

The Effectiveness of Guest Lecturers with Disabilities in the Classroom

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Abstract : Often, instructors prefer to bring into class a guest lecturer who can provide an “experiential” perspective on a particular topic. The assumption is that the personal experience brought into the classroom makes the material resonate more with students and that students would have a preference for material being taught from an experiential perspective. The question we asked in the present study was whether a guest lecture from an “experiential” expert with a disability (e.g. a guest suffering from cone-rod dystrophy lecturing on vision, or a dyslexic lecturing on the psychology of reading) would be more effective than the course instructor in capturing students attention and conveying information in an Introduction to Psychology class. Students in two sections of Introduction to Psychology (N = 25 in each section) listened to guest lecturers with disabilities lecturing on a topic related to their disability, one in the area of Sensation and Perception (the guest lecturer is vision impaired) and one in the area of Language Development (the guest lecturer is dyslexic). The Guest lecturers lectured on the same topic in both sections, however, each lecturer used their own experiences to highlight the topics they cover in one section but not the other (counterbalanced between sections), providing students in one section with experiential testimony. Following each of the 4 lectures (two experiential, two non-experiential) students rated the lecture on several dimensions including overall quality, level of engagement, and performance. In addition, students in both sections were tested on the same test items from the lecture material to ascertain degree of learning, and given identical “pop” quizzes two weeks after the exam to measure retention. It was hypothesized that students would find the experiential lectures from lecturers talking about their disabilities more engaging, learn more from them, and retain the material for longer. We found that students in fact preferred the course instructor to the guests, regardless of whether the guests included a discussion of their own disability in their lectures. Performance on the exam questions and the pop quiz items were not different between “experiential” and “non-experiential” lectures, suggesting that guest lecturers who discuss their own disabilities in lecture are not more effective in conveying material and students are not more likely to retain material delivered by “experiential” guests. In future research we hope to explore the reasons for students preference for their regular instructor over guest lecturers.

Keywords : guest lecturer, student perception, retention, experiential

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