning Environment**

There are a number of factors which are crucial to enhancing the learning environment, not only for learners like Joe, but also for other students with physical disabilities.

### Wheelchair Access

For Joe this was not a problem in the college, but it might have been a different story in some other educational institutions. He was able to move freely around most of the building, only because there is an elevator and the corridors are wide. Fire doors may have to be negotiated however, and in Joe's case his carer or the security personnel may have dealt with these. There is always the risk that the wheelchair user can be '*marginalised*' (Holloway, 2001).

### Classroom Layout

To Joe this was not a serious concern even though he was not facing the front of the classroom and had to turn around constantly to see both his monitor and the whiteboard/projector-screen. There were no alternatives in his particular case as he

would have the same problem wherever he was situated in the room. A temporary measure might have been to re-arrange his desk to alleviate this problem – or failing that the college could provide a more suitable classroom.

### Computer Hardware

Joe did not have any problems with the position of the keyboard, monitor or mouse. However, it should always be considered that ergonomic keyboards and mice should be provided for students with physical disabilities. Specialist computer peripherals are available if required. The printer was on the opposite side of the room to Joe, but this did not present a problem as printouts could be collected by Maggie, his assistant. Nevertheless, position and layout of computer hardware should always be adequate and easy to use for any learner with a physical disability.

### Lighting and Ventilation

Once again, this was not a problem to Joe, but other students with disabilities may have required better lighting or proximity to a window for maximum visibility and ventilation.

### Learning Materials

All students should be able to utilise various types of learning materials, whether hard or soft copy. Books, manuals and handouts must be easy to read with diagrams or illustrations as necessary. Poor quality photocopies are not acceptable. Additional learning materials can be gleaned from intranets such as Moodle, or

educational ‘wikis’ such Wikispaces. YouTube is also a valuable resource for additional material. Computers can be customised with accessibility options such as a screen magnifier, speech recognition software and text-to-speech applications. Keyboard shortcuts are particularly useful for cut-and-paste tasks, and these are usually learnt within the first few classes of my courses.

### Assessment

The teacher/trainer should always ensure that all assessments, whether formative or summative, can be completed by all students regardless of diversity. A variety of different types of assessment methods is desired. This would be particularly important to students who are dyslexic or have other learning difficulties. Some students require a scribe/ transcriber to complete exams. In Joe’s case, he was able to complete assessments as well as any other student in the class. Inclusive assessment benefits all (Hanafin *et al.*, 2007).

### Other Students

As mentioned previously, Joe conversed well with other students, and although it was rarely required, all of them would have helped him in any way. The fact that he was in a wheelchair was immaterial.

### Teacher’s Attitudes

Again this was not a problem for Joe, but it must always be considered in future learning. My pedagogy includes a philosophy of not leaving any student behind,

regardless of any disability, physical or mental, they may have. Within his particular class, one student had a language difficulty, and another had a literacy issue, but these were compensated for by ensuring that everyone understood each learning outcome. Inclusive practices benefit all students. Patience and understanding are inherent in a good teacher's personality.

## Conclusion

The number of factors to be considered in teaching a student with physical disabilities such as Joe are important not just for him, but for any other student in a similar situation. Although various environmental factors have to be taken into account, teaching methods and assessments are also vitally important in enhancing the student's learning experience.

Much legislation has made it easier for students with physical disabilities to enter into higher education, but attitudes of teachers and training providers must adapt to the needs of inclusive education. As already stated, inclusive education benefits everyone.

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**Appendix 1****Case Study Questionnaire**

**Name:** Joe West

**Address:** Grange, Douglas, Cork

**Age:** 51

**Disability:** Buerger's Disease

**Reason for Course:** To improve computer literacy

**Favourite Subject:** Excel Spreadsheets

<b>Facilities Provided:</b>	Access Ramps	<i>Good</i>
	Elevator	<i>Good</i>
	Corridors	<i>Good</i>
	Seating	<i>Could be improved</i>
	Lighting	<i>Good</i>
	Monitor	<i>Good</i>
	Keyboard/Mouse	<i>Good</i>

**Teaching Methods:** Excellent - no complaints  
Everything explained in detail  
Teacher very patient with all students

**Other Students:** Very helpful and friendly  
Good rapport overall in class

**Assessments:** Capable of completing successfully  
Very interesting and challenging

**Further Studies:** Customer Service  
Sage Accounts

**Comments:** Very satisfied with the course  
Learnt much which is useful  
Very friendly and patient teacher