Inclusion in the library: Monash University's Inclusive Teaching Toolkit.

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Abstract

Monash University Library aims to create a safe and inclusive environment for all students, and to deliver accessible research and learning services. To achieve this aim, we developed a new initiative, the Inclusive Teaching Toolkit for library staff (https://www.monash.edu/library/inclusive-teaching) - a dynamic and interactive online tool informed by Universal Design for Learning. Arranged around six broad principles, the Toolkit draws on existing University guidelines, the literature on inclusive teaching in higher education, and data gathered in 2017 from focus group interviews with library staff. The Toolkit provides practical guidelines about inclusion in an academic library, and its structure highlights the intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) nature of the suggested practices. The initiative is in an early phase; we are in the process of developing and delivering peer learning sessions that use the Toolkit to facilitate discussions among staff about inclusion.

Introduction

"Inclusion is core business in education, it's not some add-on social policy … it's what we're always aiming to do" – Library staff member

Until the late-twentieth century, higher education institutions tended to be dominated by 'traditional or elite views' that characterised students from low-socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds according to a 'deficit model' that 'conceptualise[d] differences as "deficits", effectively blaming students for their lack of "preparedness"' (Lawrence, 2005). This approach has been challenged in recent decades, as the higher education sector has moved toward bridging the incongruity experienced by low-SES students and non-traditional students more broadly. Devlin (2013) characterises the experience of many low-SES students as one of 'socio-cultural incongruence'. Conceptualised in this way, the issues faced by such cohorts can be understood through disparities in social capital (social status and networks) and cultural capital (the student's familiarity with the dominant cultural codes and practices at university). Core to addressing this incongruity is recognising the unique discourse used at Australian universities, and the unspoken assumptions and expectations.

Monash University Library staff regularly teach academic writing and research skills, thus articulating and explaining academic discourse, and making the expectations of tertiary education explicit to all students. The library plays, and will continue to play, a significant role in increasing the success and retention of a diverse student body. The aim of Monash University Library's Inclusive Teaching Toolkit for Library Staff is to bring together a series of principles, guidelines and resources related to inclusive teaching practices relevant to the library

environment. The Toolkit identifies sustainable and effective teaching strategies inclusive of the diverse student body at Monash, including differences in socioeconomic status, educational background, cultural and linguistic background, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, age, mode of attendance (full time, part time, on campus, off campus), and ability or disability.

The development of this toolkit was informed by Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which emphasise the use of flexible teaching and learning approaches to cater for different learning needs of diverse student cohorts (Glass, Meyer, & Rose, 2013). However, existing research into inclusive teaching, including UDL, rarely explores the type of educational encounters common in contemporary academic libraries. Monash University Library's Inclusive Teaching Toolkit, is, therefore, an innovative and vital project which articulates how to apply inclusive teaching principles to the library context.

Toolkit development

Monash Library Inclusive Teaching Toolkit was developed using three main sources of information: data gathered in 2017 from focus group interviews (FGIs) with Monash University Library staff, existing Monash University resources around inclusive educational practices (Monash University, 2016a; Monash University, 2016b), and the academic literature on inclusive teaching in higher education. After a review of the literature, and obtaining Ethics approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee, staff from across Monash University Library were invited to voluntarily participate in FGIs. FGIs were used as a data collection tool because of their advantage in deriving the group's collective opinion in a relatively short period of time (Halcomb, Gholizadeh, DiGiacomo, Phillips & Davidson, 2007). They were innovatively used as a collaborative way to discuss and share the ideas, experiences and recommendations of Library staff regarding inclusive teaching practices in the context of an academic library. The findings from the FGIs form the backbone of the Toolkit.

The FGIs were conducted at five different Australian Monash University Library branches, each with three to seven participants. In total, 27 library staff participated in the FGIs and signed a consent form prior to the interview. Each FGI lasted 90 minutes, and all conversations were tape-recorded. Each session followed the same structure with ten guiding questions. Data collected in FGIs was transcribed and analysed using NVivo to identify emerging principles and guidelines to be included in the Toolkit. Sections of an early draft of the Toolkit were then sent to relevant equity group representatives across Monash University, including: the Yulendj Indigenous Engagement Unit, Access Monash, Disability Support Services and the Diverse Genders and Sexualities Subcommittee for review. Their feedback was then incorporated into the Toolkit.

Components of the toolkit

The Toolkit comprises three key components. The first, 'Principles of Inclusive Teaching,' articulates six key principles for inclusivity which are:

- Be aware and informed
- Reflect on your teaching practices
- Use inclusive language and resources

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- Be flexible and responsive
- Be proactive and intentional
- Display empathy and understanding

These principles are intended to be broad so they apply across the Library's various educational activities, from face-to-face classes, to drop-in consultations, to the development of e-learning resources. The principles also foreground key concepts of inclusive teaching, rather than specific equity groups, thus highlighting the overlapping and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) nature of inclusive teaching strategies. An example of how to apply the principle 'Use inclusive language and resources', for instance, comments on the efficacy of using clear language and avoiding metaphors for the inclusion of students who are low-SES, on the Austism spectrum, and/or culturally and linguistically diverse. The Toolkit's information architecture foregrounds the use of this inclusive strategy for a range of students.

The second part of the Toolkit is the 'Guidelines for Inclusive Teaching', which provide examples of how to put the six principles into practice. The guidelines bring together practical recommendations for making teaching activities and resources more inclusive. They range from general guidelines for inclusive teaching, to more specific guidelines and resources related to key topics, such as the inclusion of students of all genders, sexes and sexualities, culturally and linguistically diverse students, students from low-SES backgrounds, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities.

The third component of the Toolkit is a collection of additional resources to assist its users to expand their understanding around key areas of inclusion and diversity and develop their knowledge and professional practice of inclusive teaching.

Implementing the Toolkit

Implementing the Toolkit in a meaningful and sustainable way presents numerous challenges. It is essential to promote a holistic view of inclusion, with the relevance of the Toolkit to the practice of all library staff made explicit. Equally important is the understanding that a one-off workshop will not result in deep learning or effective change. Instead, a strategic approach which incorporates ongoing professional development, supported and prioritised by management and policy, is essential to the program's success (Hitch, Macfarlance, & Nihill, 2015). To this end we have designed a multifaceted implementation strategy, in which an ongoing program of workshops, peer learning sessions, and seminars present opportunities for formal and informal collaborative learning. Combined with the development of a digital community of practice and an online induction module, the intention is to provide multiple points of access for library staff to develop inclusive knowledges and skills relevant to their practice.

The first phase of implementing the Toolkit involved running introductory workshops for all library staff. Five 1.5 hour workshops were delivered across four campuses. Attendance was voluntary, with 61 staff members attending overall. The session was divided into three sections: 'exploring inclusion', 'the principles of inclusive teaching' as outlined in the Toolkit, and 'applying the principles to your practice'. To continue the collaborative approach used in the development of the Toolkit, participants were asked to nominate topics for further learning

sessions. Based on these responses a future program is being developed which will address topics such as working with specific student cohorts (e.g. international students) and using inclusive pedagogies.

Moreover, a 40-minute induction module is in development. Housed in Monash's online teaching environment, Moodle, the module will use collaborative and active learning approaches to explore inclusion and exclusion in the library. It is intended that the module be used for commencing library staff members and for those who would like an introduction to inclusive practice.

Outcomes

Feedback from the introductory workshops delivered so far was positive, with the majority of participants rating it 3-4 (out of 4), and expressing interest in future learning opportunities. Additionally, participant evaluations highlighted the value staff placed on having the opportunity to learn collaboratively from each other. This has led to the development of a cross-institutional digital community of practice (CoP) focused on inclusive practices in academic libraries. Since the Toolkit launch in August 2018 the website has received approximately 732 page views per month, with usage peaks around the peer learning sessions. This, combined with anecdotal evidence such as workplace discussions around inclusive language, suggest that the Toolkit is being used by staff to make their practice more inclusive.

The influence of managerial and strategic support in this cannot be underestimated. Inclusion, and specifically the Toolkit, is an explicit element of Monash University Library's 2018-2020 strategic plan. Its application in research and learning will, from 2019, be recorded in the Library's regular data collection. This highlights the importance of inclusion to library staff as central to their roles and encourages them to attend professional development sessions. A combination of session feedback, website usage, survey data, and focus groups will measure the impact of the Toolkit on developing inclusive practice in the library. We anticipate further development of the Toolkit into an even more robust resource in response to feedback gathered in 2019.

Key questions

- Does anyone have suggestions about how to measure the impact of the Inclusive Teaching Toolkit?
- When you think about inclusive practice in the Library what techniques, or problems, come to mind?
- What have you done to make your practice more inclusive? What do you think are the key areas we need to work on in order to make tertiary education more inclusive?
- What do you think are some of the strengths and weaknesses of a tool like the Inclusive Teaching Toolkit?

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