

Finding a voice: Experiences of collaborative and team-based learning of students with disabilities

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Along with small group, pairs, and larger class discussions, teamwork assignments are common features in higher education instruction and assessment. Collaborative learning has traditionally been recognised as encouraging independent learning and metacognitive thinking. Further, the cultural and economic dominance of participatory culture and social media has increased the emphasis on collaborative forms of knowledge-building and learning, and the challenges of distributed work environments, virtual teams and globalisation have made the development of collaborative skills more imperative in higher education.

However, students with disabilities can sometimes find it difficult to achieve collaborative learning outcomes due to a range of issues. For instance, instructors, peers, supervisors or administrators may not completely understand how the learning environment and activities may discourage participation and limit access. Further, they may not recognise the kinds of adjustments needed to help students with disabilities fully participate, nor fully value the contributions they can offer. To compound the problem, students with disabilities often have to self-advocate which requires a higher degree of self-determination skills which they may not yet possess.

Students with disabilities are a growing presence in universities in recent years due to a range of factors and vary widely in their support and accommodation needs as well as the required skills they will need to thrive in a tertiary environment. While educators recognise there is a pressing need for research and improvement of policy with regards to teaching tertiary students with disabilities, there is currently insufficient scholarship regarding students with disabilities in collaborative and group-based learning scenarios.

As part of our research, we have conducted a series of focus groups that canvass students with disabilities for their collaborative learning experiences at university. This paper will present some of the findings from these focus groups, and offer some early recommendations on how collaborative learning experiences can better accommodate the needs of a wide and diverse student body.