Mutual Learning through Collaboration with Blind or Visually Impaired Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the possibility of positive collaboration between sighted and BVI in an inclusive English language classroom in an undergraduate programme. It traces how team work fosters and strengthens productive collaboration and contribution by the BVI and alters the perceptions of the sighted.

Keywords: collaborative learning, inclusive classrooms, team work, changing perceptions

Contemporary English language classrooms expect collaborative learning by design, informed by the perspective that learning includes construction of knowledge in a social context which in turn enables individuals to be acculturated into a learning community (Oxford, 1997). In higher education classrooms such as undergraduate programmes, inclusive classrooms, now being rephrased as equitable classrooms (NEP 2020) are a reality only at the policy level in Indian universities. Very rarely are the Blind or visually impaired (BVI) seen as collaborators in the inclusive English language classroom (IELC). The BVI are usually seen as persons 'needing help' and never as agents of change. This paper looks at the agency of the BVI as collaborators in group activities and tracks the changes in the attitudes of the sighted after such collaboration.

Negative perspectives toward persons with disabilities work as a hindrance that makes it harder for able-bodied persons in work, training, and social communications like dating and marriage (Chan et al., 2009) and therefore collaborative work in educational spaces becomes even more difficult. As for visual incapacities specifically, the perspectives of sighted people can make boundaries and hardships for those with visual deficiency or visual weakness (Hudson, 1994; Wang et al., 2015; Whitburn, 2014; McDonnall, 2016; Verhaeghe et al., 2016).

Researchers have concentrated on an assortment of experiments to change perspectives about disabilities that are held by able-bodied persons (Donaldson, 1980; Smart, 2001; Chan et al., 2009). The viability of every one of these contacts relies upon a variety of variables, yet generally speaking using different procedures might be more successful at changing perspectives than a single system approach (Link and Phelan, 2001; Chan et al., 2009). One promising road to organize interventions for attitudinal change exists inside the instructive framework. For instance, changing the perspectives of students in classrooms will positively impact them and their mental framework that is conducive to collaborate and learn from the persons with disabilities and therefore outreach and extend to their professional lives, all planning and projects so much so that the vicious cycle of this mindset

will be broken. Classrooms are the best crucibles where this collaboration can easily happen over a course. This is even more crucial when the course is the English language classroom that is inclusive not just by policy but in reality; group work, pairwork etc are a part of the language classroom teaching/learning sequences.

Inside classroom instructional spaces in higher education programmes, contact and thereby collaboration could be cultivated by welcoming individuals with disabilities into the classroom or workspaces by creating opportunities to collaboratively learn or create a working environment to connect with those with disabilities. This contact ought to be done carefully. Allport (1954) recommends that fruitful engagement through contact ought to include equivalent status people working helpfully toward a shared objective, while contact can be counterproductive and increment bias when it is cutthroat, when it is unsavoury, or when individuals from the minority bunch are of a lower status than individuals from the greater part bunch. An illustration of this is seen in Rousch (1986), where contact absolutely as an assistant or parental figure isn't helpful for further developing mentalities about inability (see additionally Hazard, 1983). Consequently, learners' contact with individuals with disabilities will preferably include collaborating on equivalent balance toward a shared objective of learning together in the IELC. This will ensure that the notion of collaboration itself, in such anthrogogic spaces (Trott, 1991) is reframed to include communities of practice (Lave, 1991) so that collaboration is between groups of adults. Moreover, such research shows that contact is best at changing negative perspectives toward incapacities when it is joined with data arrangement and instruction (Horne, 1988; Corrigan and Penn, 1999).

One such IELC, an undergraduate classroom, was observed for the possibility of collaboration where the BVI students' agency and contribution, and the responses of the sighted students were recorded. The group consisted of 30[1] UG students, with 5 BVI and 25 sighted students. All the 25 sighted students in the classroom confessed that they had never had the experience of collaborating with a BVI in any capacity before and had had only notions informed either by watching movies or just being informed in a casual chat with friends prior to visiting this classroom. This course was offered to them in their first semester (August to November) at the university Of the 5 BVI, 2 came from inclusive classrooms and 3 from special classrooms into this IELC.

The group activities in the course were a total of 8 that were collaborative (team tasks). The sighted students were randomly assigned into 5 groups and the 5 BVI were purposively placed in each group. The teacher ensured and intervened, facilitated the task completions as and when required. She subtly ensured that the BVI perspectives were taken into consideration during the discussion within the groups during facilitation rounds. She asked leading questions on whether the discussions were accessible and available to the BVI members in the group whenever necessary. The BVI students were encouraged to use their laptops, smart phones, voice recorders and Braille slates as were convenient to them. These activities focussed on

[1] The students are kept anonymous and are de-identified on purpose, where names are present as pseudonyms.

reading, writing, vocabulary and presentation skills and clocked a total of 26 hours. No external scribes were present in the classroom, since this experiment was not assessment oriented. The modalities and devices that were used included PowerPoint presentations at one end, and simple aids like even live plant twigs to enhance touch and smell; tactile props such as animal figurines, umbrella, cotton etc, and other materials easily available in the classroom were used to sensitize the BVI students to concepts they had not really understood till then. Devices like voice recorders, and laptops were used by me and the students. After each activity the students were encouraged to record their observations of participating in the activities in the WhatsApp chat group. At the end of the course a consolidated recorded statement was also collected.

An analysis of these sighted students' consolidated statements[2] clearly indicated that the collaboration with the BVI students in this course during the activities had changed their entry level biases: they moved from "i don't know how a blind person can contribute anything productive", "poor blind people", "what can i learn from them! I can only help them") to having a more positive attitude. Of the 25 students, 22 students were positively impacted by the collaborative learning experience. One student recorded that "Interacting and working with BVI students was an altogether different experience for me as my earlier institutions didn't have BVI students. This helped me interact with them on a more proximal level and I learned a lot in this time span. I specifically enjoyed the task where we used props to explain cause and effect. I observed Sunny and Raghav were very eager and quick to grasp the concept and came up with a lot of ideas. I have learned more about their working patterns and I am glad that I got to work with them". Another student clearly opined that "i learned a lot from my BVI FRIENDS. Firstly, observe keenly anything before coming to the conclusion. We sighted people don't observe the basic things carefully as of my opinion. I came to know this on the day of blind folded activity[3]. Secondly the importance of our support to our BVI friends i.e inclusiveness. Thirdly how to explain the things to our BVI friends. This thing i came to know on first day of my presentation. Finally their way of understanding the surroundings, concepts, way of interaction with each others and many more things."

Another impacted student had remarked that, "During all the English classes a learnt a lot from BVI students from their struggles to how they learn in normal classroom setting. It was nice to see them in limelight for their talents and efforts. I learnt to appreciate small senses which we usually don't notice because of them. I understood the world in their point of view. Through all this I got to know them a person and made friends." One student almost broke down when he recollected the collaborative activities, and added: "I learnt the difficulty of BVI people (as I was blindfolded) unable to get

[2] Students' statements are reproduced verbatim without any language or punctuation corrections.

[3] This was an activity where the sighted were blindfolded and the BVI students used either Braille or their aptops to read out texts for comprehension: the blindfolded sighted students were asked to answer the reading comprehension questions the way the BVI students usually do. This could be described as a deliberate role reversal to sensitise the sighted students to the problems of BVIs

whole idea of what is happening. I learnt how to be quick in decisions from all group members." The two students who were indifferent had said that "I learnt very little from the BVI" and "I still don't understand their problems". When they were asked to elaborate their stance, they confessed that they were either absent for many classes or were too preoccupied with other courses to even observe themselves and offered to relook at the little experience that they had had. The students who were negatively impacted had remarked that they "felt that the whole course was skewed to the BVI" and "teacher paid a lot of attention to the BVI and wasted a lot of my learning time". When they were further interviewed they agreed that many times during the group activities the peers and the teacher had pulled them out when they had used objectionable vocabulary such as 'handicapped' to call out to their BVI classmates. This frequent correction of vocabulary and restoration of rights of the persons with disabilities had disturbed them. Such variations in responses are only to be expected, for not all human beings are at the same level of sensitivity. However, a nearly 90 percent of the group showing such a positive attitude change needs to be valued.

The data analysis clearly indicated that the sighted students did learn a lot from the BVI in the group tasks as did the BVI. The learnings ranged from how the BVI negotiated the classroom space to how they used the laptops. More importantly, the sighted students got to 'see' the world from the perspective of a BVI student. One valuable offshoot was that many of the sighted students ended up learning Braille from their BVI friends during their leisure time. This clearly stands testimony to the fact that if a teacher is sensitive and passes on the sensibilities and sensitive awareness to her students during the classroom interactions, the sighted can learn a lot by collaborating with the BVI students in an IELC. The limitations, if any, in this project, are sample size and the inability to carry out a post experiment one on one interview to capture stance changes in the sighted or the BVI students, since classes became online.

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