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Reducing passive cultural exclusion of people with disabilities, an epistemological approach

Conference paper

Reducing passive cultural exclusion of people with disabilities, an epistemological approach

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The structure of the presentation

* **Before Fulbright** – studies of fine art, visual computing and blindness
  * Understanding the nature of epistemological exclusion
* **Fulbright study** – a study of understanding untouchable art at
  * The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (the Met)
  * Two schools for the blind
    * Massachusetts (Perkins) and California (CSB)
  * Defining passive exclusion in 2D culture
* **After Fulbright** – Recent and future research focusing on epistemology and disability
  * Developing the epistemological model of disability

Introduction

* There has been a change in the epistemological focus of impairment and disability:
  * From biological abnormality treated by
    * Therapies
    * Separate education & training
    * Separate work and living arrangements
    * Social exclusion

* To social and cultural inclusion
* Away from "passive exclusion":
  * the *process* of generating a tacit academic belief that people are incapable of inclusion in certain tasks
* Leading to social and cultural well-being through:
  * Anti-discriminatory institutional policies
  * Laws and inclusive environments
  * International recognition
    * World Health Organisation (WHO)
    * United Nations (UN)

Is belief more important than physical ability?

Before Fulbright

First Study

* Evaluation of students studying at the Richard Attenborough Centre, Leicester University & Continuing Studies, Bristol University (Hayhoe, 2000, 2008a):
  * All of the students were either totally blind or had minimal perception
  * I studied the students in Leicester for a year, and the students in Bristol for only a number of weeks
  * The ages of the people in the case studies ranged from early thirties to eighties, with a mix of gender studied
* Students who were early blind often avoided art tasks
* Students who were late blind, particularly in late adulthood, attempted art tasks

Why is blindness so important as an example of impairment

* Blindness helped to found the Enlightenment
* Blindness is also the topic of the greatest number of moral and intellectual myths – the Bible, Greek mythology, the enlightenment
* Blind people are a clearly defined population, with a clearly defined culture of media and technology
* The experiences of blind and visually impaired people are unique – socially, culturally and educationally (Hayhoe, 2008b)

Epistemology of Perceptualist Theories

* Almost all case studies, from Locke to Sacks, totally blind from birth (Hayhoe, 2003, 2008b)
* Case Study: Revesz (1950)
  * Study of blind artists in different eras
  * All artists were sculptors
  * Doubted blind people had a sense of aesthetics

"[From] what sources could a blind person, who has never seen the world with all its wealth of forms and colour, derive those manifold experiences?... [No] one born blind is able to become aware of the diversity of nature and to apprehend all the rich and various appearances of objects."

Second Study

* Students studying at RNIB New College Worcester (Hayhoe, 2008a)
* Two students had similar impairments and strength from birth
* Students studied over two academic years for A Levels:
  * Anna had previously positive experiences and took many risks
  * Emile had previously bad experiences and avoided many art tasks
  * Reflected in their final mark and academic progression
* The findings of the case studies were comparable to the findings of interviews with teachers (Hayhoe, 2008a)
* Similar findings made in a later study with blind visual programmers (Hayhoe, 2011a, 2011b)

Comparison of styles of art
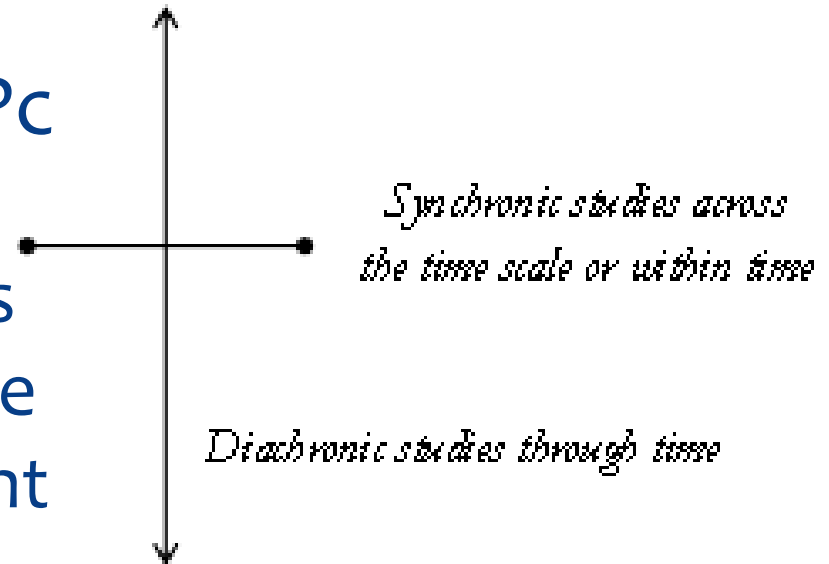
Anna

Emile

Theory "on the back of a cigarette packet" – passive exclusion

Int Ps → (Kn > Im) → Ds Pc

Int Ps = intellectual process
Kn = strength of knowledge
Im = strength of impairment
Ds Pc = disabling practice

Synchronic studies across the time scale or within time

Diachronic studies through time

(De Sauassure in Hayhoe, 2012a)

Why does a blind person want to visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art?

Fulbright Study

Original Brief

* The research project was to survey and interview blind people who visited the Met or museums websites in order to understand:
  * strategies for understanding paintings
  * problems encountered in museums
  * how paintings or other non-tactile exhibits were imagined
  * understanding of visual concepts and visual culture
  * if early blind and late blind visitors were different

Methodology Used in the Study

* Qualitative interviews with:
  * Access visitors to the Met
  * Independent visitors to the Met (Hayhoe, 2013a)
  * Students from schools for the blind (Hayhoe, 2014a)
  * Teachers from the Met
* Observations in the Met of:
  * Touch tours
  * Verbal imaging sessions (Hayhoe, 2013a, 2014a)
  * Special classes, such as drawing sessions

Findings from the Met

* Observations suggested that focus needed alteration to reflect a cultural interpretation:
  * Early blind people discussed cultural and social context
  * Visitors with art education liked aesthetic and cultural context
* There is more to visiting museums than a comprehension of art works
* Visitors use their visits to connect with the museum – this plays a large part in their cultural well being

* People educated in the arts regarded the museum as at least as important as the artworks inside
  * It was a cultural palace or cathedral, invoking feelings such as national or scholastic belonging
* All of the older visitors did not want to access images on the internet
  * They all used their visual impairment as a reason for not doing so

Findings in the Student Case Studies

* Some had scant experience of visiting museums
* All students had art education and were not intimidated by art
* Preferences appeared to reflect their learning experiences and passive exclusion, rather than their visual impairments
* Students were comfortable with technology and were not put off by images on the internet – technology was passively inclusive
* Students were comfortable with verbal description of images
  * This tended to reflect their academic preferences and abilities rather than their level or type of blindness

Combined Findings

* Older students who attended schools for the blind had not been to a museum as a child
* The level of blindness did not appear to be an important factor to engagement with visual images, whether in a museum or on the web
* A generation gap between technologically accessing images
    * Accessing images on the web not dependent on comfort of comprehending images
    * Did appear to reflect their experience with technology

* The museum as a cultural icon was common to adult visitors and students
* Those who visited the museum when younger held the museum in higher esteem
* When observing images in the museum or on the internet, it was more important to be in the presence of the image than to physically perceive the image
* This went against the received wisdom of authors such as Bourdieu and Gombrich, who argued that the purpose of the museum was to be an artistic gymnasium and place of entertainment (Hayhoe, 2013a, 2014a)

The Next Stages

* Defining the difference between active and passive exclusion (Hayhoe, 2013a, 2014a)
* Defining the epistemological model of studying disability and its application (Hayhoe, 2012a)
* Apply this to different cultural settings (Hayhoe, 2014b)
* Apply this to technological settings and contexts (Hayhoe, 2012b, 2013b, 2014c)

Conclusions

* Well being can be social and cultural, and premised on inclusion

* Participation is not necessarily a matter of what is felt to be physically possible, it is guided as much if not more by belief

* Even though people do not appear to be able to physically complete tasks, their well being is based on their inclusion in these tasks

Questions?

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