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Diversity, not Division

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Articles


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Diversity, not Division

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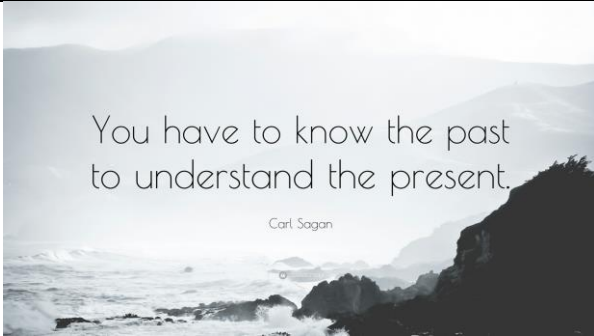
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Title slide

What I've been asked to talk about here today is my experience of working in libraries as a disabled person. But I find it hard to talk about that in isolation, because I didn't just experience disability, I experienced disability as a white woman. This is the first talk of this length that I've given so I've spent quite a lot of time wondering what I'll cover. 45 minutes seems like such an eternity compared to my usual 10 minute talks!

What I thought I might try to cover is my own experiences, some observations about the library field, the wider societal barriers that are impacting the potential staff we could employ and are employing, and thus also impacting our field. I'll also be talking a bit about TU Dublin and what we hope to do and become, and I'll finish with looking towards the future of third level education. Part of what I aim to do here today is to open a dialogue with other colleagues. I get that, sometimes, whilst there are many of us who want to help reduce barriers, people feel like they don't know what to do, and are afraid to act in case they get things wrong. Speaking in terms of disability access, it's better to at least try and get it wrong than not to try at all. But of course try listening to disabled activists first! My hope is that having an open dialogue between colleagues may reduce fear and increase action.

As some of you may have guessed, the title of this talk is inspired by a recent march in Dublin is inspired by Le Cheile, Access for All, The National Women's council, and more. The theme of the march was based on how minorities have historically been divided, and how many are facing similar issues, but are facing them independently.

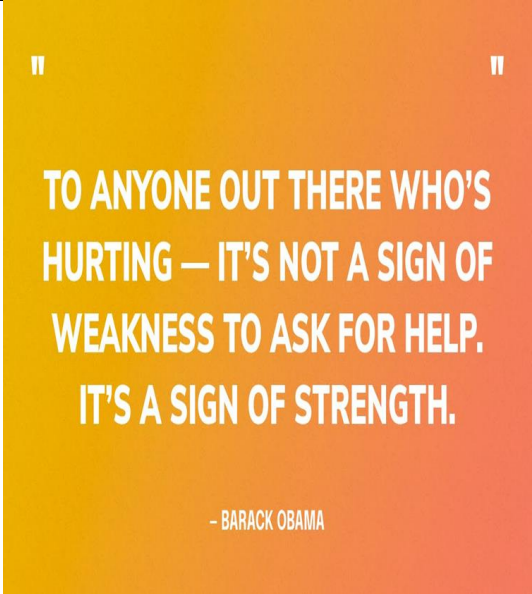


I've started with a quote from Carl Sagan " You have to know the past to understand the present". The reason I have chosen this quote is because we need to know what barriers our students have faced in order to get to third level, if we are to design services to suit their needs. And for ourselves, we need to know the history of the systems we work with and within. If we don't know the mistakes of the past, we only risk repeating them. But it's also understanding what our future students are currently facing, and planning our future service design to be able to adapt and meet their needs.

I do love TU Dublin and libraries in general, but I am also quick to admit that we are not perfect. Far from it. There are still accessibility barriers here, in the wider college and also, likely, in the library. We are, like most others here, working within the confines and restraints of existing buildings and systems. For every change we want to make, there is red tape somewhere along the line. But with every year and every change that passes, that tape gets lessened. It takes time and persistence to bring about cultural change, and it needs mass support to work. It can't be the work of just one or two people. There is also a magic to seeing the learning and the process happening. I think we are beginning to realize that is the job of a 21st century university to be accessible. That is what our baseline needs to be. And yet we still have staff who are unsure of the basics of accessibility. And, to make things clear, when I say accessibility, I don't just mean accessibility for disabled students, I mean to say that those who are single parents, who don't have English as a first language, who are Black, Asian, Travellers, or any other minority... They need to be able to get to us, to get whatever education they need in life. In essence, I'm talking of both intersectionality and equity. I'm talking Of taking an equitable approach to library work and education.

Part of taking an equitable approach, is arguably in changing the attitudes of others, as well as in

increasing the knowledge around issues some folks face. So for that reason I will be asking the audience some questions throughout the talk. I'll also be asking for your questions on how you feel the library workforce and work is changing.



So, I've got to start with saying that my experiences are just that. They are my experiences. They are not necessarily the experience of other disabled librarians. Every disabled person can have different experiences in life. Even different disabled library staff may have different experiences, depending on when and where they entered the field. Not every employer is disability friendly. A great many are still not, even including universities.

The truth is that I am here talking to you today largely through pure luck. But, for me, it's very much a happy accident that I did wind up in TU Dublin. I see the changes that staff and students are trying to make here, and I want to be a part of it. I grew up without the majority of my disability diagnoses. Somehow I made it through college and school without the ability to study. I knew, like most students, I needed to study, but I couldn't and still cannot most of the time. Somehow, as someone whose brain goes to sleep when I try to read academic text, I wound up working in a university. There's irony for you. I also swore that I would never work in an academic library, due to sensory struggles in them as a student. But I have now learned to never say never.

In my experience, the education system is one that has needed change for a long time. I essentially grew up having the diagnosis of dyspraxia. For those of you who don't know what dyspraxia is, it is a movement related neurodivergence. There was support given to me in school, but that support largely consisted of a laptop, and some extra time in exams. For me,

there was no social support, there was no other physical support, or for attention or sensory needs, and yet I had the need for all of those. I also went through college with these same needs unmet. Why? Because I hadn't been able to attain a relevant diagnosis to get those supports. As it turns out, once I graduated and could somewhat afford to pay for them, I got those diagnoses. Except ADHD. Still can't afford that one. But that experience has led me to believe that supports, and especially disability related supports, should not rely on students having access to diagnostic tests. It seems shocking to say, but as things are, worldwide, a diagnosis is a privilege, and one that a lot of people cannot access. A lot of people think that the HSE does a lot of work around and for disability and disabled people. And to an extent, it does. But it doesn't always provide access to diagnosis, even for more common conditions for adults. An autism diagnosis, for example, can cost upwards of 800 euro from a private professional, ADHD can be closer to 1000. For Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, which is becoming more widely recognized, there is only one doctor in the country currently taking on patients, and an initial visit with him costs about 400. Many adults, and children, with conditions like these struggle to get any access to services and treatments in the public system at the moment. There are also chronic illnesses that exist that we don't test for in Ireland at all. I think, in the long run, we need more adaptive services in order to move away from relying on diagnoses to provide support. Support services, in particular, would require more funding because their range of potential users and services could and should vastly increase.

To take this quote from Barack Obama, "To anyone out there who's hurting- it is not a sign of weakness to ask for help. It's a sign of strength." All I want is for people to actually be able to get that help, to not be held back by policies or lack of policies.



So how does all of this impact our professional lives? And what role should education have in our professional lives? Looking at librarianship, in particular, the MLIS degree has almost come to define the profession, but it should be the opposite. The profession should define the degree. In a profession that is crying out for more diversity, we are still essentially requiring people to have a masters degree before taking on a position as a library assistant. This is despite the fact that the educational requirement to take on this role is supposed to be the Leaving Cert. I am not against this degree, but I am against the fact that it and many others currently stand as barriers to inclusion, and it is a barrier that is growing, especially with the cost of living and housing crises. when we are a country in the middle of a housing crisis. It must be noted that housing, and the cost of housing, can impact on people's ability to work in universities too. Again focusing on library side of academia, it's not a highly paid profession. According to Glassdoor, the average library assistant salary in Ireland is 28,000. The average rent in Dublin is now 2,260 a month, according to the Residential Tenancies Board. That works out at 27,120 a year. The properties they looked at were for single tenancy, two bedroom dwellings, which definitely skews the findings a bit. Many single renters, just for example, cannot afford a two bedroom dwelling. The rising rate of rent is fast making library work unaffordable. Whether or not we know it, it is impacting each of us. It is increasing stress levels in staff, as well as staff turnover as people are moving to more affordable areas and higher paying jobs. Now, you can imagine that this same issue is also going to be impacting our students. Can a student successfully complete their degree if they're taking on extra jobs just to make ends meet? Can they even begin the degree if can't find a place they can afford to live in? And that's without the student facing any other disadvantage.



In terms of working in libraries, I did find the field initially difficult to break into, and still difficult to progress in. Prior to my current job, I can remember quite a few interviews where, when I mentioned that I am disabled, the interview took a very noticeable nosedive. At the time it was hurtful, but I now realize in a way that it was also useful. It turns out disclosure can be a little like a RADAR, when it comes to job interviews. You see, if employers react even a little negatively to being told a potential employee is from a minority, then that's likely not a safe or healthy place for that employee to work. It's almost certain that it's not a place that they will be supported. I've often been advised not to disclose my disability when applying for jobs, but my advice for others, is that when you are in a financial position that allows you to do so, using disclosure in a tactical manner may save you money and mental health struggles in the long run. Funnily enough, my interview with TU Dublin was the first where I used disclosure in this manner. It worked! Upon disclosing, the interviewers did their best to be supportive and understanding. That alone hints strongly at a positive workplace culture.

Something I've struggled with communicating in the past is how lack of representation of diversity doesn't just hurt our students, it hurts our staff. Just speaking for myself, there was a long time where I didn't know any other disabled library staff, and that's quite an isolating feeling. There is a sense of community in meeting others who may have had similar struggles to you in life. It's part of the reason that I'm working on setting up an equality and diversity subgroup of the Library association of Ireland. Part of my hope for that group is that it could be a bridge for people from minorities to meet others, to hopefully see that they're not the only ones. I do feel like the library world in Ireland is changing and that there is some more diversity coming into our workforce. I think this might be a good place to stop, and ask for some audience opinions and questions on

how you feel the workforce and work is developing. Have you noticed any positives, or do you maybe have any worries?

We need equity in our work practices. We need flexibility and policies that allow for that. We need the staffing levels to ensure that flexibility can happen. We have staff who are disabled, who have kids, who have caring responsibilities and they need their jobs or hours to be flexible in order to be able to do their best work when they are in work. Some of these staff may need the option to work from home, others to work only part time. Certainly, as regards the latter, the library world is still lacking in options for those who need to work part time. Especially at grades above those of Library Assistant. Just speaking personally, I love where I work and those that I work with, but it is frustrating to watch others be able to advance their careers whilst I'm heavily restricted in that regard. Currently, I am one of those who would need to work part time. I could, in theory, apply for higher grade jobs and HOPE that I can be granted the ability to work part time, but there are a lot of risks involved in that. 1) I would have to work full time hours until I found out if an application for part-time hours was approved or not, potentially putting my health at risk, 2) if the application for part time hours is rejected, I am left without a job. This is a glass ceiling that needs to be addressed if we are to achieve equality throughout all levels of library staffing. Whilst I know that there are more taxes and such involved in employing two people to fulfill one type of role, it can be beneficial, both to the staff and to the institution. The staff get more flexibility and work life balance, albeit less money, and the institution gets the experience, viewpoints, and combined talents of two people working the job. Sometimes, when employers make attempts to address workplace issues, they can create policies that are only relevant to the needs of one minority. Take, for example, the fact that working from home used to only be available to disabled staff in some companies. Working

from home, by the way, is something that disabled workers have asked for since the 90s. It's something that has now been proven to benefit many workers. It is a prime example of how you can adapt something from a potentially divisive policy (reasonable accommodations), and use it as a way to increase diversity. Of course staff involved need to be provided with the right tech to prevent any digital divide related issues, and I do also acknowledge that not all staff actually have a place where they can work from home. In terms of accessibility to work, the WFH aspect of Covid increased the ability of disabled people to contribute to the workforce. The reason I say that reasonable accommodations policies can be divisive is that they can rely on people having a diagnosis. This can further inequity between those of us who can and cannot afford diagnosis. It also ignores the fact that staff without a disability can have similar needs in the workplace.

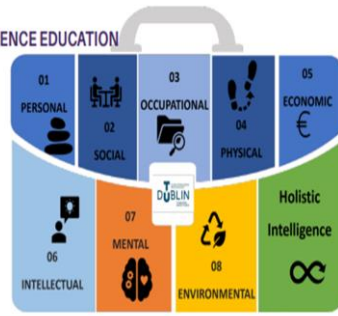


Now, I realize the theme and title of this talk is Diversity, not division, and I have just spent a lot of time talking pretty much specifically about disability. It has been my main experience of oppression, so it is where most of my knowledge lies. But it is through talking about it that I met activists from other minority groups, only to realize that they were facing a lot of the same issues, even if they were facing them for different reasons. They faced the same lack of access to education, the same lack of finances, some faced similar or more severe levels of prejudice in society. So why have policies been created focusing on the needs of some but not others? That is divisive. It is the old, structural method of "Divide and conquer". It is ignoring the fact that many people from minorities, are from multiple minorities at once. If we want our staff to embrace diversity, we have to remove oppressive division, and replace it with equity. To this end, I've included a quote by Audre Lorde "Divide and conquer must become define and empower" We

don't need to know everything to know how to empower each other. That just requires an open mind and willingness to learn, and action to open closed doors.

DIMENSIONS OF HOLISTIC INTELLIGENCE EDUCATION

The dimensions of HI are inclusive of experiences that define a Holistic Intelligence education at TU Dublin. The HI dimensions are considered to be dynamic and changing as socio-economic-political-cultural issues evolve in our complex world, with the overall aim of being proactive in our mastery of HI education and cultivating HI as a graduate outcome.



I can now bring you to one example of something that TU Dublin is working on in relation to this. This is focusing on our students, and it is our institutes new Educational Model. This model is student focused. It uses multiple pathways of engagement to enable its 10 core principles. I've put the principles up here. I feel like the principles interconnect very well. If you have teaching that is student centered, then by logic it should also be flexible, accessible, and diverse. It should also help to increase student engagement and knowledge application. TU Dublin is using multiple pathways to implement this model, one of which is our Holistic Intelligence pathway, or what some of our staff are calling the "whole student approach". Part of embracing holistic intelligence is in teaching staff how to recognise the dimensions of it. Holistic Intelligence supports the eight dimensions of well-being and productivity that affect each of us in day-to-day life, namely: personal, social, occupational, physical, economic, intellectual, emotional and environmental.

ALONE WE
ARE SMART.
TOGETHER
WE ARE
BRILLIANT.

- Steven Anderson



This brings me to my next set of questions- do you feel universities are or could be embracing similar policies for their staff? And how might, or does, that benefit our students? Is Holistic intelligence a model that can help increase diversity?

And now I'll finish with looking towards our future. For me, at least, it means a slight shift in my role in TU Dublin. We are new to embracing the functional model of service. To this moment, at least, many of our library assistants fill an all-rounder type of role. We had people who would man the issue desk, but also work on cataloguing and acquisitions for example. But our migration to our new functions has begun! I'm moving from what was, mainly, a client and faculty kind of role, into a Digital Services one. The hope is that, like many of you, the functions will work individually, but also interconnectedly. It's been a great time to be part of TU Dublin. There have been struggles with the large amount of change we are undergoing, but also opportunities for staff to learn and engage, to become trainers, and to move roles, and to move campuses. We're also in the process of combining three separate library systems, including different LMS's. The aim in doing this is to give unity to the service, and in doing so, provide more flexibility for our students. Our Digital Services will have a heavy focus on creating good quality accessible web content, and embracing and investigating new technologies. It will also focus on training staff on our LMS, and on training staff on general digital related matters, potentially eventually including assistive technology.

For the library field in general, diversity can only be a good thing. I hope that having come here today, you'll leave with a bit more understanding of what some of our students and staff face. I think I'll finish with a quote from Steven Anderson, "Alone we are smart. Together we are

brilliant". The more we embrace diverse knowledge and life experiences, the more brilliant we become.

Lastly, for anyone interested in hearing more about the LAI subgroup I'm forming, this is my email.