Roundtable: Disability in the Classroom

Contributors: Nicole Schroeder, Leni Van Goidsenhoven, Inge Van de Putte
(Edited by: Evelien Geerts, Josephine Hoegaerts, Kristien Hens, Daniel Blackie)

This roundtable aims to stimulate thinking about disability in compulsory and post-compulsory educational settings. To that end, the editors of this special issue invited three experts with professional and personal experience in this area to share their opinions about what inclusion and accessibility means to them via an email conversation. What might an inclusive and fully accessible classroom look like? And what role can institutions, educators, and students play in making educational spaces places of belonging in which everyone can thrive?

Dr. Leni Van Goidsenhoven, Department of Philosophy, University of Antwerp (Belgium): a cultural scientist. Her research explores methods for amplifying the voices of disabled people in contemporary debates, and she has a wide experience in qualitative inquiry and arts-based research designed to promote accessibility.

Dr. Nicole Schroeder, Equity in Action Presidential Postdoctoral Fellow, Kean University (United States of America): an American historian, educator, and founder of the Disabled Academic Collective (2020, https://disabledacademicco.wixsite.com/mysite), a group which advocates for ‘accessible higher education for all students’.

Dr. Inge Van de Putte, Disability Studies and Inclusive Education, Ghent University (Belgium): an educational scientist with a background in both research and teaching, and a long history of supporting the inclusion process of students with various needs.

Our panellists were asked to respond to the questions below. Their answers suggest a diversity of approaches that, in part, perhaps reflect the different cultures of disability and education at play in the United States and Belgium. However, all three of our panellists seem to be in agreement that rethinking disability in the classroom demands nothing less than a radical reappraisal of the meanings of education. With this in mind, we invite readers to do just that, offering up this roundtable as an encouragement.

We thank our contributors for their thoughtful comments and willingness to share their insights with us.

1) How do we make space for disabilities that are – at first sight – invisible?

NICOLE SCHROEDER: The first thing we can do is re-centre our worldview to assume that disabled people are always present. Although estimates vary based on competing definitions of disability, over the past decade we have seen an exponential increase in the number of disabled students accessing higher education. We should assume that disabled students are in our classrooms, without paying heed to the visibility of disability in those spaces.
We need to acknowledge that invisible disabilities are the norm rather than the exception. We need to let go of any conception that disability ‘looks’ one way, or even presents in signs that we can recognise. The spectrum of disability is wide-ranging and incredibly specific to individuals. Our goal should not be to merely identify and ‘see’ disability, but to assume it is an embodied experience that is always present.

Disabled people are experts at navigating able-bodied expectations. Many disabled individuals are actively pressed to, and strive to ‘pass’ as able-bodied due to the relevant stigmas tied to disability and the privileges afforded to able-bodiedness. If we hope to make space for disabled students and colleagues, we cannot spend time, energy, or resources on drawing a binary between disability and able-bodiedness. Educators striving for inclusivity should not attempt to decipher the boundaries of disability. It is not our place to uncover hidden disabilities, or demand that any individual disclose their disability.

That means learning to be comfortable without identifying, categorising, or defining disability in practice. Educators should not ask details, require one-on-one conversations, or question the validity of students’ accommodation requests. Furthermore, when we implement accommodations in the classroom, we should do so in a way that retains confidentiality. Our goal is to support students, not to force them to publicly claim their disability. The risks for “outing” students as disabled are very real. There are pervasive and overwhelming stigmas and barriers attached to the disability. It is dangerous for some students to claim the identity, especially those at the intersection of other marginalised identities.

To build a space that is safe for disabled individuals, we need to actually implement policies that benefit and protect them. That work begins with course design and carries into class activities, assessments, and grading policies. When we design our courses, we should be asking ourselves “how can I implement Universal Design for Learning (UDL) frameworks? What accommodations can I meet by simply modifying my course design?” Inaccessible policies, like hard set deadlines, can be eradicated by building in flexible deadlines into our course design and pedagogical practices. UDL and accommodations can work hand-in-hand to create an inclusive learning environment, the former targeting broad issues of access, and the latter targeting individual and variable needs.

**LENI VAN GOIDSENHOVEN:** What does visibility mean in the context of disability? Most of the time it feels like all disabilities are in many ways rendered invisible.

When asked about how to make space for (invisible) disabilities, one can refer to legal regulations to ensure an inclusive society (i.e., ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2009), the right to inclusion at all levels enshrined in the Belgian Constitution (2021)). At the same time, however, we see that the Belgian school system is creating new categories to segregate people with learning, intellectual,
and behavioural disabilities from normal schools. This implies that the dominant focus to look at disability is on (early) detection, categorisation, intervention, and remediation. Research also indicates that students with learning and behavioural disabilities withdraw from post-secondary education at higher rates than their non-disabled peers, the situation for students with psychiatric diagnoses is even more complex (Jarman and Thompson-Ebanks, 2020). Margaret Price (2011) argues that the very expectations of educational systems are set up in a way to exclude or at least create barriers for many students with (invisible) disabilities. This all shows that the dominant way of thinking about disability is influenced by the ‘medical model’, which frames disability as an ‘individual deficit’. However, disability is also a cultural and social identity; it is relational, it is a lived experience. It is even a way of thinking, a method. How can we make this knowledge culturally available? Maybe the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick on queerness can be helpful. She taught us that queerness is not a category but a way of approaching the world, our bodies, and our desires, as much as it is an identity. Can we not do the same for disability? If disability is not only an identity, could it also similarly be a method and practice? In other words: how might we disorient dominant thinking about disability in practice, in the classroom, as well as dominant thinking about access. After all, to make space for disability, we also need to explore the meaning of access.

In educational environments, access usually comes in the form of extended time, quiet testing environments, materials in alternative formats, note-takers, interpreters, captioning services, and audio texts. These supports are welcome, but all of these supports involve diagnosis, qualification, requests, and granting of services. It constructs access as a check box; an end goal; a thing. Tanya Titchkosky (2011), who has extensively written on ableism and access in university life, talks about relational accessibility and access as an interpretative movement. Titchkosky argues that access is not an end goal, but a way of looking and relating to other people (physically and emotionally): “Exploring the meanings of access is, fundamentally, the exploration of the meaning of our lives together—who is together with whom, how, where, when, and why?” (2011, p. 6) More concretely put, it changes the question of ‘what is wrong with this child/student’ towards ‘what is needed for this child/student/parent/teacher’ (i.e., always looking at the child or student in relation to her context (parents, caregiver, teachers, peers). This emphasis on relation also means negotiation and more precise local negotiation. We should not say: this child/student needs this or that (that is fixing or locking things), but looking at the context, the story and the need of the child at that time in that specific context (going to the library is something different as going to the art academy or going to a party).

So, how to make space for (invisible) disability? Firstly: we should bring (critical disability studies) theory and practice together repeatedly. Secondly: we should focus on relational accessibility and local negotiation.

**INGE VAN DE PUTTE:** At first sight, this question feels wrong. It seems to imply that a visible disability makes it possible to adjust practice and create an inclusive environment. Practice and research shows that this is not the case. Despite regulations (ratification of the
aforementioned UN Convention), we in Belgium, and specifically in Flanders, are still struggling to create an inclusive school system that takes into account different (in) visible needs. On the other hand, we know from research that society, and therefore also teachers, have a more negative attitude towards students with intellectual and behavioural disabilities (Vantieghem and Van de Putte, 2019). Rather, this has to do with the greater change needed in the professional vision of teachers – how they look at class management, flexible curriculum, etc.

The way we try to implement inclusion is often category related. Teachers should be open to different types of disabilities. In the latest statistics we see that this has the wrong effect. For example, in recent years there has been an increased focus on learners with autism and average to high intellectual ability. Instead of more inclusion, we notice that they are more often registered for support and are segregated. Thinking in categorisation brings in an education that is focused on fixing and normalising children. What is problematic about the dominance of diagnoses, labels is that it comes along with specialist knowledge of what is lacking and how this absence might be fixed. In this way, there will always be a category for which the teacher is not ready to teach for and therefore not ready for inclusion. Inclusion asks for a different etymological view of how the world is structured. We must support teachers (and the wider educational professions generally), to think differently about differences.

Difference is often conceptualised in terms of categorical differences. Categorisation feeds into thinking of disability-as-a-deficit, which is referred to as the clinical/medical model, where the difference lies in the other who has been categorised. Deleuze offers another approach to difference in which difference comes about through a continuous process of becoming different, of differenciation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; De Schauwer et al., 2017). It is a matter of how things become different, how they evolve beyond the boundaries of the sets they have been distributed into; in this way of thinking difference can become a productive force.

What is helpful in practice is having a practice-based assessment model, Assessment for Intervention (AFI) (Handelingsgerichte Diagnostiek). It aims to bridge the gap between assessment and intervention (Van de Putte and De Schauwer, 2019). It reconceptualises deficit thinking, so that “what’s wrong with this child?” becomes “what are the needs of this child/teacher/parent”? In this way education will work in a more holistic understanding. Children are seen in their specific context and network. There is a greater tendency to focus on the barriers within social practice and the creation of equitable access. This means that we must support teachers in the position they take, not being bystanders who take up a neutral position, but a relational ethics where they take up a position and the responsibility to think about our role in shaping a world we live in. We have to support teachers to expand their capacity for thought and action that enables the transgression of binaries and barriers. Instead of eliminating difference, we work with difference in order to re-create a world where all humans can be part of. So, in this way, difference becomes a productive force.
2) What has the current COVID-19 pandemic taught us about the role and limits of technology in making the classroom a more accessible place?

LENI VAN GOIDSENHOVEN: Before the pandemic, it was very hard to ask if a class could be recorded or followed online. Attending a class digitally was regarded as a “special measure” or a “reasonable accommodation” (implying: the student must have a clinical diagnosis). Because of the pandemic, schools began at breakneck speed to experiment with this digital teaching. Also other institutions, like cultural organisations, began to experiment with digital events (e.g., digital book clubs, online lectures, online performances…). Within those digital spaces, people with disabilities, but also sick people, elderly people, mothers with young children, among many others, began to express that it was sometimes easier to participate now the events were online. They could watch the lecture later when the baby was in bed, there were no mobility issues, there was less stress in terms of planning and so on. Technology became, then, a way of participating and not a goal in itself. Technology here, the online and digital spaces, were not interpreted as reasonable accommodation anymore, but as a full and official way to participate.

At the same time, this shift towards online and digital participation uncovered also something about socio-economic inequality in society: not all students had a computer, some had to share their computer with the siblings, sometimes the internet was not strong enough to let everyone online at the same time, sometimes students had not a quiet place in the house where they follow a digital class and so on.

NICOLE SCHROEDER: If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that there is no easy method to achieve accessibility. For some students, remote learning offered an unprecedented level of access. For others, remote learning posed new barriers and accommodation needs.

For many educators, the shift from in-person classes to online learning also presented new challenges and demands for accessible course design. The shift to online learning across the globe forced educators to rethink our course design. What is the purpose of a lecture? How do we create engagement and sustain interest and intrigue in the course content? The pandemic forced us to question how we used technology, where we have failed to use technology, and how we might improve our praxis in the future.

It became glaringly obvious to most instructors that we lack proper pedagogical training in accessible technologies. However, I want to note that many instructors familiar with online teaching reached out to offer instructional assistance, advice, and recommendations for accessible digital tools. These individuals, however, often occupy underpaid and poorly protected positions in our higher education systems.
In cases where educators were able to implement accessible technologies into the online classroom, many students with disabilities thrived. Some educators expanded access by prerecording and captioning their lectures. Others experimented with message boards and different chat features to allow students to engage in either real-time discussions or asynchronous ones. Students could plan responses, chat with their peers, and search chats and transcripts for content they might have missed when taking notes.

These new modes of engagement allowed some students to thrive. Other students, however, struggled with the new course format. Benefits were not seen across the board, especially for those who struggle with screen time, such as students with frequent migraines. Some courses were also better suited for the online environment, such as humanities classes, whereas lab courses were much harder to translate.

The pandemic also taught us that “access” and “accessibility” issues do not pertain to disabled academics alone. Educators found themselves tackling an online learning environment across multiple time zones. Universities were forced to contend with the fact that numerous students are caregivers as well as full-time students. Online learning posed glaring realities of class inequity and the very real presence of the digital divide. Technology has the potential to improve access, but only when the technology itself is financially accessible and educators are properly trained to implement said technology into their classrooms. Educators must be trained to use technology properly, to think of access from the start, and to choose to incorporate tools that have built-in accessibility features. Academics need resources, funding, training, and labour acknowledgement for this work.

INGE VAN DE PUTTE: During the pandemic everyone had to adapt at an incredible pace. One of the adjustments was to switch to a digital way of teaching. We know that even before the pandemic, Flemish education did not really excel in the use of technology in education. So there was a lot of catching up to do.

Teachers had to do this with little support; apart from a number of webinars, they had to find out how to get started, organise their practice, etc. But they mainly tried to work in the same way as before the pandemic. The ‘grammar of schooling’ was not adapted or changed. The grammar of schooling is “a set of rules and structures that feel very natural and are taken for granted and seem necessary” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). For example the ability of students is measured by tests and examinations. Diversity questioned this ‘grammar of schooling,’ it demands a flexibility and openness necessary to create inclusive learning environments.

We did not change our way of working so the same barriers remain although we use technology. This is apparent in the following points: First, it has become clear that school/classes are places where boundaries are reinforced again. This leads to children being classified as either falling within these boundaries or out of them (Naraian, 2017). There will always be students who are seen as slow, dependent or incapable of learning. Remote education

makes the boundaries more distinct and outspoken about more children not belonging in the regular school. As one parent expressed it in a focus group we ran: “There was a group work and the children were divided and I saw that my son was just not chosen. The teacher did not react. When I confronted her about it, she said that his slowness was the reason. The difficult thing was that this exclusion was happening in my living room.” Inclusion and exclusion processes also happen in the digital context.

Second, the average pupil is still the starting point of teaching. Little differentiation has happened within a class practice according to pace, interest, and ability. We do not start from the different needs of students. As one of the students experienced: “I need predictability, working with breakout rooms was terrible, not knowing with whom you are in the group. It gave me a lot of stress. There was no room to bring this in conversation with the teacher.”

Third, the pandemic has shown us that the current neoliberal thinking is a strong force. This dominant economic discourse narrows the scope of mastery to qualifications in knowledge and skills necessary for the labour market (Biesta & Polls, 2012). The focus remained mainly on the content of a subject, few learning opportunities were taken for how students dealt, for example, with the pandemic, with social isolation, etc. Also students must function independently of others. Little attention was paid to connections and interactions with others. For example, how we can support each other in this crisis. And finally, we have been struggling a lot with the evaluation of students. The only way we can measure the competence of students is through tests and exams.

These are a few examples where we do not change our existing structures, but rather do what we have been doing for years. The main focus is on closing the gap, dealing with the learning deficit and eliminating the difference.

It would also be wrong to describe the whole digital change as totally negative and without opportunities. It has also had positive effects. For some students, the alternation between digital and going to school was a way of going to school at their own pace. It gave less stress and the opportunity to shape the education more to what they needed. They could take ownership of their own learning process. The method of contact also provided opportunities for students. There were different ways of asking their questions. For example, for some students the opportunity was created to ask questions via chat and connect with teachers and peers. Some teachers experienced that this way of teaching gave them more opportunities to respond to the interests of students. As one teacher pointed out: “I was challenged more to the essence of the content of my lessons, to work with videos to arouse interest, to introduce a poll to provoke opinion of students, etc.”

But overall, my experience is that technology has not brought so many opportunities because we are not adjusting the underlying structures of our education. Our grammar of schooling remains the same. We have not rethought education. We have mainly done the same from the past. As a result, there are rather limits than possibilities to make education more accessible.
3) How do you make room for vulnerability in the classroom – both students’ and teachers’ – and how can that space be used as a place that is generative of learning?

NICOLE SCHROEDER: I am lucky in that I am an openly disabled academic, and so I have the opportunity to model access needs and accommodations for my students. On the first day of class, I assert my own access needs by explaining to my students how they can best accommodate me and how we can work together to expand access in the classroom.

On the first day of class, I explain to students that the syllabus is a set of expectations that we collectively agree to. We spend time as a group working our way through its details. I make sure that students have the opportunity to give feedback, point out any policies they find unfair, and together we revise the document to meet our collective needs.

I build certain policies into my syllabi to protect my own access needs. For example, I explain that I have an email policy that gives me at least a 12-hour cushion to respond to questions. I explain to students that I will not reply in the middle of the night, or right before class. I make sure that all assignments are posted at the start of the school year on our classroom page (my university currently uses Blackboard) and I invite students to access a Google Drive folder with all assignments outlined so that they have ample time to review assignments and pose questions early in the semester.

I also make it a point to explain that my disability impacts my activities in the classroom. I explain that I cannot stand for long periods of time because I am liable to fainting. I sit for my lectures and I use technology to “write on the board.” After class, all of the “board” work is posted to our shared Blackboard course page.

I explain how the formal accommodations process works when using the Disability Access Centre on campus. I make sure my syllabi connect students to resources like disability services, family services, writing services, and library resources. I also inform students that they never have to disclose their medical condition to an educator. I tell them that they should never feel pressured to give the details of their disability to their instructor, and that accommodations do not demand medical disclosure outside of the Office of Accessibility.

For me, practicing vulnerability in the classroom is a radical act that combats ableism. I give students the space to see a disabled academic, to discuss access, and to identify personal needs for success. I challenge all students to identify their own access needs and push able-bodied students to see classroom norms as forms of access. While able-bodied students often frame their own access needs as “normal”, I challenge them to consider how our built environment and general university policies privilege their embodied experience while simultaneously perpetuating ableism.
INGE VAN DE PUTTE: Vulnerability is often seen as a weakness. In neoliberal society, there is no room for vulnerability. We look at students and teachers as feasible. If they try hard enough, they will become stronger. When someone is vulnerable, we must fix them.

We can also look differently at vulnerability, as a feeling that gives opportunities to connect with yourself and others. In order to allow vulnerability, it is important that teachers bring in themselves. I mean to bring who they really are as a person into the classroom. It gives the opportunity to enter into relationships with others, to connect, to intra-act. If they sense insecurity, they bring this into the classroom group and they look together at what is needed.

A more relational approach is important. I think it is important to pay attention to the inclusive values of interdependence. We do not exist as human subjects, independently of each other or the world we live in. For example, “I can only be a teacher because of the students who are here”. This provides a balance against the whole individualistic culture we live in. It is precisely that mutuality/reciprocity that will create a stronger environment. It will create much more of a culture of responsiveness, an attitude of responsibility to react to the other, to the urgent problems or challenges. Allowing vulnerability also means learning to see and acknowledge each other's perspective.

Vulnerability disrupts the category of able, independent bodies. Vulnerability is precisely the possibility to deal with the not knowing. To allow moments of pause, of doubt, of searching what we feel and how we can react. We have to get rid of the idea that we always know what to do. That we know everything. It is precisely in the search that possibilities and other ways of living become possible.

LENI VAN GOIDSENHOVEN: We have a long history in thinking about learning relationships starting from hierarchy. Bringing in vulnerability in a hierarchical structure is very hard. When asking how to make room for vulnerability in the classroom, I would begin by starting to disrupt hierarchy.

Disrupting hierarchy can be done by bringing in yourself as a person/researcher (or: the teacher enters the class as a person with all her/his/their vulnerabilities). It also means taking ‘encounter’ as a framework for action. During an encounter I am always thrown into the deep end. Is an encounter venturing yourself into uncharted territory, venturing yourself into what is unfamiliar? How do we take time to align with each other? Can we look for each other? Are we willing to jump in, every time, even when the line of encounter seems to be disrupted?

In my own work with people with communication issues, I am inspired by Erin Manning’s concept of leading-following, a concept based on the complexities of intra-action in how we move in dance:
‘We walk. I am leading. But that does not mean I am deciding. Leading is more like initiating an opening, entering the gap, then following her response. How I follow, with what intensity we create the space, will influence how our bodies move together. I am not moving her, nor is she simply responding to me: we are beginning to move relationally, creating an interval that we move together. The more we connect to this becoming-movement, the more palpable the interval becomes. We begin to feel the relation.’ (Manning, 2009, p. 30)

While leading-following, it is not clear anymore who is leading and who is following. From a philosophical perspective this practice is a political critique on leadership, and it also dismantles the hierarchy between researchers and research subject as it refers to an a-personal field of endless negotiations and transformations. By taking serious leading-following, we work with the not-yet known. We don’t know what the relationship will bring. We also become very aware of slowness, quietness, and dead ends. It is precisely in that place, in the not-yet known that learning takes place. (Van Goidsenhoven and De Schauwer, 2020, p. 333)

To work with encounters, to work in a relational way and with the not-yet known is not easy; it is a constant experiment. There is also not one correct way to do this, what is important is how you keep searching for entries, belonging, access, encounter. Similarly, in a child’s life, there is no one key or method to follow that always helps when the child gets stuck in a situation. It is rather about constantly finding ways to give the child space, invite her to contribute and connect with her.

4) There is no one-size-fits-all approach to inclusion, and people with the same disabilities may benefit from different strategies. How to implement a truly universal design for learning (UDL), and maximise the learning choices without overburdening the teacher?

NICOLE SCHROEDER: Unfortunately, there is no perfect UDL (Universal Design for Learning) approach that provides complete access for all learners. There is no perfect checklist or set of guidelines that ensures total access, because individual access needs can be incredibly specific. Yet we should not assume this to be a negative. On the contrary, UDL offers a foundation upon which to build a more accessible classroom. We can use UDL to provide basic access, and then build individual accommodations into the class from that foundation. Our classroom, of course, changes every term. New students each term means that both individualistic and even collective needs change each semester.

We should not be dismayed by this reality, but rather view it as an opportunity to broaden our knowledge of access and accessibility. Disability is diverse, and access needs are just as diverse. Sometimes, competing access needs can infringe upon one another. There is no perfect
set of solutions. Instead, we should view diverse access needs as a challenge to tackle through innovation, experimentation, collective review, and reflection.

Part of the work of implementing UDL (Universal Design for Learning) starts before students enter the classroom. Universities can help implement more accessible frameworks by abolishing attendance policies and other rigid demands. Educators also need time and resources built into their job expectations. Updating, reassessing, and reviewing one’s pedagogical skills and undertaking training in UDL and accessibility should be promoted and supported by the tenure review process.

Improvements in access often sprout from failure. Educators are often trained to handle access issues as they arise, instead of anticipating their existence. To some degree, this is inevitable. Diverse student needs, evolving technology, and new pedagogical practices change the shape of UDL approaches every term. Inaccessibility will always be present in some form, but we can actively combat it by looking upon our previous courses with a critical eye. What could we have done better? And how can we avoid the same issues in the future? Not only do we need to take an individual approach to rectifying these access issues, but we need group-focused resources and review sessions.

In addition, universities need to prioritise hiring disabled individuals. University policies only change when someone speaks up about current inequities. Until disabled individuals are fully represented in the professoriate, inequity will persist. Disabled academics at all levels of higher education can help pinpoint access issues, introduce new accessible technology, and review UDL frameworks built into course syllabi and campus policies. They must, however, be fairly compensated, protected, and respected for providing this consultation service.

Ultimately, universities need to invest resources and commit to disability justice on campus. Implementing UDL (Universal Design for Learning) in the classroom will only tackle a fraction of the barriers to access that disabled students, faculty, and staff encounter. In order for these classroom policies to make a difference, our campuses at large need to be safe spaces for disabled individuals.

INGE VAN DE PUTTE: UDL is currently still used in a too fragmented way. For example, differentiating towards input, or – different ways of applying learning materials to suit the learning styles of students. This is one of the principles of UDL that teachers take into account. But all other principles are ignored. It is important that UDL is not seen as a method to be followed but as a philosophy. A way of making schooling.

UDL should be approached as a global framework, so what seems to be a simple framework at first sight is much more complex to integrate. Applying this complexity requires cooperation from teachers, between themselves but also with all support.
It should also be used to work with differences. At the moment, it is still used too much to achieve the norm – to eliminate the difference. We see that UDL is not used to rethink education. For example, it is not because we organise classes according to age that we have to keep doing it. It is not because evaluation often results in a written record that this is the best way to do it. Making education accessible requires us to question the 'unwritten' rules, self-evidences, principles and structures. Can we proactively organise and re-design education differently so that more children can learn and develop optimally? The principles of UDL are a good guide to differentiate in the classroom but this cannot be separated from changing this 'grammar of schooling'. Rethinking of a whole system cannot be the responsibility of an individual teacher.

This requires collaboration and a lot of reflection. If we really want to integrate UDL we need much more possibility to reflect in dialogue. We need to go away from the teacher alone in front of the class. Space needs to be created to have a dialogue encounter.

It requires an ethical attitude of teachers – to deal with the difference in order to make education together, to become a teacher and a student together – every time again. It requires the teacher to focus her/his ethical compass on what world we want to create. We all struggle with the forces of normalisation. So it is important to question our own (sometimes dogmatic ideological) position. Different social and political discourses work together, simultaneously. It is important to get teachers to reflect on their practice, position but also to clarify their own views on learning, on being and becoming a human. What discourses influence our views and what makes the world continue to exist as we know it and what gives opportunities to rethink and recreate it?

It is important that teachers get inside in how the world is constructed because it is within this challenging context that inclusive education must be implemented.

What also is needed is the belief in the potential of teachers. In the implementation of UDL, too often we start from the premise that the teacher is not competent, and has to start from scratch. We must start much more from the existing practice and expand it and start from the learning questions of teachers to develop the practices in a more UDL approach. It requires professionalisation on the spot and the unconditional belief that teachers have or can have the competence to work with the difference in their classroom.

In recent years, more attention has also been paid to the voice of students – how they experience their problems, how they evaluate the support, what the impact of this support is on their learning and their social participation process. Seeing education as a process of constant tuning, the lived experiences of students have to be taken into account.

Implementing UDL as a global framework asks the starting point from seeing teachers as competent people, who need to be supported in understanding how the world is structured and
how UDL gives opportunities to deal with diversity whereby we get stronger educational assemblage that is open and responsive to difference. It is much more about how we can collaborate, divide groups, and create an atmosphere of learning for all those participating in the inclusive assemblage.

LENI VAN GOIDSENHOVEN: For me this question ties in with the first one. Thinking about inclusion and access always needs to take into account all people involved, here: the student, the teacher, the caregiver of the student, peers... focusing on the interdependencies.

UDL is important to use in the preparation phase to ensure accessibility for all. When talking to an architect about a building, UDL is part of that conversation, part of this preparation phase. However, working with UDL will not guarantee that in the end everyone can enter that building. After the building is finished, there will still be a lot of work to do in order to guarantee access for everyone. UDL will be helpful in thinking about access and inclusion, but there is more. Sometimes the needs of people to have access and to participate are contradictory. Therefore, a relational approach (and here I want to refer once again to Tanya Titchkosky’s work) is important. This means: listening to different expressions of the people involved (“what is important for the teacher?”, “what is important for the child?”, and so on), and listening to different dimensions of disability. We know, indeed, that there will be no one-size-fits-all approach, but we do continue to take our responsibility, we also continue to critically evaluate how access is granted, to whom and why. Furthermore, the question of access does not end when someone can enter the building, or when someone can participate. The question goes further towards: how can someone belong?

Disability Justice and Crip Theory are also expressing this line of thought: The question is not merely how to make a society more accessible by creating more exception measures, and reasonable accommodations, using ramps and Braille signs, but the question is rather in which our ways of relating to, and depending on, each other can be reconfigured (McRuer, 2006, p. 94); how can we collectively imagine disability differently. Disability is not something that must be tolerated, but a natural and desirable difference.

Bibliography


