Claire Burrows
University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES AND DISABLED STUDENTS: AN ACCESSIBLE STORY? (Paper)

Abstract:
Approximately 14 percent of the Canadian population has a disability (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada 2011), with this number expected to rise as the population ages (Prince 2004). Disabled individuals are more likely to live in poverty, be unemployed and achieve lower education levels than their non-disabled counterparts (Prince 2004), and the inability of the disabled population to access higher education has the effect of further entrenching these and other societal disadvantages (Liasidou 2014).

The development of disability legislation in several provinces—such as the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)—is beginning to place demands on all public- and private-sector organizations to develop more inclusive and accessible services. While Canadian universities are currently formulating various strategies to increase accessibility within the academic environment—as can be seen in the development and implementation of AODA and similarly-inspired policies—less attention has been paid to what academic libraries are doing to support the increasing numbers of disabled students at these institutions.

Overall, there has been increased attention towards accessibility within the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) in recent decades, especially with regards to webpage accessibility (Byerley & Chambers 2002; Dermody & Majekodunmi 2011; Fulton 2011; Comeaux & Schmetzke 2013). However, there remain significant gaps, such as a dearth of research pertaining to the Canadian context. In the US, much of the literature relates to the Americans with Disabilities Act and often focuses on services provided by public libraries (Lodge 2004; Khailova 2005; Burke 2009). In the UK, there has been a stronger focus on academic libraries (Heaven & Goulding 2002; Harris & Oppenheim 2003; Howe 2011). However, this research is tied to the specific legislative context and higher education system of the UK and is not necessarily applicable to Canadian institutions. The introduction of the AODA means that academic libraries in Ontario are required to ensure that students and other users with disabilities are not excluded from their services, which prompts the need for Canadian specific research. This is especially pertinent as we look towards the next 150 years of information services in Canada, and leads to the following research questions for this study:

- In what ways do Canadian academic libraries conceptualise disability?
- Are disabled students' academic needs being met by Canadian academic libraries?

This paper beings to address these questions, and will highlight initial findings from a PhD study that focuses on how Ontario academic libraries approach the provision of accessible services, as well as how disabled students experience these services, through a comparative case study. Canadian perspectives on this topic are currently an underexplored area of LIS research, and little of the research in any country includes the perspectives of disabled individuals themselves: "Overall, the literature focuses on what the library has and how users operate within those parameters. Little research explored the more fundamental questions of what people with disabilities might want from an information provider and how best to provide that service" (Hill 2013, 141).

This study weaves in threads from critical disability theory—situating disability in "the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity" (Gabel & Peters 2004, 588) and drawing on conversations developed in feminism, race theory, and queer theory—to develop alternative understandings of disability and to explore how these might be used to examine a "traditional" LIS question of how we might approach providing service to a specific population. Hosking (2008) suggests that

> Critical disability theory adopts a version of the social model based on the principles that (1) disability is a social construct, not the inevitable consequence of impairment, (2) disability is best characterised as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and the social environment, and (3) the social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional and attitudinal (together, the 'social') environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of 'normalcy'. (5-6)

Accessible library services are especially important to consider using theoretical perspectives, as "LIS research, theoretically informed by disability research, could broaden perceptions about the concept of disability and what it means to be accessible" (Hill 2013, 141). Rather than approaching the topic from traditionally dominant understandings in which people with disabilities need to "adjust to their environments and be the recipient of medical/professional expertise and dominance, alternative understandings demand societal adjustment and call for individual and collective responsibility of all societal members to redress disabling environments" (Goodley 1997, 373). Kumbier and Starkey (2016) suggest considering "how we [in LIS] might transform the systems, beliefs, and practices that make libraries and the profession inaccessible and inequitable" (468). Considering this issue from the starting point of disability will inevitably affect other marginalized populations, as

> most of us are women, racialized, poor, queer or any such combination…Disabled people are not a homogenous group; we are diverse and impacted by different oppressions. We cannot successfully (or conscionably) fight for the insertion of disability into mainstream society at the expense of others, particularly because most disabled people would be left behind. (Withers 2012, 11)

The paper will therefore focus on disabled students' personal narratives—including students who are registered with Disability Support Services and/or who self-identify as being disabled/having a disability—as well as those of library staff, to explore current accessibility practices within Canadian academic libraries. The inclusion of disabled students' narratives is significant, as "being identified, and identifying, as a disabled person is central to understanding one's self, one's social position with its attendant opportunities and limitations, and one's knowledge of the world" (Hosking 2008, 11). Integrating these elements with an examination of the institutional policies—such as mission statements, annual reports, and accessibility planning policies—will allow a picture to emerge of how notions of disability and accessibility are constructed in academic libraries in Ontario. While results are not expected to be directly generalizable across Canada or even necessarily to other Ontario institutions, it is hoped that they can help us in the LIS profession to further develop conversations around what accessible and inclusive library services can and should look like.

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