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"It's my life we're talking about": The lived experience in the higher education classroom

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Abstract

This article explores the transformative potential and complexities of integrating disability-related lived experience into higher education pedagogy. It contextualizes the concept of lived experience within phenomenological and autoethnographic traditions, highlighting its value in challenging conventional academic norms. Drawing from narratives of academics and students, we illustrate how the inclusion of lived experience can enrich learning, promote inclusivity, and foster a deeper sense of belonging. We reveal the emotional labour, strategic disclosure, and institutional resistance often faced by disabled academics and students navigating ableist structures. Through first-person accounts, we uncover how vulnerability, when embraced, can disrupt rigid pedagogies and catalyse collective transformation. Our major contribution to higher education practice is a set of practical strategies for incorporating lived experience into teaching. We propose these strategies for academics and students to engage ethically and critically with lived experience, advocating for structural change that centres accessibility and embodied knowledge. We conclude with a call to action: to move beyond tokenistic inclusion and toward a systemic reimagining of education that values lived experience as a foundational epistemology. By reframing disability as a vital source of insight, we position lived experience not as supplementary, but as central to fostering an equitable, empathetic, and intellectually vibrant academic community.

Keywords: lived experience, disability, embodiment, higher education teaching

Introduction

Lived experience has become a ubiquitous term in contemporary research. A simple Google Scholar search for lived experience in research leads to a result of 17,800 published articles and books since 2020, more

items than were published in the decades from 2010 to 2020 and from 2000 to 2010. In education, specifically, learning from experience, and the learning from experience of others is fundamental. At the same time, trends towards research approaches that enable the dismantling of existing power dynamics and hierarchies to promote equity, equality, and participation, have led to researchers becoming more introspective and reflexive (Foley, 2002). These developments have led to an unprecedented rise of autoethnography (Chang, 2016; Chang et al., 2016), the writing about the self in order to understand society and culture (see Brown, 2025).

Against this backdrop of the importance of lived experience and the rise of autoethnography, it is therefore not surprising that educators in higher education bring their personal lived experiences into the classroom to enhance teaching and learning by fostering deeper understanding, empathy, and critical thinking. In this contribution, we use our own experiences as academics and students to explore what it means to focus on lived experience in the higher education classroom, with a specific focus on the undergraduate module "Disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence in contemporary society", as it is taught at the University College London. We begin with a brief literature overview relating to the lived experience of disability in higher education. What then follows are examples of lived experiences. We offer two individual narratives from Steven and Elisabeth, alongside a collective narrative co-authored by Mar, Sofia, Hugo, Aiyi, and Malvika. We have chosen this structure intentionally. Individual narratives can be powerful tools within disability-informed and critical academic work because they foreground lived experience, illuminate structural barriers, and make visible forms of knowledge that are often marginalised within higher education. Presenting individual accounts therefore allows for a deeper engagement with the specificity and complexity of personal experience. At the same time, however, we recognise that lived experience narratives involve vulnerability, disclosure, and varying levels of personal exposure. As a collective, we did not want to impose expectations that all contributors should share personal experiences in the same way or to the same extent. The collaborative narrative format therefore creates space for student contributors to participate while maintaining control over what they choose to disclose, emphasise, or withhold. This approach reflects our commitment to respecting individual identities, boundaries, and differing relationships to disclosure, while still valuing the collective insights that emerge through shared reflection and collaboration. Drawing on the academics' and students' perspectives, we then discuss the challenges of focussing on the lived experience in higher education before offering practical strategies. Our original contribution to higher education practice is a set of practical strategies for incorporating lived experience into teaching, which derive from the narratives and our personal experiences. We use our conclusion as a call to action to individuals and institutions to further foster the lived experience as an opportunity for transformation.

Lived experience of disability in the higher education classroom

It is difficult to establish a clear definition and the origins of what we consider lived experience. Some scholars see its roots in the German scholarship of Husserl's phenomenology (Husserl, 1970/1900; 2001/1901). In this context, experience stands for "Erlebnis", a single event that one has experienced, as well as for "Erfahrung", the aggregate of all individual events one has experienced (e.g. Casey, 2023). Others see the French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir as the founder or promoter of lived experience, when she explored women's perspectives on life in patriarchal structures (e.g. Kruks, 2014). The questions researchers have begun to raise is in which way ordinary, everyday experience may differ from *lived* experience and what lived experience may offer to research that regular experience cannot (McIntosh &

Wright, 2019). The answer does lie in the differentiation of experience as "Erlebnis" and "Erfahrung". Regular experience relates to an individual's experience of an event or a series of events, whereas *lived* experience describes an interrelationship between experience, knowledge and understanding.

> Lived experience [...] is a representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject's human experiences, choices, and options and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge. [...] Lived experience, then, leads to a self-awareness that acknowledges the integrity of an individual life and how separate life experiences can resemble and respond to larger public and social themes, creating a space for storytelling, interpretation, and meaning-making. Lived experience allows a researcher to use a single life to learn about society and about how individual experiences are communicated. [...] Lived experience responds not only to people's experiences, but also to how people live through and respond to those experiences (Boylorn, 2008, p.490).

Lived experience can also be defined in relation to learned knowledge. Learned knowledge is acquired through structured learning processes such as schooling, reading, and instruction. It is often explicit, systematic, and transferable across contexts (Bloom, 1956). Learned knowledge is foundational in disciplines that require cumulative and theoretical understanding, and it is therefore often categorised as propositional knowledge. As such, learned knowledge is generally decontextualised, meaning it can be applied beyond the specific circumstances in which it was learned. Lived experience, by contrast, is deeply personal and contextually embedded, it is often tacit, intuitive, and difficult to articulate fully in formalised terms (Polanyi, 1997), and it is embodied in that it is not purely intellectual but also felt, sensed, and enacted (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Lived knowledge is situated cognition, thus knowledge is constructed through participation in specific social and cultural contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991):

> Educators, advertently or inadvertently, draw on the experiences of others in the form of feedback, physical or verbal cues, and examining or direct questioning, in order to develop their practice (Farrell, 2020, p.1).

The exploration of lived experience in the form of phenomenological studies to explore experiences is a logical step. Disability-related lived experience offers a powerful counterpoint to conventional teaching norms, disrupting traditional epistemologies and pedagogical approaches. Rooted in the principles of disability studies and neurodiversity scholarship, this lived experience foregrounds embodied knowledge, challenges ableist educational structures, and redefines what constitutes valuable learning. However, efforts to centre disability perspectives in education often encounter tensions between inclusion, accessibility, and institutional resistance.

Toombs (1995) argues that disability can be reduced to a biomedical account of the relevant physical or mental impairment, chronic illness or neurodivergence, in keeping with the medical model of disability enshrined in UK equality legislation. However, she suggests that this does not fully account for the human experience of disability. On the other hand, phenomenological accounts of disability drawing on lived experience can expose the emotional dimension of disability (Toombs, 1995, p. 10). Disability, Toombs suggests, can disrupt one's experience of space, relations with others, corporeal identity which all affects one's place in the world (Toombs, 1995, p. 20). Hughes and Paterson (1997) also argue for a phenomenological theory of disability;

> The impaired body is a 'lived body'. Disabled people experience impairment as well as disability, not in separate Cartesian compartments, but as part of a complex interpenetration of oppression and affliction (Hughes & Paterson, 1997, p. 334).

However, it is not always easy for stories of disabilities to be told and disability as a label is not always at the centre of those narratives. Disability has a myriad of meanings and theories which sit beneath it. Both the 'medical model' and the 'social model' (Oliver, 1990; Oliver & Barnes, 2012) of disability have been theorised, questioned, debated, criticised and both have been re-written and expanded to an extent. The social model is accepted as the most effective way to support staff and students in Higher Education (Barnes, 2007; Office for Students, 2019). But structural issues or adaptations are not always the sole focus for disability inclusion. Shakespeare and Watson (2001) suggest that impairment must be included in the biographies of disabled people and accepted as part of their daily experience (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001, p.11). It should also be recognised that being disabled is just part of a person's lived reality and other personal characteristics intersect within an individual's identity;

> Disability is the quintessential post-modern dichotomy, because it is so complex, so variable, so contingent, so situated. It sits at the intersection of biology and society and of agency and structure. Disability cannot be reduced to a singular identity: it is a multiplicity, a plurality (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001, p. 19).

Critical disability studies have embraced an intersectional approach to disability advocating that people's lives are made up of many aspects and therefore asks us to consider the potential multiple prejudice experienced by marginalised communities where disability is just one aspect to consider alongside gender, class, sexuality, race, religion and so on (Crenshaw, 1989; Goodley, 2014; Goodley et. al., 2019).

Mainstream education typically privileges abstract, standardised knowledge, often devaluing embodied, experiential, and situated ways of knowing (Haraway, 1988). Disability disrupts these norms by highlighting the ways in which learning is fundamentally shaped by bodily experience. Disability studies scholars argue that knowledge is not solely produced through detached intellectual inquiry but also through lived experience, what Garland-Thomson (2005) describes as a "staring back" at dominant assumptions about ability and normalcy.

Neurodivergent and disabled individuals often develop unique problem-solving strategies, heightened sensory awareness, and alternative ways of engaging with information (Yergeau, 2018). For example, autistic students may process and communicate knowledge through nonlinear, associative, or hyper-focused thinking, which challenges the rigid, sequential logic often imposed in traditional classrooms (Walker, 2021). Similarly, disabled educators incorporate interdependent and multimodal learning strategies, such as incorporating movement, pauses, or visual mapping, which counter the expectation of a one-size-fits-all pedagogy (Dolmage, 2017).

By centering disability experience, education shifts from a model of passive knowledge consumption to an active, relational process where diverse forms of engagement, such as sensory, emotional, and affective dimensions, are recognised as legitimate ways of knowing (Titchkosky, 2011). This shift aligns with crip epistemology, which asserts that disability generates unique, non-normative insights into how knowledge is structured and disseminated (Kafer, 2013). Crip epistemology (McRuer, 2006; Thorneycroft, 2024) argues that knowledge is shaped by embodied experience, including experiences of disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence. Rather than treating disabled perspectives as marginal or secondary, it recognises them as important sources of insight about the world, social systems, and human relationships. People who navigate inaccessible environments, medical institutions, fluctuating energy levels, sensory differences, or social stigma often develop forms of understanding that able-bodied people may never encounter directly. These experiences can reveal hidden assumptions about normalcy, productivity, independence, and health

that are built into society. In this way, crip epistemology challenges the idea that able-bodied ways of knowing are neutral or universal and instead argues that disabled ways of knowing produce valuable and distinctive forms of knowledge.

Disability experience disrupts entrenched educational norms by questioning what constitutes an "effective" or "rigorous" learning environment. Conventional pedagogies often emphasise speed, efficiency, and productivity, values that implicitly privilege normative bodies and minds (Samuels, 2017). Disabled scholars and students, however, argue for the value of slowness, unpredictability, and adaptation in learning processes (Price, 2011). Crip pedagogy (Bierdz, 2024) is a disability-informed approach to teaching that emerges from disability studies and crip theory (McRuer, 2006), and is grounded in the lived experiences of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people. Rather than treating disability as a deficit or a problem to accommodate after the fact, it understands disabled ways of moving through the world as sources of knowledge that can reshape how teaching and learning are organised. In this sense, pedagogy is directly informed by lived experience: the realities of pain, fatigue, sensory difference, medicalisation, stigma, access barriers, and interdependence become the basis for rethinking educational practice itself. Through this lens, crip pedagogy (Chinn, 2014; Bierdz 2024) challenges ableist assumptions about the "ideal" student, such as expectations of constant productivity, fixed attention, physical endurance, or standardised participation. It asks educators to reconsider whose bodies and minds educational systems are designed around and whose experiences are excluded. Drawing on crip epistemology, it positions disabled and non-normative bodyminds (Schalk, 2018) as holders of valuable expertise, allowing lived experience to shape curriculum design, classroom interaction, and definitions of knowledge. This approach also rethinks how time operates within education. The concept of "crip time" (e.g. McRuer, 2018; Evans et al., 2024) emerges from the lived realities of fluctuating energy, chronic illness, pain, and access needs, challenging rigid academic schedules and productivity-driven expectations. Crip pedagogy therefore values flexibility, rest, and alternative pacing as legitimate educational practices rather than signs of failure or lack of commitment. At the same time, crip pedagogy rejects the ideal of total independence that often underpins traditional education. Because many disabled people experience care, assistance, and accessibility as collective and relational, this pedagogy emphasises interdependency, mutual support, and shared responsibility within the classroom. The classroom becomes not only a place of instruction, but also a space where dominant assumptions about normalcy, ability, and success can be questioned and reimagined through the knowledge generated by lived disabled experience. For example, the expectation of sustained attention in a lecture-based classroom assumes neurotypical cognitive processing. However, neurodivergent learners may engage in non-traditional means of interaction that are often misunderstood as disruptive rather than as meaningful cognitive strategies (Kapp, 2020). Similarly, the rigid emphasis on linear argumentation in academic writing marginalises disabled students who communicate knowledge through more associative or multimodal formats (Yergeau, 2018). Furthermore, conventional assessment practices, such as timed exams or participation-based grading, often reflect ableist assumptions about memory, speech, and physical endurance. Disability-informed pedagogy challenges these norms by advocating for flexible, process-oriented assessments that account for diverse cognitive styles and bodily rhythms (Dolmage, 2017). What then does it mean to bring the disabled lived experience into the higher education classroom? Let us turn to the first-person accounts of two academics next.

"It's my life we're talking about": Academics' perspectives

Steven

Different disabilities have different meanings in the higher education classroom. When I enter my classroom, it is immediately evident that I am deaf. Students see my interpreters and me communicating in American Sign Language. Being deaf serves as credibility since I train Teachers of the Deaf, and I can talk about these experiences proudly. My learning disabilities, including limited working memory, organization skills, and difficulty interpreting social cues, are another matter. Colleagues and students dismiss these disabilities because they cannot imagine how someone with them could earn a doctorate, become a professor, and earn tenure. As a consequence, my awkwardness, forgetfulness, and sometimes dissonant responses in conversations become supposed character flaws rather than interpreted through a disability framework. I offer awkward humour about never learning my student's names. Everything takes me a long time, and I make many errors that appear careless but are certainly not that. It is a wonder that I earned tenure, but not for the reasons others might believe.

Mental illness, or what I call brainweather, is an even stickier topic. Between the ages of six and twenty-six, I experienced acute brainweather, narrowly avoiding long-term institutionalization. The severity waned over the last twenty-two years. When I was a newly minted Ph.D., I provided guest lectures about my experiences in my colleagues' special education classes. My comments visibly wilted students and faculty members alike, and they were unsure how to respond. I participated in The Disability Monologues, events akin to The Vagina Monologues, discussing brainweather. With good intentions, colleagues suggested I "calm down a bit and talk about these things in a more removed way." I understood the stigmatization of brainweather and felt falsely insulated from the repercussions of disclosure. Over the years, I have learned that it's fine to claim brainweather with brief clinical words, but having symptoms or describing experiences crosses a line. For this reason, I don't talk about these experiences much anymore, despite how central they are to my identity.

I feel disconnected from disability work in my daily life despite having a doctorate in disability studies. That's a different academic program in the department that has drawn an unnecessary and distinct line about my instructional role. There is an important border between deaf and disability studies but also a significant overlap. For these pragmatic and stigma-related reasons, I often feel the College implicitly asked me to abandon my Self, and I agreed, which feels like self-treachery. My discussion of these topics doesn't seem focused on teaching about disability for a reason. The classroom often feels like a cloistered space, because colleagues rarely see what I do and even fewer dare transgress ethics about telling other faculty members how to teach their courses. However, this is a false security. When a student takes issue with language that is too graphic, or too taboo of a topic, and reports it to the department chair, it becomes an institutional problem open to criticism, which has happened to me three times.

When I instruct topics of disability or sexuality, I fear my students, the administration, and my colleagues who largely determine promotion and retention. I work to make my instruction of these topics more and more clinical to minimise risk, but it feels deceitful to glaze over their human components, and my embodied truths often come out. I provide more service and conduct more scholarship than my institution expects of me, because I cannot rely on the application of statements of equity. What venues are left to talk about disability in authentic ways? When students reach out to me about their struggles with presentations of or the stigmatization of disability, poverty, or sexuality, I feel confident that we can have frank

conversations and that I can draw from my experiences. When I lecture at other institutions, I have more latitude, because the worst they can do is not invite me back. In my scholarship, I have more freedom, because as far as I know, and as strange as it is, I don't believe any of my colleagues have read my work.

In the United States, tenure is the process of evidencing your value to the institution based on criteria they provide. Separate from tenure is academic rank: Assistant, Associate, Professor, and various articulations of those. The institution awarded me tenure and Associate Professor in 2021, and I have applied for promotion to Professor with a review in Fall 2025. I currently have a foundations disability studies book under contract. While the book is a scholarly analysis of the able-bodied interpretation of the decisions disabled people make, my disability memoir is the setting. A book from a major publisher is an integral part of a senior scholar's record. I have known for fifteen years that I would write this book and have timed it intentionally. I don't have evidence that the reception of my book might negatively affect my chances of promotion, but it feasibly could, based on my past experiences and understanding of social disablement. I am hopeful that promotion review committees will consider a book under contract as a sufficient indicator of my scholarly development.

Meanwhile, I have developed some autoimmune disorder in the last year that hasn't yet been fully diagnosed. I struggle to walk, drive, eat, breathe, and think. I attempt to discuss this as an educational tool and justification for my recent behaviours. However, I worry my students and colleagues don't effectively engage the topic and view me as lazy and contrary. These ruminations may be true or a result of how I have internalised ableism, and that's how these things work for disabled people.

Elisabeth

Up until recently I rarely shared my lived experience of disability in the classroom despite living with a chronic disabling auto-immune condition since 2007/8/9; always hard to pinpoint when it actually started. My disability consciousness was a gradual awakening over several years that came to the fore during my professional doctorate in which I explored the lived experience of disability in law school using phenomenology. I wrote about my own 'coming out' as part of that experience (Griffiths, 2020) and I gradually reconstructed my own identity as part of that process. This led me to think about how I present as a disabled person in work with colleagues and in the classroom with students. I am an Employment/Labour lawyer which means that discrimination and equality in the workplace has been a central part of my professional life since I qualified back in 1996 and disability has been a central tenet of my practice since disability discrimination legislation was first enacted in the UK in 1995 (Disability Discrimination Act, 1995 and now in the Equality Act 2010). For me disability was a workplace issue, located within the law, and I was comfortable disclosing to my employer as I knew my legal rights, but this sharing did not extend to the classroom. I had never merged my professional teaching life with my disability and because my disability is a largely non-visible disability, I can pass if I choose to (Brune & Wilson, 2013) and this act of passing was my regular practice. Gradually this position felt less authentic and quite frankly exhausting. As time went on and I realised sharing my disability might support disabled students in my classroom I gradually started bringing my own lived experience of disability into the classroom.

But there is a process of selective disclosure that goes on. I weigh up how much I think it is going to support or hinder and how much emotional labour might be involved from me. Sometimes I feel stronger and happy to share, sometimes I feel more vulnerable and decide not to. My condition waxes and wanes and

flares from time to time. I exist in the shaded area between health and sickness (Frank, 2013). My condition is managed by powerful drugs with challenging side effects. Therefore, I regularly skirt the borders of the 'kingdom of the sick' (Sontag, 1978) and the land of the well negotiating the fear, uncertainty and anxiety associated with being ill (Carel, 2016). As suggested by Hughes (2012, p.68) "disability is a life lived before a looking glass that is cracked and distorted by the vandalism of normality". And this fear and exhaustion can be a challenge when sharing. However, my students tell me they appreciate my candid disclosure, as do staff and so the disclosed narrative becomes worthwhile. I have now co-created with disabled staff and students, alongside inclusive education advisers, a disability pedagogic toolkit called 'A Place for Us' for higher education staff at my own institution to support them in navigating the challenge that is disability in higher education (Griffiths et al., 2025). As part of this process, one student told me, "If a lecturer mentions disability in their first introductory lecture, I know I am going to be ok and that they will be open to a discussion about my own access needs". Imagine, that one simple gesture could have a profound impact in the classroom.

The students' perspective (Mar, Sofia, Hugo, Aiyi, Malvika)

Having heard the perspectives of two academics, we now turn to the student viewpoint. Consistent with our commitment to ensuring that no individual feels compelled to disclose personal experiences, we have elected to present a collective account reflecting the contributions and perspectives of the student as a group.

While there are plenty of (inter)personal and epistemological benefits of bringing lived experience to the learning space, being a student with lived experience can equally be uncomfortable and emotionally demanding. Discussing ableism as a student who most likely experiences it can be stressful and demanding, disclosing personal experiences with ableism even more so. Concurrently, navigating what to disclose and when can be a complicated task. One's experience of disability can be inherently vulnerable, and the nature of one's impairment can be incredibly personal. Participation in class discussions requires students with lived experience to (a) ask themselves what is appropriate and inappropriate to share in an academic space, and (b) where their boundaries surrounding disclosure of their disability lie, which can be taxing. Additionally, internalised ableism can bring up questions about being "disabled enough" to share an experience. While taking on the discomfort of disclosure and navigating lived experience can undeniably be a form of emotional labour, this discomfort, if treated with sensitivity and respect, arguably has the potential to be productive and transformative.

The impact of educators using their lived experience in the classroom

Seeing someone with a shared lived experience successfully navigate an environment that can sometimes be unwelcoming and/or lonely can be incredibly helpful. It gives visibility and acknowledgment to the disability and neurodivergence community that performs in a high academic sphere. It gives hope, even for those who believed there wasn't a place for them in academia. Even considering successfully implemented integration policies and modifications that aim to make the experience of students easier, there is no denying they might not be as effective in practice as they seem in theory. We have personally witnessed

lack of communication between university staff, reluctance to allow adaptations and many more. Learning from a neurodivergent and/or disabled educator provides a deeper comprehension and a point of understanding for those students in a similar situation.

They can act as real-life role models who can provide guidance and encouragement.

Non-disabled and neurotypical students will equally benefit from having disabled educators: Hearing the teachers' personal stories might be a door-opening experience that helps them deconstruct negative misconceptions they had previously or even give them perspective on hidden ableism in their thinking. Not only that but learning from someone who can speak from lived experience and with an insider perspective helps fight ableist stereotypes and encourages work under a critical gaze. Additionally, it gives otherwise depersonalised theory a much more intimate approach.

In our personal experience, disabled educators have been much more considerate when it comes to accepting and dealing with aspects of the student's identity that may escape the model image of an academic. They have provided accepting spaces that allow for comfortable disclosure and have presented us with modifications that guarantee an accessible working environment that caters to individuals' needs as well as possible. We have felt valued wholly as humans and understood beyond our sole academic performance. To be in a class that defies the typical forms of assessment and physical attendance (via a hybrid lecture method or the submission of artefacts instead of a rigid essay) feels relieving for many of us, opening new doors for a much more accepting and accessible academic space for all.

The discomfort of lived experience

During our studies and teaching opportunities, we have witnessed that opening up about one's disabled identity is never easy. Pronouncing the words "disabilities", "disorders" or "illnesses" immediately places one in a vulnerable position. In academia, as we are familiar, intellectual competence is broadly celebrated, yet vulnerability is viewed as a weakness. The presence of students and scholars with disabilities provokes a visceral reaction: discomfort. Not necessarily out of rejection or malice, but because vulnerability, when made visible in a space that prefers efficiency and almost perfection, forces us to confront our own limitations, prejudices, and ways of thinking.

Disability in educational spaces is not just a medical condition or an identity, it is a presence that disrupts the dominant narrative of academics of independence, productivity, and self-sufficiency. A student who needs captions during the lecture, a teacher who uses a screen reader, a researcher struggling with chronic fatigue, all of these realities destabilise the implicit expectation of homogeneous performance. This disruption becomes uncomfortable, because it reveals that education is not designed for all bodies and minds. It exposes the rigidity of a system that rewards speed over depth, consistency over resilience, and norm over difference.

Many prefer to look the other way, use superficial inclusion language, or simply focus on "accommodation" without questioning the structural framework that makes those accommodations necessary. Nonetheless, dealing with that discomfort is also an opportunity for learning. That feeling of discomposure can be the first step toward profound transformation: a more empathetic pedagogy, an academic ethic that values interdependence, and an institutional redesign that not only includes but celebrates functional diversity.

Some educators with disabilities, like Nicole, Elisabeth, Steven and Sorcha, have started to embrace their own vulnerability as a pedagogical tool. They speak openly about their experiences, incorporate crip perspectives in the classroom, and model ways of knowing that are not based on traditional authority, but on honesty, adaptation, and collective care. This can generate palpable discomfort among students and colleagues. Still, it can also open unexpected paths toward a more humane academic community, as it did in Nicole's module "Disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence in contemporary society".

Accepting vulnerability as an intrinsic part of the educational experience is no easy task. It requires unlearning deeply internalised norms and building new ways of relating with one another, evaluating, and knowing. This path, though uncomfortable, can also be profoundly transformative.

Being and belonging in the higher education classroom

In recent years, we have seen a growing crisis in student engagement within the higher education classroom. Even in a class on disabilities, chronic illness, and neurodivergence where a hybrid mode is offered to increase accessibility and engagement, people are sparsely showing up to seminar discussions to engage with the readings at a deeper level. Unfortunately, this is not new. In several modules since the start of our studies in 2021, people were simply not turning up to seminars or lectures, let alone meaningfully engaging with learning materials unless they are particularly relevant or necessary for an assessment.

This raises important questions about what motivates student engagement, and what it means to feel a sense of belonging in classrooms. One factor that seems to shape this is the extent to which students see their identities, experiences, or intellectual interests, reflected in the curriculum. When course materials resonate with personal lived experience, there is often a stronger motivation for engagement. For instance, in a seminar where discussions drew on accessible public transport systems, we noticed more active participation from students sharing their experiences and perspectives of having navigated London public transport. Similarly, a lecturer who is open about their experience with neurodivergence or disability can create a more inclusive learning environment by allowing students with similar experiences to feel seen and represented. This visibility creates a sense of community, making it easier for students to engage not just with the content but also with their peers and tutors.

A bigger issue lies behind the decline of meaningful and positive teacher-student relationships at universities as higher education becomes increasingly commodified and platformed. As students are pushed into larger, crowded classrooms with a different guest lecturer each week, they no longer have the chance to build a deeper connection with the very people they are trying to learn from. Learning becomes an alienating process, and attending class feels like completing a transaction. When students are made to feel like passive, isolated recipients, it is no wonder that many have stopped engaging.

An initial step towards building a sense of belonging is fostering an interrelationship between experience, knowledge and understanding in the curriculum. For example, when the vulnerabilities and lived experiences of a lecturer - be it navigating academia with a disability or conducting research in underrepresented communities - are shared or incorporated in their teaching, it humanises the learning process and encourages students to also see knowledge as something dynamic and personally relevant.

Ultimately, feeling represented in the curriculum goes beyond inclusion, as it is also about creating an educational space where students see their realities acknowledged, their insights valued, and their

engagement with knowledge as something meaningful beyond the pursuit of a certificate. When students feel this sense of belonging, the classroom transforms from a site of passive learning to a community of active participation, curiosity, and intellectual growth.

Challenges of focussing on the lived experience in higher education

Bringing lived experience of disability into the classroom can be emotionally draining. What to share and what to withhold and where individuals set their boundaries, depends on how they view their own disabled identity. Disability is a complex, slippery phenomenon and whether to disclose requires careful consideration and at times, a 'journey of acceptance' (Brown & Leigh, 2018). As Kasnitz (2020, p.16) suggests, "disability is one of those concepts that grows as you think about it, forcing you to consider related concepts: identity, impairment, illness, health, intersectionality, and more". These related concepts can contribute to the creation of a disabled identity which is infused with emotion, stigma and doubting and the label 'disabled', or 'disability' can take time to understand (see Elisabeth's account). Borrowing from Butler's work on performativity (Butler, 1990), as people we internalise visible images and signifiers of disability in everyday encounters, a wheelchair, a walking aid, a guide dog and in these repetitive acts we develop an idea of how people exist in the world. This brings with it a normalising framework for a disabled identity and those who do not fit or choose not to through acts of passing when they can, inevitably lead to problems with disclosure and boundary setting (see Steven's and Elizabeth's accounts). As Shildrik (2009) suggests a disabled "body image – and especially internalised body image – is never simply a material reality but a complex and fluid mix of corporeal, psychic, and social components" requiring a nuanced understanding (p. 130). Disability and ableism are internalised and can remain hidden until revealed and accepted as part of a disability consciousness (see Elizabeth's and the students' accounts). Until this happens any act of disclosure or discussion of lived experience can be re-traumatising for individuals (see Steven's and the students' accounts).

Relationships with others can frame how individuals view their own disabled identity which in turn can frame how complex the act of disclosure can be. Good, positive supportive friends and employers can embolden a disabled person to feel confident in their skin and disclosure seems less problematic somehow. But previous poor reactions and relationships can end any discussion about disability or increase vulnerability adding to shame and stigma (see Steven's and the students' accounts).

In addition to the emotional and intellectual labour of sharing personal experience, there are institutional and pedagogical barriers to bear in mind. Despite growing advocacy for disability inclusion in education, tensions persist between accessibility efforts and institutional resistance. Many universities promote a rhetoric of inclusion while maintaining rigid structures that fail to accommodate disabled ways of knowing (Titchkosky, 2011). Institutional accessibility measures often focus on compliance-based solutions, such as providing accommodations on a case-by-case basis, rather than rethinking pedagogical frameworks to be universally accessible (Dolmage, 2017).

One significant tension arises from the distinction between inclusion and accessibility. Inclusion, as often framed by institutions, implies the integration of disabled individuals into existing structures without fundamentally altering them. In contrast, accessibility requires reconfiguring those structures to be usable by all from the outset (Hamraie, 2017). The latter approach, informed by universal design, demands a

radical rethinking of educational norms, something many institutions resist due to entrenched ableist traditions and economic constraints (see the students' account).

Institutional resistance is also evident in the reluctance to recognise disability as a legitimate form of expertise. While universities increasingly embrace diversity initiatives, disabled scholars often face barriers to employment, tenure, and leadership positions due to perceptions of disability as a deficit rather than as an epistemological advantage (Kafer, 2013). Similarly, students with disabilities are frequently required to prove their need for accommodations, reinforcing an exclusionary logic where access is conditional rather than a fundamental right (Samuels, 2017; see Steven's and the students' accounts).

Moreover, the tension between autonomy and interdependence remains central to disability-inclusive education. Traditional pedagogies valorise independence, often measuring student success by their ability to function without support. However, disability disrupts this framework by emphasizing interdependence, where learning is a collaborative, relational practice rather than a solitary pursuit (Kuppers, 2014). The refusal to integrate interdependent learning models into mainstream education reflects a broader institutional unwillingness to recognise the legitimacy of disability knowledge (see the students' account).

Disability-related lived experience offers profound insights into the limitations of conventional teaching norms, highlighting the need for more flexible, embodied, and relational forms of knowledge production. However, the movement toward more inclusive and accessible education is often met with institutional resistance, as universities struggle to reconcile their commitment to diversity with deeply ingrained ableist structures (see Steven's and the students' accounts).

Crip pedagogy (Chinn, 2014; Bierdz 2024), which actively centres disabled ways of knowing, offers a path forward by challenging normative assumptions about learning, embracing slowness and interdependence, and resisting rigid institutional frameworks (McRuer, 2006). True accessibility requires not just minor accommodations but a fundamental transformation of pedagogical practices, one that recognises disability not as a barrier to overcome but as a valuable source of knowledge and innovation (see Elizabeth's and the students' accounts).

Strategies for focussing on lived experience

How academics may bring lived experience into the higher education classroom

As has been shown academics increasingly recognise the value of lived experience in enriching pedagogy. Bringing lived experience into teaching challenges traditional notions of expertise, fosters critical conversations, and disrupts ableist assumptions that often pervade academic spaces. However, this integration must be done thoughtfully, balancing personal disclosure with professional boundaries, situating experience within academic discourse, and pushing for structural changes that support inclusive pedagogy (see Elizabeth's, Steven's and the students' accounts).

No one disabled identity is inherently harder or easier to navigate than another. Rather, each individual's experience offers unique insights into systemic barriers, accessibility, and alternative ways of knowing. Incorporating lived experience into teaching can initiate discussions that might otherwise be too difficult or uncomfortable (see Steven's and the students' accounts).

A key strategy for academics integrating lived experience is establishing clear boundaries around disclosure. Sharing personal narratives can humanise academic discussions and deepen engagement, but disclosure should never be an obligation. Expectations that disabled academics must continually "perform" disability or educate others can be exploitative and exhausting (Price, 2011). Academics should determine in advance what aspects of their lived experience they are comfortable sharing while considering the emotional labour, the potential for vulnerability, and the power dynamics between faculty and students (Kafer, 2013; see Elizabeth's and Steven's accounts). One effective approach is to connect lived experience to broader systemic issues rather than focusing on personal detail. For example, academics may frame discussions through disability justice movements or accessibility barriers in higher education rather than personal medical histories. Boundaries are also important when students seek emotional support or advocacy beyond the teaching role. While mentorship can be valuable, academics need to maintain limits and direct students toward appropriate institutional resources (Dolmage, 2017).

Lived experience is most effective pedagogically when situated within established academic discourse, ensuring personal insights are recognised as legitimate contributions to knowledge production rather than dismissed as anecdotal (Titchkosky, 2011). Academics can align personal narratives with theoretical frameworks, research, and historical contexts. For instance, lived experience of neurodivergence may be framed through the neurodiversity paradigm (Walker, 2021), while chronic illness may illustrate the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990). One useful strategy is "critical autoethnography," which combines personal narrative with sociocultural analysis (Adams et al., 2015). This approach situates individual experiences within wider systems of oppression, policy failures, and exclusion, transforming lived experience into a tool for critical inquiry (see Elizabeth's and Steven's accounts).

Institutional support is also necessary if lived experience-informed pedagogy is to be sustainable. Universities frequently prioritise detached scholarship over embodied knowledge (Dolmage, 2017), so academics must advocate for policies that recognise lived experience as a legitimate epistemological resource. This includes pushing for structural accommodations beyond individual adjustments, such as universal design principles, flexible assessment methods, and anti-ableist hiring practices (Hamraie, 2017). Academics should also advocate for recognition of the often invisible labour of mentoring, accessibility work, and advocacy performed by disabled scholars (Samuels, 2017; see Steven's and the students' accounts).

Bringing lived experience into the classroom does more than personalise learning. It disrupts silences and enables conversations about exclusion, ableism, and institutional neglect. When academics share their experiences, they validate student perspectives while challenging assumptions of neutrality and objectivity in education (Kafer, 2013). For instance, an academic who shares their experience navigating inaccessible academic conferences might open up discussions on broader issues of professional gatekeeping in academia. Similarly, an academic with lived experience of mental illness might frame a conversation on academic pressure, stigma, and student well-being, encouraging students to critically examine the structures that perpetuate ableism in education. By doing so, lived experience acts as a catalyst for collective reflection and systemic critique (see Steven's and the students' accounts).

How students could engage with lived experience in the higher education classroom

The inclusion of academics' lived experiences in teaching offers students an opportunity to engage with knowledge in a more dynamic, embodied, and socially relevant way. However, engaging with personal

narratives in an academic setting can be complex, requiring students to navigate emotional responses, critically analyse personal testimony within scholarly discourse, and create peer support networks that foster collective learning. Students therefore play an important role in ensuring that lived experience is met with respect, critical reflection, and meaningful dialogue rather than passive consumption or discomfort-driven disengagement (see the students' account).

Lived experience in the classroom can evoke a range of emotions, particularly when it addresses themes of marginalization, systemic oppression, or personal struggle. Students may experience discomfort, guilt, defensiveness, or even a sense of powerlessness in response to an educator's personal disclosures. Rather than avoiding or suppressing these feelings, students can learn to sit with and process them productively. Self-reflection through journaling can help students explore their responses privately before engaging in discussion. Students can ask themselves:

- What emotions am I feeling, and why?
- How do my own experiences shape the way I'm interpreting this narrative?
- What assumptions or biases might I be bringing into this conversation?

Another strategy is practicing active listening (Seidman, 2006). Students should aim to listen without immediately formulating a response or critique, allowing space for the lived experience to be shared without interruption or dismissal. Nonverbal engagement, such as eye contact and attentive body language, can also demonstrate respect. A "pause before response" approach encourages reflection before speaking and is especially useful in disability-related discussions, where immediate reactions may reproduce unconscious ableist assumptions that frame disability as tragedy rather than knowledge or resistance (Kafer, 2013; see the students' account).

While lived experience offers valuable insight, students should engage with it critically rather than treating it as unquestionable truth. Academic discourse requires personal narratives to be situated within wider social, political, and historical contexts. For example, an academic's experience of ableism in higher education can be analysed through the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) or crip theory (McRuer, 2006), connecting individual experience to systemic structures. Comparative analysis of multiple narratives can also help students identify patterns of exclusion, privilege, and resistance while recognising the diversity of disabled experiences. Students should also ask thoughtful, open-ended questions that encourage dialogue without placing demands for emotional disclosure on academics. Questions that connect lived experience to disability justice movements or systemic change shift the discussion from personal confession toward collective analysis and intellectual inquiry (see the students' account).

Because engaging with lived experience can be emotionally and intellectually demanding, peer support networks can help foster collective learning and resilience. Informal discussion groups outside class can provide opportunities for students to reflect on classroom discussions, share perspectives, and deepen understanding collaboratively. Students can also co-create community guidelines for respectful engagement with personal narratives. Students can work together to establish principles such as:

- assume complexity: lived experiences are multifaceted and cannot be reduced to simple narratives.
- avoid tokenization: recognise that one person's story does not represent an entire community.
- acknowledge privilege: consider how one's own positionality shapes interpretations of lived experience.

Solidarity-driven engagement is equally important. Students can amplify the work of disabled scholars and advocate for accessibility and inclusion within their institutions, including universal design approaches and expanded disability and mental health support. Such actions recognise that lived experience should not simply be included symbolically but treated as a legitimate source of knowledge (see the students' account).

Bringing lived experience into higher education creates opportunities to challenge academic norms, foster critical discussion, and advocate for structural change. However, it also requires careful navigation of emotion, critical engagement with narratives, and institutional support to prevent tokenisation. Recognising the epistemic value of disability lived experience allows universities to move beyond accommodation toward educational models that value diverse ways of knowing. Students therefore have a responsibility to engage thoughtfully with academics' lived experience, balancing empathy with intellectual rigour and contributing to classroom cultures grounded in respect, inquiry, and systemic change (see Elizabeth's, Steven's and the students' accounts).

Concluding thoughts

Ultimately, the responsibility for fostering an inclusive and experiential academic environment does not rest solely on disabled academics. It requires a collective effort from institutions, educators, and students alike. Institutions must recognise lived experience as a legitimate form of knowledge and provide structural support for those who share it. Educators should be empowered to integrate their experiences into teaching without fear of professional repercussions. Students must engage with these narratives in ways that are reflective, respectful, and transformative.

This is a call to action: universities must move beyond mere performative inclusion and towards real, institutional change. Educators and students must work together to challenge ableism in academia, not just by making space for lived experience, but by centering it as a critical foundation of knowledge. Only through this collective commitment can we build an academic environment where experiential wisdom is not just tolerated but celebrated.

Biographies

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