Bridging continents, cultures, and crip theories: teaching Comparative and International Disability Studies in education and sociology*

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**ABSTRACT**

This article deals with the question how to teach Disability Studies and Inclusive Education to international student populations in higher education (HE). It provides a glimpse into an example of teaching practice, namely a workshop on experiences and expectations of disabled international students in HE, organized by the second author. By referring to the notion of bridging, it reflects how various understandings of what disability is, can be linked up and made fruitful in the classroom. The proposal of this article is twofold: for the theorization of disability, that a variant of ‘Comparative and International Disability Studies’ shall come into being; and for the practice of inclusion in HE, that the time is ripe for a concrete and constructive discussion about the access, participation and educational achievement of international students with disabilities in universities abroad, as well as about appropriate forms of assistance for their mobility.

Fifty years ago, the Nordic novelist Aksel Sandemose passed away, whose book *A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks* (1933) laid the foundation of the so-called Law of Jante which, described either in psychological or in sociological terms, can be understood ‘as an expression communicating both a fear of individualism and an awareness of this fear’ in Nordic cultures (Ahlness 2014, 549; quoted in Trotter 2015). This book illustrated for the first time what in Nordic countries is commonly referred to when saying ‘Janteloven’, meaning that Scandinavians tend to not only ‘demonstrate their confidence in the ideology of equality’ (Henningsen 2001, 126; quoted in Trotter 2015), but arguably even put more value on sameness than on differences. However, when teaching Disability Studies and Inclusive Education to an international student population in a Scandinavian country, this (myth of a) tendency of a condescending notion towards differences in the context of a generally egalitarian orientation of Nordic cultures offers itself as an ideal starting point for a comparative analysis and understanding of cultural differences in dealing with individualism (Goodley and Kiuppis 2014), equality (Hughes 2007) and differences by using a functional equivalence analytical approach (Rostgaard 2002). This article provides a glimpse into an example of teaching practice, namely a workshop on experiences and expectations of disabled international students in higher education (HE), in which Comparative and International Disability Studies (CIDS) is being implemented in Norway. The main purpose of this

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The idea for this paper emerged out of a research project with the title ‘Nothing about us without us becoming us – Processes of institutional change and identity formation in disabled people’s self-organization’, which was conducted at the Sociology Department of Emory University in Atlanta, where Florian Kiuppis stayed for ten months as Visiting Research Scholar, supported by a personal overseas research scholarship granted from The Research Council of Norway (project number 225440).

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article is to reflect how various understandings of what disability is, can be linked up and made fruitful in the classroom.

Teaching disability studies in Scandinavia

For the past four years, Florian Kiuppis has developed and been the responsible teacher of an interdisciplinary curriculum in Disability Studies in Education and Social Studies and Inclusive Education at Lillehammer University College (LUC), which fits the purpose of an introduction with international scope to how ‘disability’ has been defined in various historical periods and cultural spheres and how context- and culture-specific worlds of meaning surrounding disability phenomena can be understood, analysed and challenged. Those two courses in Disability Studies that up to now are set up in the [name of institution]’s spectrum of programmes taught in English were initially developed for international students who were going to spend half a year at [name of institution] and would cover herewith their full-time workload for one winter semester (which is $2 \times 15$ credit points). The curriculum institutionalized at LUC is connected with one lecture Florian Kiuppis is teaching since Spring semester 2014 at the University of Oslo (on the MA level), which is an offer primarily for international students – for the most part participants in the Erasmus Mundus Programme – and deals thematically with a related topic, namely the emergence of a heterogeneity of disability definitions in context of world-level classification models.

For the purpose of their social inclusion into student life in Lillehammer, the courses in Education and Social Studies were also opened to local BA-students and reached the number of recently 12 participants from various European countries, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and Spain (in previous years also Czech Republic and Poland). Beyond the aims to inter-culturally deal with issues such as different social ideologies, structural forces, power and societal arrangements that have shaped the meaning and experience of impairment and disability in different contexts, the central innovative pedagogical principles which were injected into the programme can be summarized as CIDS, carried out in a ‘new sociology of disability’ perspective (Thomas 2012, 210ff.; Kiuppis 2013, 152ff.).

CIDS is inspired by a variant of scholarship in Education and Sociology that considers comparison as a method connected with ‘explicit theoretical structuring’ (Andersson 2005, 31), rather than as a mental operation used in everyday life. Numerous approaches of comparison as a method for analysing data have been developed and reached so far the status of classics, for example, Glaser and Strauss’ famous approach to theory building (Glaser and Strauss 1967), or Mill’s method of comparison aiming at causal inference (Mill 1967). A useful overview on comparison as a method is provided by the Dutch sociologist Piet Verschuren who arguably favours Ragin’s case-oriented strategy (Ragin 1989) as an ‘excellent methodological treatment of comparison as a holistic device’ (Verschuren 2003, 132).

However, the theoretical framing of the interventions in Disability Studies Pedagogy at [name of institution] starts with the basic premise – originally formulated by the German American sociologist Reinhard Bendix (and post mortem published by his son John) – that ‘the use of a term [in our case “disability”] in different social contexts [is] itself a worthwhile subject of comparative analysis’ (Bendix 1998, 310). The variant of CIDS developed by the first author at [name of institution] is to be considered a useful set of tools to constitute both a new agenda for research (analysing data) and an innovative spectrum of interventions in Disability Studies Pedagogy for international students in HE (interpreting cultural differences in dealing with individualism, equality and differences) that deals with different collective understandings, perceptions and associations of ‘disability’, with institutional changes in various contexts: national, legal as well as academic cultures.

In the following, we are going to provide a glimpse into issues of pedagogy in terms of what we consider important theoretical tools when teaching Disability Studies in a comparative way to international student populations. The article illustrates how CIDS is being implemented by following those points comparativists are by methodology literature advised to keep in mind: (1) making
use of the diverse backgrounds of the students in class for the choice of additional themes; (2) questioning and challenging ‘paradigmatic views of social, economic, and political change’; (3) ‘[thinking] across various social sciences when comparing’; (4) taking into account historical depth; (5) aiming for ‘conceptual clarification (or the limited applicability of terms)’; (6) searching for contrasts; (7) appreciating the role and value of ideal types; (8) never forgetting ‘the moral dimensions and implications of comparison’ (compare Bendix 1998, 311).

Since different academic cultures do not rely on the same conceptions of disability, it seems appropriate to provide in the following an overview on various scholarly and, in emancipatory Disability Studies, thereby also political activists’ understandings of ‘disability’ and their relation to ‘impairment’, as well as on different accentuations in those cultures in the process of inserting external references into domestic academic and political discourses around ‘disability’. By making use of the notion of ‘bridging’, we firstly present the conceptual foundations which different Disability Studies communities are dealing with. Secondly, we illustrate how various understandings of what disability is and the interpretations what respective other communities of researchers and activists consider as such can be linked up and made fruitful for teaching CIDS. Doing this, we provide insights into a workshop organized by the second author, dealing with the theme of ‘Disabled International Students’ Experiences and Expectations in an Inclusive International Education’.

**Bridging crip theories from different countries: internationally comparing meanings of disability**

Disability Studies in the United Kingdom (UK) have traditionally relied on the British ‘Social Model’, according to which ‘disability’ is not an attributable feature of individuals but imposed by society oppressing people who are physically impaired (Finkelstein 1996). Understood in this way, the limitations of people who are considered ‘disabled’ result primarily or, in a more radical understanding of the Social Model, only from their societal context. Somewhat differently, members of the Disability Studies community in the United States (US) commonly prefer to talk about ‘people with disabilities’, rather relying on a human rights based or minority model perspective, seeing the use of the term disability as a way to remove the stigma linked to disease, illness and impairment by both implying that some of those conditions cannot be explained by biological science and that there are social, political, cultural and economic factors that determine disability (Shakespeare and Watson 2001; Kiuppis 2013, 152). Such thinking is pretty much in line with the ‘person-first’ terminology used by International Organizations such as the United Nations (e.g. UN 2006) and their respective sub-organizations (e.g. WHO 2001; UNICEF 2013), which allows individuals to be the primary focus of attention and relegates the disability issue to a position of secondary importance. This is a way of framing that arguably dates back to the ‘UN Decade of Disabled Persons’ (1983–1992), of which one outcome was the publication of the ‘Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities’ (UN 1993). In this context, for example, participation restrictions could be explained by highlighting barriers to inclusion such as disabling conditions, but one still tended to see the individual’s body and mind as essential part of the disability phenomenon and not just the contextual factors (Goodley and Kiuppis 2014).

However, disability researchers in the Scandinavian countries, while sharing the same networks with researchers from the UK, do for the most part not tend to act as advocates of a radical approach to the British Social Model. Instead, they increasingly rely on so-called Nordic relational models – the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (WHO 2001) is one version of a relational model – understanding ‘disability’ from a relative interactionist perspective (Gustavsson 2004, 62) which disagrees with both predominant models of disability propagated in the UK and the US – with the first because it neglects the body side (impairment) as part of the disability phenomenon; with the latter because it tends to neglect that disability is constituted by the interaction between persons and their social context. However, both these interacting sides of the disability phenomenon are reflected in the Preamble of the UN-Convention on the Rights of Persons with...
Disabilities which states that ‘disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others […]’ (UN 2006, 1).

Strikingly, in the context of Disability Studies conducted in the UK and the US, the respective others’ way of framing disability is criticized and possibly even misunderstood. For example, from an US-American perspective, the term ‘disabled people’ is sometimes rejected (UNICEF 2013), because it arguably implies that disability is an attribute of a person – as, for example, described in the Preface of a book by Selwyn Goldsmith, according to whom

The disabled’ is an ambiguous term. It can mean, as it usually does, [...] those who have got something wrong with them, which a physician can describe. (Goldsmith 2012, vii)

This is certainly a misconception of the Social Model’s underlying rationale, which is to differentiate between impairments as limitations on the personal level and disability as oppression on the social level. One could argue that the original version of the British Social Model is not compatible with the person-first terminology used when applying human rights and minority approaches in the US because ‘being disabled’ highlights the oppression that the Social Model focuses on, and using the phrase ‘people with disabilities’ does not reflect this as clearly. However, scholars in the US are sometimes accused by disability researchers in the UK of following the medical model, as opposed to the newer Social Model (which was developed in opposition to the former) because by using the term ‘people with disabilities’ they supposedly mean ‘people with impairments’. Along those lines, ‘people with disabilities’ is sometimes discredited as a medical model term (Shakespeare and Watson 2001, 12; Goldsmith 2012, vii). Arguably, this is again a misconception of the underlying principles of US-based Disability Studies, which are better characterized as applying a human rights or minority model than a medical approach. For example, on its ‘mission & history’ internet page, the Society for Disability Studies (SDS) may refer to ‘artists with disabilities’, not meaning their oppression, and explicitly positioning itself against the view of disability as an individual deficit or defect that can be remedied solely through medical intervention or rehabilitation by ‘experts’ and other service providers (SDS 2016). While, from a UK perspective on Disability Studies, the American community of disability researchers fails to apply their Social Model by neglecting both aspects of disability, (a) imposed by society and (b) resulting primarily from oppression of people with impairments, researchers who use the American perspective in Disability Studies regard the use of the term ‘disabled people’ as a labelling approach.

However, in the various academic cultures of Disability Studies, thinking about disability and impairments in medical terms is considered somewhat ‘outdated’. But it becomes clear that the replacement of a traditional deficit approach with a social oppression understanding went hand in hand with certain linguistic changes that differ significantly between academic cultures of Disability Studies (Grue 2011). Whereas both the UK and the US perspectives within Disability Studies look at relationships between individuals and society, one could argue that within British Disability Studies, the impact of impairments on participation restrictions and activity limitations tends to be underemphasized. Then again, the Social Model tends to overemphasize the aspect of ‘being disabled by society’ without taking into consideration the impact that impairments can have on individuals’ lives (e.g. Shakespeare and Watson 2001). When arguing that disabled people only have one important attribute in common, namely that they are all subject to oppression (Barnes 1991, quoted in Watson 2002, 512), the impairment aspect of the disability phenomenon is neglected. However, particularly in writings within American Disability Studies that deal with people who ‘have a disability’ (e.g. Peterson et al. 2010), the consideration of the social-contextual side of disability seems to be too subtle. Accordingly, the human rights approach applied in the US possibly tends to overemphasize the impairment side of the disability phenomenon. For this reason, UNICEF’s statement ‘See the child – before the disability’ (UNICEF 2013) would not be acceptable in an academic context and its political circles of Disability Studies within the UK. One example can be seen in the reaction to a similarly sounding UK Government campaign in the 1990s, with the slogan ‘See the
person [and not the disability], which was opposed by disability activists largely because in their view, the term ‘disability’ referred to physical impairment (e.g. Findlay 1999, 7).

Summing up this section on the comparison of meanings of ‘disability’, it becomes clear that – even though the Disability Studies communities in different world regional contexts converged on their policies from different pathways – the way to achieve certain ideals arguably have many parallels. And formulations of ideals we are sharing nowadays partly reach back to the beginnings of Disability Studies, for example, to the book project Paul Hunt had initiated in the 1960s in London, out of which the Foreword by Peter Townsend is stating that ‘disability […] is more a matter of degree than of kind. It is more a relative than an absolute condition’ (Townsend 1966, viii). However, for the research communities considered relevant as reference cultures for the teaching context we are introducing in this article, it counts as beyond debate and thus incontestable that impairments and the interconnected disabilities in various situations occasionally limit individuals’ potential for participation. This claim certainly holds even more true when dealing with non-physical impairments, such as ‘intellectual disabilities’, mental illness, traumatization or (eventually resulting) disruptive behaviour.

**Bridging cultures by teaching disability studies in comparative ways to international students**

For the following we will provide some insights into interventions we chose with the intention to bridge cultures for the sake of providing students in [name of city] with tools that help them take disability from intercultural viewpoints and a critical stance. The topics chosen for the curriculum of ‘Disability and Society’ and ‘Participation, Inclusion and Justice – implications for education and social work’ were the following: What is disability? What does the term Disability Studies mean?; Disability classifications and their development in historical perspective; Different models of disability (medical, social, bio-psycho-social, Nordic social-relational, etc.); Fundamental theories, basic concepts (e.g., stigmatization; discrimination); Visual Arts, poetry, and creative writing; Disability & Society, Social Work (employment, health care), Social Studies, Sociology; ‘Bodies-in-Design’, Universal Design; ‘Disability Rights and Wrongs’ (in-depth lit. study); Interdisciplinarity & Intersectionality (e.g. gender, class, ethnicity).

The way that CIDS is incorporated into the teaching at [name of institution] is oriented on basic principles Reinhard Bendix formulated in the context of his elaborations on comparison as a method in the social sciences by trying – as highlighted by his son Bendix (1998, 311) – to stick to a number of things which ‘comparativists’ might be well advised to keep in mind:

1. the significance of personal experience in shaping intellectual interests;
2. the dangers of too readily accepting paradigmatic views of social, economic and political change;
3. the need to think across various social sciences when comparing;
4. the need to not neglect historical depth;
5. the need for conceptual clarification (or the limited applicability of terms);
6. the extent to which comparison is a search for contrasts;
7. the role and value of ideal types;
8. the moral dimensions and implications of comparison.

**Towards a new sociology of disability**

Centrepiece of the courses we are highlighting here, along those methodological lines, is an approach to the study of disability and social justice according to which it is relations that students are explicitly requested to focus on and establish when comparing definitions and representations of ‘disability’ in various historical periods and cultural contexts and between culture-specific worlds of
meaning rather than *phenomena* as such. Hence, the main issue at stake is the identification, interpretation and critical discussion of functional equivalence to be found in disability-related discourses throughout the world and the use of a *method of comparison* while studying relations in connection with ‘disability’.

The conceptual link between the chosen approach to CIDS which is organized around the principle that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon that is adequately understood when being looked at from a context- and culture-specific relative interactionist perspective, and common approaches of Disability Studies Pedagogy is provided by what Thomas (2012) coined ‘new sociology of disability’, in connection with her plan to develop a disciplinary variant of equality and diversity studies in sociology, that is ‘located alongside the now familiar engagements with gender, “race”, sexuality, age and social class’ (Thomas 2012, 210). One central feature of this idea is that the ‘new sociology of disability’ is intended to come into life as a new sub-discipline within mainstream sociology on the global stage and would thus potentially be capable of bridging different approaches to the study of disability, such as different academic cultures of Disability Studies in the US, the UK and the Nordic countries. Thomas calls her approach ‘a new sociology of disability in the equality and diversity genre’ in which disability is thought of ‘as an essential thematic arena within equality and diversity studies’ (Thomas 2012, 211f).

To position disability within the paradigm of equality and diversity studies and further understand, compare and challenge definitions and representations of ‘disability’ in various cultures, a disability researcher from the UK (the second author) was invited to deliver a workshop on disabled students’ experiences and expectations in an inclusive international educational setting.

The topic for this workshop was based on second author’s research and publications in the field. Inspired by her own experiences of being a disabled international student in British higher education institutions (HEIs), she investigated the accounts of fellow disabled students (18 from Western and 12 from non-Western countries) studying at British universities for her Ph.D. research. Qualitative methods such as a focus group and 30 semi-structured interviews were utilized, focusing on the areas of information; access and funding; disability services; learning and teaching; and non-disability-support services including accommodation and social life. Subsequently, adopting the UK social model of disability, a range of disabling barriers in participants’ university life, in particular those pertaining to education, disability, cultural issues and physical environment were identified and analysed. Since these barriers were analysed in the social model framework, disabled students’ voices and experiences remained the focal point of the research throughout and have informed the second author’s future academic output in the field. In order to inform individual teaching staff, HEIs and policy advisors, the thesis conclusion contained recommendations for alternative, flexible and responsive practices based on the inclusive education principles. What follows is a discussion of the workshop content, specifically in relation to CIDS principles, and the way it was delivered.

**Workshop on experiences and expectations of disabled international students in HE**

The workshop commenced with an introduction to the second author’s academic background. Various barriers such as physical, attitudinal, educational, funding and social based on her double identity of ‘disabled international’ student shaped and influenced the second author’s personal and academic experiences whilst a student at two British universities. Yet, the dearth of national policy and documentation to address the barriers relating to disabled international students’ specific concerns in a British educational context has been alarming and further reinforces the prevailing assumptions and expectations of ‘normalcy’ embedded in the education system itself. Despite claims by HE policy that the sector adopts a ‘social model’ understanding of ‘disability’ and ensures an inclusive environment, HEIs tend to demonstrate characteristics of a more ‘integrated’ education system (Madriaga et al. 2010). The policy is still dominated by an interpretation of an
individual student’s medical ‘deficiencies’ and a perceived lack therefore of her/his abilities; hence, the responses are often individualized and reactive. In an integrated university setting, as also evidenced by the second author’s first-hand experience, students who are labelled as having ‘additional needs’ are mainstreamed without the educational environments being adapted or modified (Sooreni 2013). Instead, the students are expected to fit into an inflexible institution that is unresponsive to their needs.

To discuss the intercultural practicalities of university rhetoric, the workshop participants were divided into two groups. One group was asked to consider the barriers that disabled domestic students may face in a university environment and the other group was invited to focus on non-disabled international students’ possible difficulties in an overseas university. Practicing one of the CIDS principles, participants were encouraged to search for contrasts in meanings, opinions and observations of differing barriers within their respective group.

Subsequently, the group which considered disabled domestic students’ concerns reported various universal disabling barriers such as access issues, including long distances between buildings, inaccessible routes, steps, broken lifts, heavy doors for students with physical impairments and lack of tactile signage for students with visual impairments within university facilities. Participants discussed the prevalence of the ‘disability’ definition being only in medical individual deficit terms on majority of universities’ literature and forms, and how this may prevent disclosure, particularly from students who understand disability in social model terms. Thereby students may fear being labelled or discriminated against and opt out from disclosing their impairments, therefore miss out on receiving appropriate assistance throughout their studies. Next, they identified barriers in disability services such as Personal Assistance (PA) schemes, including PAs not receiving appropriate training to assist students with specific tasks (e.g. note-taking or supporting them with campus orientation). Highlighted disabling educational practices ranged from lack of accessible information, handouts and exam papers, to inaccessible lecture rooms and teaching procedures, and inappropriate exam set-ups (e.g. noisy and distracting exam rooms for students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD]). The group also discussed how due to inaccessible accommodation availability, some students may be expected to live in inaccessible housing at least during their first term, which provides an unnecessary hurdle during a crucial stage for students’ successful transition period.

The points raised by the group which focused on non-disabled international students’ difficulties comprised of practical challenges such as obtaining visas, availability of relevant information on housing and financial support pre-/post-arrival, as well as emotional and affective issues such as homesickness, stress and culture shock. Participants talked about problems such as linguistic diversity, cultural adaptation and integration. Adapting oneself to a different pedagogical culture and academic convention including alternate system of assessment, seminar, study and writing skills may exaggerate international students’ study-related complications.

The workshop participants were then invited to think about the possible barriers faced by disabled international students. It was explained that sometimes the intersectionality of this group’s double or even multiple identities simultaneously enhances the existing difficulties, resulting in new barriers being created, reinforcing an unequal university experience. The group spent some time focusing on previously discussed disabled and international students’ concerns as two separate groups. In practical terms, they discussed how some of these barriers in isolation may continue to have negative impact on disabled international students’ educational and social experience, while others not only can intersect and compound the existing barriers but may also create new obstacles. In this way, the group was encouraged to reflect on the concept of intersectionality in relation to students’ age, impairment, nationality and type of course studied, and how these identities interconnect and thus shape university experiences.

The predominant obstacle reported appeared to be the cultural interpretation and variation in the understanding and treatment of ‘disability’. This difference was all the more evident in the context of degree and type of disability support required and offered, as well as the variety of existing anti-discrimination legislations in different countries. The discussion struck in accord with the second
author’s findings in her Ph.D. research: nationality and culture impact on social relations and family attitudes to ‘disability’ and disabled people. This reflects the conceptual link between the chosen approach to CIDS based on the understanding that disability is a cultural construct, which is adequately understood when being examined from a social context- and culture-specific ‘relative interactionist’ (Gustavsson 2004) viewpoint.

The discussion then focused on how in the light of minimal information concerning disclosure received, disabled international students may feel overwhelmed and unsure what terminology to use to disclose their impairments in a different cultural and linguistic context. The group discussed different concepts of impairment prevalent in participants’ own cultural contexts, and how the socio-cultural and linguistic differences can often increase confusion and misunderstandings about what ‘disability’ means.

To support this discussion, the second author cited Deng and Guo (2007), who explain that in China educational services recognize only three categories of disability: cognitive, visual and hearing impairments, while in Hungary and France the support provision for children with ‘special needs’ is focused on pupils with learning and behavioural difficulties (van Zanten 2009). The difference in classifying children as having ‘special education needs’ also exists within Western countries. The US categories of the term point to individual students’ ‘disabilities’, whereas the German categories refer to educational support needed, highlighting the medicalization of the American system (Powell 2009). Thus, the way in which disability was defined, classified and conceived within the group differed depending on the respective cultural context. Thereby another of the CIDS’ principles was adhered to, making use of students’ diverse backgrounds in order to generate further discussions, as well as aiming for conceptual clarification.

In terms of information accessibility, the workshop participants pointed out that for some disabled international students receiving timely, accessible and appropriate information from their host universities, through post and phone contacts for example, is vital, yet this may not be a standard university practice. Barriers such as visa issues, inaccessible application forms and administrative staff’s lack of awareness regarding disabled international students’ problems were but a few of challenges highlighted by participants for the admission stage. They thought all this limits disabled international students’ choices of a suitable university and is unhelpful in reducing stress related to starting university life in a different country.

Moving onto the PA scheme, the participants discussed how the limited funding for this service available in some countries may put disabled international students at a risk of not being able to access such crucial support and therefore face much more complex set of disability-related barriers in their new environment. Additionally, the cultural differences in perception of giving and receiving disability-related assistance in participants’ home countries with that of the host country were discussed. Similar to differing definitions of disability, the topic of care and support was also culturally interpreted. Once again this diversity of perceptions created interesting debates. For example, whilst some participants in a matter of fact fashion talked about helping their disabled friends informally with daily activities in their home universities, others pointed to the formalized disability-support system present in their institution. The latter group favoured the university support provision, eluding to the problems that can arise when relying on support from friends. They argued that once the academic work becomes heavy and pressurized, the other students may be less available and willing to volunteer to help.

Although arguably the difficulties related to the pedagogical inaccessibility are general to all disabled students, participants’ attention was drawn to the fact that international students often have to conduct lengthy discussions with the academic staff in their second or even third language in order to access the same entitlements as their domestic counterparts. Whilst disabled domestic students in the UK, for example, are automatically granted exam allowances based on a needs assessment prior to starting their course, the majority of disabled international students arrive just before their course starts and thus miss out on such crucial opportunity of their needs being assessed. Finally, the group talked about specific disabled international students’ housing concerns mainly relating to on campus
accessible family accommodation availability. The discussion revolved around the importance of this support given that most disabled international students may not be able to pay for PA hours and other services for all their daily support needs.\textsuperscript{5}

The next section of the workshop was introduced by explaining that even though in the HE context, international students are incentivized because of their financial value, through the provision of minimal additional support as an individualized measure in countries like the UK, disabled international students’ disability-related needs are at best reacted to inconsistently, or merely tolerated and at worst ignored or even rejected. At this stage, participants were invited to reflect on various inclusive education practices that not only identify and remove informational, attitudinal, pedagogical and social barriers discussed previously in the workshop, but can also welcome, celebrate, value and respect students’ diversity and dignity, leading to an inclusive culture.

Participants thought that on pre-arrival, disabled international students will benefit from receiving accessible, relevant and tailored information in their own languages on university-specific student life, including the particularities of various disability-support services on offer; this information to be available in a range of alternative formats such as audio, Braille and large print. Following a discussion about the practicality and feasibility of providing information in different languages, participants agreed that provision of information in English as a shared language should suffice. They suggested that it would be also helpful if information is provided on what does and does not constitute a disability and also how to disclose different impairments in a given language and cultural context. The advantages of enclosing a reassuring note about the confidential treatment of information disclosed were deliberated. Where disability services such as PA schemes are concerned, the general view was that a brief explanation of the cultural understanding and practicalities of student and PA working relationship is essential. In terms of physical access, participants were of the opinion that universities need to embrace flexible access strategies in order to accommodate a wide range of students with different impairments.

To maximize all students’ learning, participants talked about a range of inclusive and flexible teaching methods and assessment procedures in accessible buildings with appropriate facilities. As a final thought participants contemplated on the idea of a collaborative work between disabled international students and the relevant student representatives to develop and facilitate a series of training sessions on equality and cultural awareness from the stage of inception to delivery for all staff in relation to disabled and international students’ issues and also the overlapping complexities for students who belong to both these groups. Despite the variations in understanding of disability in the group, participants agreed that the promotion and practice of such flexible and responsive methods can lead to necessary discussions for change in the current university context, contributing to some specific aspects of inclusive education system. Based on the social model of disability, the inclusive education recognizes different environmental and pedagogical barriers as obstructing disabled students’ progress and advocates for their removal, rather than considering individual disabled students responsible for their failure to access education. The goal is not only to break down traditional thinking of ‘normality’, but also being sensitive to the reality, diversity and intrinsic value of all learners and teachers as well.

Conclusion

The main debates and findings in the workshop supported the theoretical considerations discussed in the first section of this article, specifically relating to the social interpretations of ‘disability’ being dependent on cultural contexts. During the identification, interpretation and debates about disability, participants were referring to a specific historical timeframe and socio-cultural contexts as well as comparing their perceptions on an intercultural level. Hence, this was a worthwhile experience and was a valuable contribution to different collective interpretations, understanding and critical discussion of ‘disability’.
Delivering the workshop was as much an educational experience for both the authors as it was for the participants. The diversity within the group and the interactive nature of the session allowed learning by challenging, questioning and expanding each other’s perceptions, leading to differences being respected and valued.

We conclude that the provision of a legal framework on an international level to achieve inclusion must be supported with moral fervour and genuine political commitment to strengthen its influence to provide the best educational environment for disabled learners, as well as helping with removing barriers and challenging stereotypes. To ensure that quality and sustainable improvements in inclusive education as a human right across the globe can be achieved policy-makers and practitioners must be aware how disability is socially constructed by the communities in their specific localities. The nature of the world, with its diversity and richness, will then be embraced and celebrated.

Notes

1. Only those students who completed the course [course title 1] can take part in the course [course title 2]. For the latter students construct a syllabus (based on ca. 1000 pages of literature) individually on their own, in cooperation with the course leader. As part of the exams, the students are expected to write an essay on the basis of their syllabus. This way we meet the requirement of the method of comparison, to keep in mind the significance of personal experience in shaping intellectual interests (Bendix 1998, 311).

2. We particularly focus here on the Disability Studies communities in the UK, in the US and in Northern Europe, as both our teaching and our research are located within these contexts. In the section on ‘Bridging’, we bring these three research and activist traditions in relation.

3. These points are essential part of the research project with the title ‘Rethinking Disability: the Global Impact of the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) in Historical Perspective’ Florian Kiuppis joins as Core Group Member, which is conducted at the Institute for History of Leiden University (The Netherlands), financed by an ERC Consolidator Grant of the project leader Monika Baár (October 2015-September 2020).

4. This aspect the students become aware of, for example, when visiting a DPO in Norway that makes explicit reference to the IL-movement, organizing Personal Assistance services. This we use as background to discuss various representations of IL in different contexts. Another way of actually involving the students into the situation of members of the IL-movement (and thereby meeting essential requirements of Disability Studies, such as the participatory and emancipatory paradigm) is to bring them into direct contact with activists such as Lois Curtis who exchanged paintings of the students with letters from the students.

5. The students were aware of the housing situation of Adolf Ratzka in the 1960’s at the University of California Los Angeles, had prior to the visit of [Armineh Soorenian] watched a short documentary film (Herzog 1970) and discussed this in line with Bendix’ eight basic principles of CIDS.

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Note on contributors

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