

a different perspective on inclusive practice...



# respectful language

a practical handbook

Laura Chapman



## **A different perspective on inclusive practice**

### **Respectful language**

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## Acknowledgements

While writing can often be a lonely endeavour, the learning that goes into a book is a shared process. This handbook represents a significant journey enriched by conversations with many people along the way. It is, as always, time to say a big ‘thank you’ to those who have helped, encouraged and supported... and made this legislation of the journey possible.

Thanks goes to those who gave up their time generously to help me learn more about respect: Ken Thompson, Ross Davies, Megan Crawford, John West-Burnham, Andrea Layzell, Alison John, Wendy Stark, and Rosie Gorman.

Thanks also goes to those who gave this job purpose: Yasmin Khan, Sam Smith, Emily Morton, Sharon Brown, John Fuller, Sally Byng, Richard Holmes, Michaela Kennedy and Jordan Purcell-Ashburner.

Thanks to those that keep giving help and encouragement, generously and tirelessly: Cormac Russell, Ruth Hunt, Sam Clark, Nimmi Johal, Suzanne Marshal, and Lesley Sharkey.

I owe a huge amount of thanks to the colleagues who were willing to be interviewed for this research. Their thoughts are expressed by some particularly eloquent jelly babies who appear throughout the pages that follow.



## 1. Introduction

This document raises key questions for our time, questions that are not only significant for learning and personal growth but also critical for the direction of organisational change.

### *Why do our services reveal so little respect for human experience?*

Demonstrating our respect to others is rarely a quantified element of a job description. The organisational protocol and process of professional settings can often sap our humanity. By understanding inequality we can begin to see how the bigger pressures in today's society can impact on our capacity to empathise. While individually we may have little power over the world, its systems and institutions, acknowledging how inequality affects us all can be a key to freedom. Where unjust habits become the norm they limit our ability and flexibility in word and behaviour: empathy is lost at great cost to community engagement.

### *Why does language play such an important role in building respect?*

When people feel alienated in conversation they move to the periphery or exclude themselves from shared activity. Acronyms, jargon, and coded phrases increase the distance between professional and citizen. Words are not bad *per se*, but complex terminology can isolate individuals and threaten their sense of belonging. Alternatively, phrases used with care can enable a very different sense of participation.

### *Why articulate ethical commitment?*

From an operational perspective there is a moral imperative to ensure that everyone receives equality of respect in the workplace. Furthermore, language could be the strategic tool with which we change our future. Through conversation we can create scenarios to enable a shared vision. Without storytelling, there is no picture, no articulation of the world we want to inhabit.

### *How do we take ownership of change?*

To address change with confidence we need to feel free to choose. For example we should have a choice about the way we express ourselves in relation to others, and how we describe the fairness and autonomy we experience or seek. Using language as intentional action not only helps spell out our commitment to achieving greater parity, it also helps us articulate our principles and direction when defining our leadership activity.

### *How can we better define our own soulful authority?*

Leadership activity is hard to encapsulate, but we explore it here as a congruence of head, heart and hand. It encompasses our own private thoughts and the personal ideas we share as we pursue our public voice. In articulating soulful authority, I seek to describe the spiritual energy that enables us to make difficult decisions in a complex world full of dilemmas, intangibles and mess.



## 2. The background research

This document draws on my experience as a researcher. While the published dissertation was inevitably somewhat dry, I share here more of my own journey – the meaning I gained from the academic exercise. I believe that the development of respectful language is one way of engaging an entire community of practice in cultural change, and therefore an example of inclusive practice within a professional context. The purpose is not to identify ‘good’ or ‘bad’ words in order to define correct terminology once and for all. It is about a process, one that sets out to spread authority by purposefully sharing the job of articulating understanding. From this point of view, leadership activity is a conversation *between* individuals with *different* experience who seek to articulate their perspectives and alter a shared future.

Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversations don't just reshuffle the cards: it creates new cards. ... it's like a spark that two minds create.<sup>1</sup>

I began my research into ‘respectful language’ having delivered a number of workshops on the topic within equality programmes. Conversations with learners often revealed that they wanted to learn more about terminology because they were often scared about using the ‘wrong words’ in their work. What struck me during the training activity was that people expressed great frustration with political correctness. They told me that political correctness made them angry and/or more confused about what to say. Most were happily surprised to discover that some of the impetus behind respectful language arose from the Civil Rights movement. Language is in a state of flux, so there are few rights or wrongs but choice is important, choice of words often depends on context and a willingness to understand others.

As such, the use of respectful language encourages people to take responsibility for what they think and say about the impact of the ideas *behind* their words. Particularly at work, professionals have a duty to remove the discrimination faced by some groups. However, to achieve greater fairness across services, there is a moral duty to ensure those we work with receive equality of respect.



### ***Five key findings from the research:***

- a. *Respect* is a demonstration of empathy. It is a mindful and proactive activity. Empathy requires intentional thinking, a recognition that other people's feelings and circumstances are separate from our own and a willingness to act appropriately in response to them. Thus respectful language begins with an intention to respond to what others actually want. Showing respect does not involve benevolence or guesswork, or giving what feels comfortable in response to a need: it is a conversation of mutual benefit.
- b. *Reflection for action*. Stereotypes tend to fit with our existing world view. Therefore, addressing what we believe may require the external prompt of participation in a different experience. Conversations with others bring us fresh insights, feelings and perspectives that may support reflection, new understanding and change.
- c. *A community of practice* is defined here as a willing association of professionals, a diverse group working across institutions with a joint purpose. Community is often used to define groups outside an organisation – the 'people on the street'. There is a danger, therefore, in assuming that individuals from marginalised groups exist outside working relationships or mainstream social networks. A community approach seeks to bridge institutional boundaries, explicitly bringing together those who want to talk together.
- d. *The growth of professionalism* depends of the development of collective ideas to secure joint understanding of ethical commitment. Only through conversation can we achieve deeper co-construction of shared meaning, an equal part in knowledge and the responsibility for development of moral purpose. In holding different conversations, courageous and courteous professionals affirm their own values and share human principles.
- e. *Soulful authority* is the humanity that drives leadership activity. Rather than hierarchical status, leadership activity needs moral confidence. How should we encourage and recognise it? Challenging the *status quo*, and helping others to grow is a generous act: how do we make time for the conversation that supports such inclusive practice development?



### 3. The words that bind us

The words we use connect us. Rather than understand speech as a purely personal skill, it may be worth considering our words as interpersonal tools. In this way the threads of ideas that connect us can become a web of shared experience, woven from conversation. Shared stories therefore become the thoughts that connect us. They thread through our relationships, uniting the social fabric of our lives.

Within groups, shared terms and phrases establish common ground. Between groups, these domains may create a patchwork of fields on the shared landscape. Smaller territories that anchor my existence to people and place helps me think more clearly about my relationship with other groups. From this perspective, shared terminology can be seen as part of the world in which I feel comfortable. It is familiar. I feel at home. If my identity belongs with a part of the landscape, then crossing boundaries becomes an act or movement.

The way language connects us seems important here, as different types of dialogue can be used in different ways. We could start with the distinction between private and public. Things we say when we trust another may seem inappropriate in public debate. We may not share with others those ideas with which we privately struggle. Words are tools with multiple meanings. Words are neither good nor bad. Like hammers, knives or spoons, they are neutral: rather, it is their use that gives them power. I've listened to awkward articulations of profound respect, using words that seemed to jar yet said 'I love you' in the way that *The Princess Bride's* character, Westley, says, "As you wish". Equally, I've been insulted in the most politically correct terms and denigrated without any resort to obscenity.

Conversations are not simply sequences of words. Through body language, intonation and demonstration of feeling, we articulate intent and belief in different ways according to context and relationships. I care more about what people are trying to tell me than how they say it. When topics are challenging, it's hard enough to explain our feelings,



I feel respect is present where there's been an authentic and genuine dialogue.





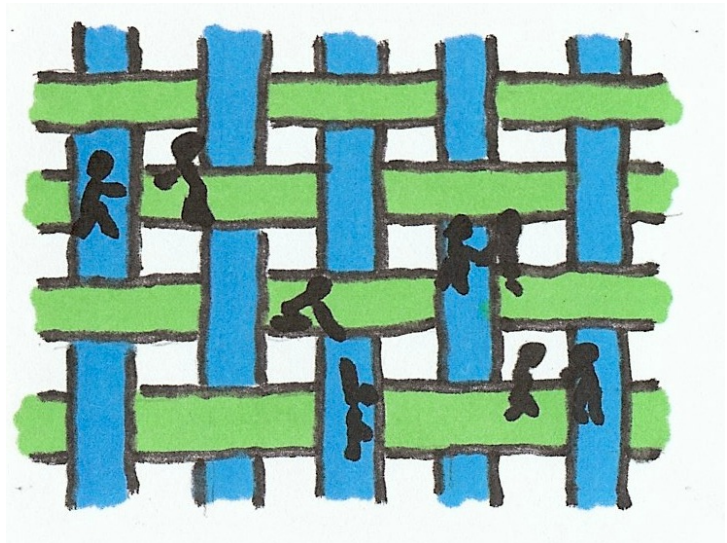


without also feeling compelled to use the correct term or grammar.

Time-served trust and understanding are reflected in the ease at which short phrases and small gesture are understood by those who have shared our journey. With such closeness, the implicit need not be made explicit.

We have already seen that as an interaction, words weave a web, a fabric that connects people. And people make shared “personal languages creative, fluid, dynamic, energetic, changing, fluctuating and varied in terms of functions, places, contexts, personality, age, gender, groups, cultures, history and individuality.”<sup>2</sup>.

But what happens on the boundaries? Are we explorers or visitors? Do we impose our ideas? Do our words impact on others? Or can we sit expectantly, sensitively joining in at another’s pace? Are we willing to hear those who believe we have earned the right to hear their story? We need to be *a respectful visitor*, demonstrating courtesy and empathy until we can share enough trust to walk the path together and call the journey our own.

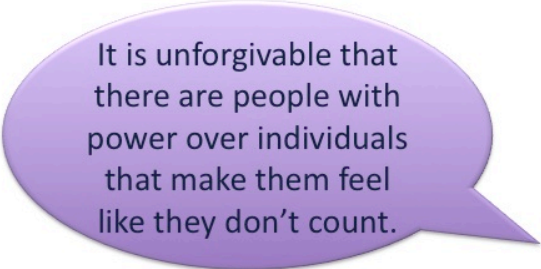




### *Service-led provision and inevitable inequality*

... it is in those more equitable affluent countries where people live the longest, where social conditions are most favourable, that people are most likely to admit to not feeling so great all the time, because they can afford to admit to it.<sup>3</sup>

Society's widespread consumerism influences what we value in our lives. In acknowledging its impact we can reclaim some control by declining direction by institutional procedures. For example, I understand widespread materialism: I therefore try to limit my acquisition of shoes, articulating my belief that excessive materialism is a problem. More specifically within services, the fixation on the bottom line can prevent us from appreciating the value of human experience. Making decisions based on cost-cutting in people's lives may prevent us from acknowledging the part of human experience that is fundamentally more important to their well-being and happiness: **control**<sup>4</sup>.



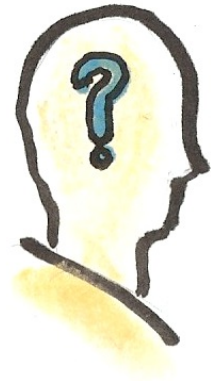
It is unforgivable that there are people with power over individuals that make them feel like they don't count.





## 4. Inclusive practice - the intentional conversation

We can't be creative if we refuse to be confused. Change always starts with confusion; cherished interpretations must dissolve to make way for the new<sup>5</sup>.



Enabling the fullest participation is at the heart of good practice. To begin with, addressing inequality implies an understanding that not all have equal opportunity. Being clear in the articulation of *systemic inequality* encourages the speaker to focus not only on everyday barriers but on the more profound physical, attitudinal and institutional barriers that obstruct equality of participation.

The ability to identify the language of stereotypes is fundamentally more useful than labelling words as good or bad. An ever-deeper understanding of the characteristics of different types of discrimination is important: people face greater disadvantage because prejudice is cumulative. Not only do some individuals face it every day, but the various labels applied to them may each draw unfair treatment. The cumulative effect compounds the difficulties people face and reduces their chance to participate in community life.

Shared endeavour enables all community members to make a positive difference, empowering us to actively change our own circumstances. Addressing inequality through community action shifts the focus from a service-led assumption that the person, family or group is faulty to individual capacity, contribution and fulfilment.





## Ethical development

Inclusive practice does not exist in a vacuum. It has a purpose. It needs to be anchored. It follows a direction, a philosophy, a vision or a dream. Inclusive practice is not a policy or dictate, neither is it a new idea or an alternative methodology. Inclusive practice is probably best described as a moral imperative<sup>6</sup>: a very personal blend of faith and spirituality that underpins the way we *choose* to work. In short inclusive practice is leadership activity.



Inclusive practice is happening all around us. In their many different ways, people everywhere are taking action and demonstrating a willingness to change the world they live in. With its roots in ethical development this action is not simply good practice or efficacy. Inclusive practice is about developing respectful ways of working. It's about challenging injustice and valuing different experience. Ethical development is about being mindful of the things that matter and embracing the tensions when circumstances deny parity of esteem. It is about talking with courage of injustice and inequality, so that the conversation can drive purposefully forward to help secure meaning and belonging.

Where language is seen as the activity that brings people together, conversation within groups enables the sharing of knowledge and explaining what is valued – and therefore central to common purpose<sup>7</sup>. While *doing it right* puts emphasis on the bureaucratic *procedure*, it is often *doing the right thing* that determines attitude and ability and energises *the process*. Unfortunately, a predominant focus on procedure helps people to ignore moral ambiguities. *Doing the right thing* implies a willingness to respect the interests of those working with and around us in order to secure moral justification<sup>8</sup>. To do this people will need to encourage fuller participation, in 'a process that builds capacity and ownership through cumulative learning and commitment'<sup>9</sup>.

Put simply, ethical development can be defined as *learning to change for the better* - engaging in dialogue that extends (rather than limiting) possibilities. Ideally, it is the never-ending process of questioning the purpose in our work. The 'why' has a specific purpose – to deliver greater equity



by developing *ways of talking* about our existence and celebrating belonging. **Ethical development is the journey as well as the direction!**

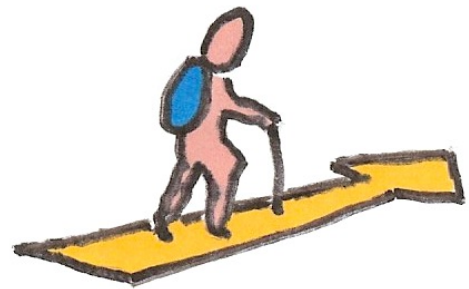


## Change

Many of us find it difficult to hold an idea of long-term change in our minds. Simplicity and ease must not be equated: great change demands significant effort, as a great deal of time and personal growth must be invested to secure new knowledge. The transformation in working practices that will generate the change in culture we contemplate here will take many years.

People often have more influence than they think, giving their language power. In their roles their words convey meaning that varies according to context. Their words can therefore be used as tools to carry out intentional action with a social function<sup>10</sup>. In terms of power, our influence still exists even if it is not congruent with institutional ranking, and therefore authority is not formally recognised<sup>11</sup>.

Not all language is spoken. Indeed, much is non-verbal. Listening, too, is part of language when it is intentionally used to invite sharing and acknowledge others' experiences. Even within a highly structured institution, "reciprocity banishes the assumption that only some people are thinkers"<sup>12</sup>. Viewed thus, language is a moral fabric woven from the threads we choose to share through speech, movement, and silence: in this sense, language has no function outside social connection<sup>13</sup>.

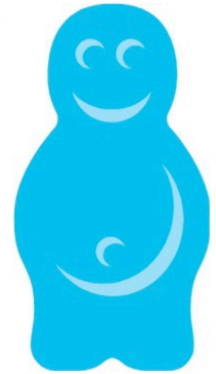


To support respect within this connection, personal choice is essential, for it is through our choice of words, phrases, intonation and so on that we alter the conversation within an organisation. People have great control over such choices. Ideally, a different type of dialogue is supported so that people feel they are part of the conversation. The words professionals use do not seem to be the problem, but correctness is frequently an imposition rather than an explanation.



The acknowledgement that power is held in the words we use is important if professionals want to mindfully demonstrate empathy. It is not enough that words are not used to cause harm to others; they must clearly acknowledge the power differential. Speakers must weigh up options and alternatives to maximise positive impact on others.

**A lot of it is very subtle, because a lot of it is the nonverbal, the body language and way people look at you... Sometimes it's more important than the spoken language.**





## 5. Meaning and power

### Do ducks duck down in down duvets?

The impact of words on others is explained by Speech Act Theory, which describes ethical behaviour as ultimately relationship-bound, and therefore localised within professional boundaries as well as communities. While internal dialogue is one aspect of personal reflection, language use has influence on others and therefore a site of speaker power:

Language use has a force as well as an abstract content... people, being people, cannot simply perform speech acts without any concern for those interpersonal implications<sup>14</sup>.

The nub of the issue does not concern 'good' or 'bad' words, as respectful language aims to be neither negative nor positive: instead, it aims to describe situations clearly and with awareness. Words have meaning, but they are tools used for different jobs and a single word may have a variety of meanings. Words may be used in different ways according to place, time or person. Homographs show how meaning can change:

"I shed a tear for a tear, and the wind winds me up!"

Meaning also changes with tone, expression, and inflection. If in response to a sad story I'm laughing rather than serious, my interlocutor might be offended. Change cannot happen without a good understanding of language because the discovery of truth and the creation of knowledge depend on understanding both meaning and context<sup>15</sup>. Sometimes words are used to convey positive or negative ideas about certain individuals with identifiable characteristics or groups with specific traits or descriptions. When this happens they can act as labels, which in turn can reinforce ideas about people and their identity. These biased ideas and stereotypes can reinforce the idea that some groups have more power than others by virtue of their characteristics or affiliation.

The words we use reflect the assumptions we make and the beliefs we hold, and therefore articulate the things we take for granted – our unchallenged thoughts. We often fail to realise that what we say impacts our unconscious mind and how we think.

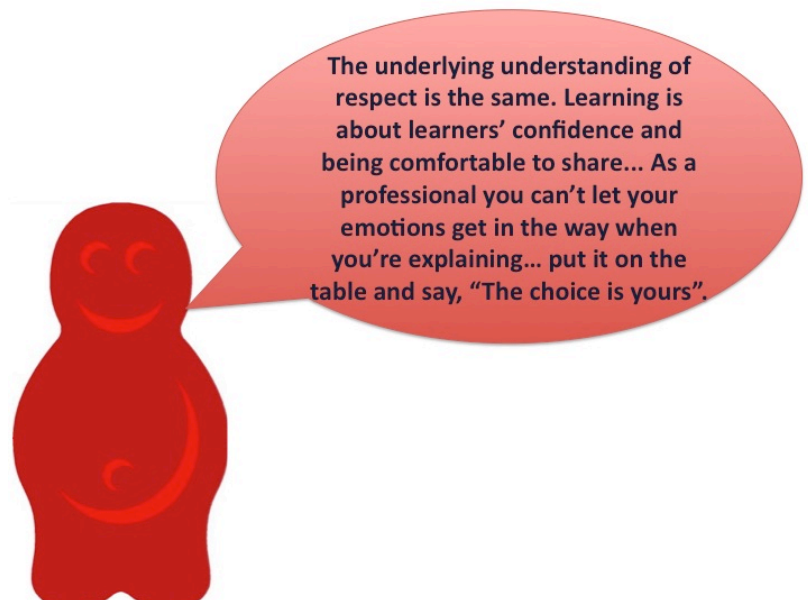






Understanding how certain phrases nurture a variety of unconscious assumptions helps explain why words can create their own tensions in ethical debates. Describing a group as a minority, for example, rather than one that is marginalised (by another group), communicates the idea that they are deficient or needy. In the struggle for articulation of meaning within services, specific terms can represent a whole approach or methodology. For example, where ideas are used within sectors to support certain approaches to practice development, phrases will gain meaning unique to the teaching within that sector. Consider the word 'risk', for playworkers it implies positive growth to be encouraged through activity, for social workers it describes negative behaviour associated with substance misuse or dangerous personal choices.

The words we choose and use can show how far we are willing to engage with a view that differs from our own. Put another way, our choice of terminology may demonstrate our willingness to employ the 'textual worlds of others rather than remain in our own'<sup>16</sup>. We should also bear in mind the importance of indirect meaning such as artistic licence or spoonerisms, which rely on the common understanding of phrases that carry many subtleties of thought, reason, interaction and humour<sup>17</sup>.






## 6. Political correctness

“When change is done to people they experience it as violence; when change is done by them they experience it as liberation - Beth Moss Kanter“

There is so much confusion around the *correct* use of words that people are often too scared to talk about the issues the words *convey*. Using politically correct language is not the same as using respectful language. The issue is one of choice. Political correctness is largely imposed, some would argue from above.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, because the choice governing political correctness often lacks ethical foundations, it can create its own misunderstanding. Advocating terms such as *physically challenged* or *visually challenged*, may seem euphemistically less negative or derogatory but such terms fail to challenge people about the source of a problem. Euphemisms often detract from the serious issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance etc. The problem remains the same: in short, who is being challenged? Is it about difference or common humanity? Then how do we embrace it? And how do we label those understandings that do not fit our world view?

Action by feminist lobby groups demanding changes in words such as asking for use of ‘chair’ and ‘spokesperson’ in the 1980s, has fallen out of favour. Times have changed, and while sexism still goes on, its form and character has altered, as it has for other ‘isms’. However, the political correctness lobby has created its own problems, confusing certain issues and ignoring debates that were important to marginalised groups. The negative reaction to political correctness is easy to understand because it feels like an imposition on personal choice. People feel they are being told what to say and instead of changing the conversation to one about power, they instead feel resentment or challenge. In some cases, politically correct terms reinforced by urban myths, have further contributed to harmful stereotyping.

The term ‘political correctness’ is thus a good illustration of the way terms can ‘slide around’, having slightly different meanings for different people, and being a ‘site of struggle’<sup>19</sup>.



Political correctness made us change the words but not the conversation.



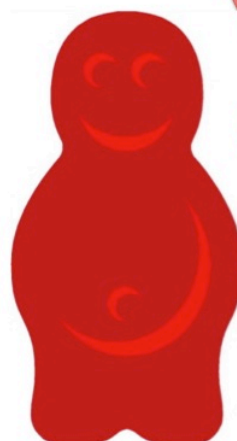


## Self-reference

Brainstorming is used in the United Kingdom to describe the sharing of random thoughts to encourage creative ideas. A few years ago, the term received media attention as rumours spread that management memos were being sent telling workers that the expression was no longer to be used. The reason given was that “a brainstorm” could be confused with a description of an epileptic fit. The reason for not using the phrase was that it would imply disrespect toward those with epilepsy. However, a quick survey revealed that neither individuals nor organisations supporting people with this condition had endorsed this concern or indeed complained. As no one did equate brainstorm with epilepsy, the explanation to back the change in terminology now seems conjectural. This demonstrates how harmful imposition can be, where advice is without the grounding in theoretical understanding or leadership of group voice. More needs to be done by us, in professional roles, to understand the experience shared by individuals, and stories articulated by groups of self-representing advocates. Our wording to reflect experience – not conjecture.

The ideals of conversation remained masculine, until women changed the subject. They showed that talking about the emotions could not only improve the way we treat each other, but also diminished brutality and aggressiveness in general.<sup>20</sup>

Language demonstrates group ownership of ideas and where used to empower people it may encourage people to contribute more to shared action. I love that moment in training when participants request that we 'avoid jargon' as a ground rule. I smile, as I suspect that what they actually mean is 'don't use *your* jargon' for they invariably continue to use *theirs*. Jargon often refers to the familiar terms (technical, expert or acronyms) of which a group has developed shared understanding.



A victim of discrimination? No I experience it, I'm not a victim – if you say it to people they'll believe it, words carry images and that image can be taken on sometimes by the individual, if you tell somebody they're ugly often enough... but tell them they're gorgeous and sexy...



### ***The dehumanising article***

'The' black, 'the' poor, 'underachievers'... To call any group of people 'the' reinforces the idea that they are homogeneous and therefore adds a dehumanising note. People's experiences are different. Thus their understanding, sensitivity and response to similar circumstances will vary, as illustrated here with reference to gender difference:

To some extent it may be possible to generalize about the ways in which woman and men differ while always remembering that there are bigger differences of attitudes and behaviour within each sex than between them.<sup>21</sup>

The word 'gender' in this sentence could equally be exchanged for other groups. In conversation, reference to likeness within groups accentuates and reinforces stereotypes. To avoid the generalisation, therefore, the speaker needs to understand group difference. This deliberate choice can also help draw attention to the different experience people encounter when subject to inequality. Use of 'the' may sway attitude, behaviour, and motivation to the majority or traditional view. Unfortunately, the majority view is often blind to perspectives that remain unrecognised until acknowledged by the rest of us.

Many people from underrepresented groups have felt empowered by the ideas and language of the Rights Movement. Using language reclaimed and owned by group affiliation is partly about identity for some, but many words have been chosen to describe experience from a specific position. For example, the term 'disabled' has become positive and empowering for many people. When used to articulate *disablism* as the character of a specific oppression. Used as a verb - I am disabled by attitudes; he is disabled by systems, he faces disabling structures - it recognises the environmental impact of discrimination as external to the person. Significantly, it also acknowledges that society can change to remove the negativity underlined by particular words.



In a professional context where racism, sexism, disablism exist, you have to take each one as it comes... I can't collude, so I have to challenge... I can't abide political correctness, it is about respect, about the speaker understanding why it's not appropriate.

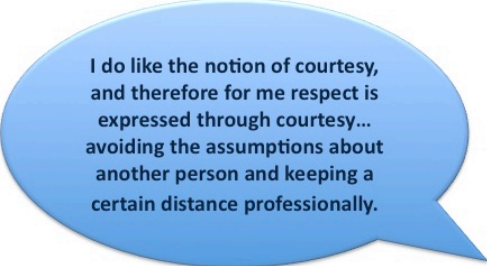


## 7. Respect: courtesy and empathy

Ideas and values do not always translate to equitable practice; and imposing change can end up stifling freedom of expression (and learning) even when implementation is in the interest of equality. I think balance is key, and a wider perspective may prevent exclusive focus not taking account of other factors. While ownership can enhance feelings of belonging in members of one group, different ways of talking creates power imbalances between groups. Furthermore, how easily we use the specific language within a certain group can serve to indicate how much we belong; for as familiarity and fluency increase the more we identify with others<sup>22</sup>. Equally getting words wrong highlights possible estrangement.

Academic theory is robust about the significance of politeness. However, whatever people call it courtesy does seem to be an important factor in establishing respect in professional relationships. In demonstrating courtesy we employ knowledge of words, place and thought<sup>23</sup>. While people I interviewed may not have agreed on words, they all talked about the direction of action. The people I listened to spoke of mutuality, consideration and genuine feelings. Giving was not perceived as benevolence but generosity. The overall feeling was one of shared experience, not a donation from superior to needy. As equal members in a common humanity, *mutual* consideration seemed to mean more than any nominated exchange.

Courtesy as empathetic action may be better understood as the willingness to demonstrate our respect for each other. It was also noted that in a professional context, it was important to address others with a degree of formality. This convention implied a consideration to equal status, where familiarity could denote lack of consideration. Using formal language also conveyed an intended expectation of reciprocal respect. This was particularly striking when it contradicted the negative behaviour typically encountered by marginalised



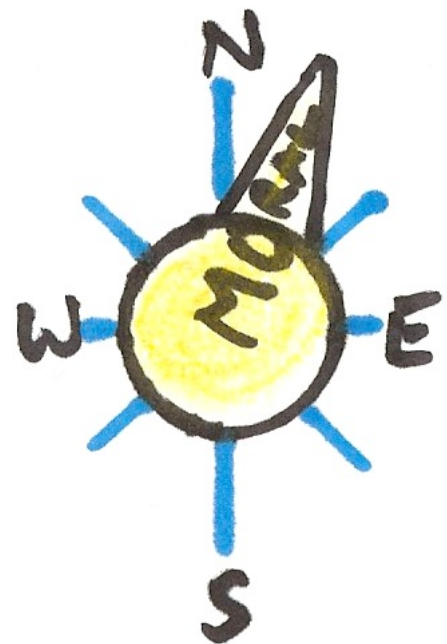
I do like the notion of courtesy, and therefore for me respect is expressed through courtesy... avoiding the assumptions about another person and keeping a certain distance professionally.





groups. Formal language may later become relaxed with increasing trust. The professional must be able to model in their own language the sort of responses they believe are appropriate in any given situation.

Using titles instead of 'you' during teaching, for example, sets an expectation that the courtesy would be reciprocated. Some participants viewed holding doors open and dressing smartly as daily actions that demonstrated a respect to others. However, people seemed to agree that problems occurred where language is used as a means of control. A moral basis has to be agreed it was thought, otherwise, language could be used to reinforce status or hierarchy. The challenge therefore is to find a way of turning basic ethical principles into personal moral practice. It is in daily interaction with others that professionals reveal whether they are true to their principles. Reciprocation creates a morally sound relationship. Exploitative or one-way interaction could be morally unacceptable.





## 8. Reflection for action

If it is true that professional practice has at least as much to do with finding the problem as with solving the problem found, it is also true that problem setting is a professional activity.<sup>24</sup>

At work, our conversations often unwittingly revolve around need. Unfortunately (and perhaps driven by latent consumerism) other people's deficits become our focus. However, the focus on deficit and its financial implications needs to be taken seriously in difficult social and political contexts because it calls into question any definition of organisational purpose. Because ethical development depends on finding common ground across organisation and community boundaries, social responsibility is increasingly important. Some go as far as to suggest that the language we use has become the problem. People's words are neither neutral nor value-free. Therefore, a new conversation is needed to support change; more importantly that change needs to be *done with* rather than *done to* people.<sup>25</sup> Viewed thus, as conversation that is either reflective or public, it is dialogue which may bring about different action.

Discussion which does not resolve itself by finding common ground... Though no common shared agreement may be reached, through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another.<sup>26</sup>

With a different conversation in mind, the hardest movements are the mindset leaps from *wrong* to *different*, from *correct* to *transforming*, from *customary* to *innovative*. As with beginners in any new area of exploration, it is hard not to feel afraid and humble when faced with an expanse of new information. The danger is that the more expert we feel, the less flexible we become in considering different perspectives. There is a fine line between competence and arrogance, and learning to consider a different view from an alternative angle may just help us accept difference rather than impose our on ways.



Difference is like the stone in the oyster. If you bring something in that really irritates, you get the pearl... difficult people in groups and life can get you thinking.



## Action learning

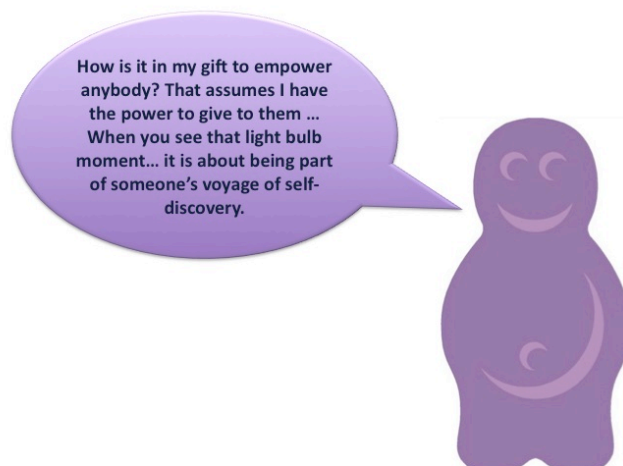
I find it takes just one person to have the courage to start a conversation... They're just waiting for someone else to begin it.<sup>27</sup>

It is often difficult for individuals to question the ideologies of their own culture. Not only can it be intellectually challenging, but it may also create social stigma. People who question dominant ideology often appear not to make sense: what they say will sound illogical to those who hold that ideology. In extreme cases, people who ask such questions may even appear to be insane. However, questioning deeply held assumptions is essential to empower those silenced by existing ways of working.<sup>28</sup>

Learning is a mutual relationship, and co-production of knowledge is possible only if the conversation is one of respect. That is, it demands that both respect each other's learning. Even in the role of teachers we do not give knowledge: we facilitate its development in others. We build on existing understanding, to help extend knowledge. If the assumption is one of filling a gap, it suggests that the learner is needy or lacking in experience.<sup>29</sup>

In daily activity, inclusive practice still requires strategic understanding, because ethical practice demands greater understanding of systemic inequality than simple accommodation. Underpinning a commitment to ever greater ethical judgement, deliberate and respectful action can be seen as an ethical or moral imperative.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, inclusive practice is a leadership activity that acknowledges the impact of systemic inequality. Leadership action requires a vision enabling society as a whole to progress and transform. However, action taken needs to be based on change that arises from real experience, not one that aspires to a fantasy.<sup>31</sup>

If action responds to a community's desired outcomes, the starting point is an authentic conversation. The voices of those enduring inequality will be heard and their situation fully acknowledged and understood.<sup>32</sup>







Where practice is ethically grounded, practitioners are often aware that their daily interactions are subject to numerous dilemmas. These are situations where there are no *acceptable* options, only *undesirable* choices.<sup>33</sup> To face these situations with judgment, the professional does not simply react to events but prepares for action by questioning their own judgment – thus engaging in critical reflection. In this context, the term *reflection for action* refers to the ability to reflect critically on past events or present practice in order to act with deliberate and intentional judgment in the future<sup>34</sup>.

I would see respect as the acknowledgement of the value and dignity of another person, and the treatment that goes with recognising in practice that value and that dignity.



Moral judgment of this type requires a philosophical grounding, the engagement of our hearts within learning. Dilemmas bring with them elements outside the professional's control. Only an acknowledgment of boundaries will reduce the emotional tension. The outcome often depends on how a practitioner deals with emotions and unconscious bias. In the long-run this ability will determine how consciously he or she will be aware of the impact of their power within a professional relationship<sup>35</sup>.



Ethical development will serve to help practitioners plan and deliver alternative practice that secures increasingly fairer outcomes for every person, while **also** extending the impact of their organisation's purpose to achieve local equality.



## 9. Shared stories and group identity

Community, recognized or not, on its own territory or dispersed from it, that has a common language is a linguistic community, with full individual and collective rights.<sup>36</sup>

My language is my land, the part of the landscape on which I have purpose. Its boundary traces the ownership to a part of the world I know well and to which I feel I belong. I will admit that I used to be an overly fervent advocate of common terms and simple phrases. My concern for accessibility meant I was keen for people to avoid complicated terms. However, it is not always possible to simplify without losing specific meaning, situational nuance or shared interpretation. I enjoy that feeling of shared stories, the ownership of tradition, knowledge and history, when key expressions take on a meaning with significance in terms of past conversations and close confidence.

Within my own community, key phrases indicate bond – a kinship.

Well, for one thing, many such stories are origins stories – they tell us where we came from, and came to be the way we are. They tell us about community, they create a sense of belonging for us.<sup>37</sup>

I find it wonderful when others adopt our key phrases. Shared understanding of certain words brings with it a feeling of belonging. It is a little like the phrase 'as you wish' in film *The Princess Bride*: the thought alone brings a smile. Understanding the phrase as meaning 'I love you' can bring warmth to any ordinary conversation.



I think professionals working with disabled people should recognise why it's important that they listen to what we're asking... For me, that's where I think you start sharing power.



## Elitism?

Some argue that specialist vocabularies can feel exclusive – for example, the professional or academic groups who identify phrases to describe a different perspective or approach. Viewed as an attempt to confuse or alienate others, complex terms can appear to complicate straightforward ideas. Putting things simply is not always easy when the ideas we are seeking to unravel are complex. The problem can be viewed another way. For those trying to find a better way to describe their deepening knowledge, new or alternative definitions of specific ideas make sense. In professional conversations about theory or concepts, simplifying the words used by adding the full explanation would take too long. However, shorthand is useful in order to discuss ideas that rely on shared concepts. Without it we could not deepen our understanding of very complex issues.

Jargon can of course threaten. No-one likes to feel left out and feeling unsure what others are talking about. Lack of common terms can heighten the power inequality between those who ‘have’ or ‘don’t have’ expertise. Examples of this are seen at some academic conferences, where arcane words are sometimes so extraordinary that they fail to bridge divisions between subject or department, let alone help ideas spread across organisation and community divides. From this perspective, vocabulary, attitude, behaviour, and motivation, is the sum of utterances, tones, dress, and imagery that conveys shared meaning. These tacit ideologies or ideas held by groups define their knowledge.<sup>38</sup> The language of the organisation will help define its cultural identity, for it is the means by which people frame their understanding of the place within their world.<sup>39</sup>

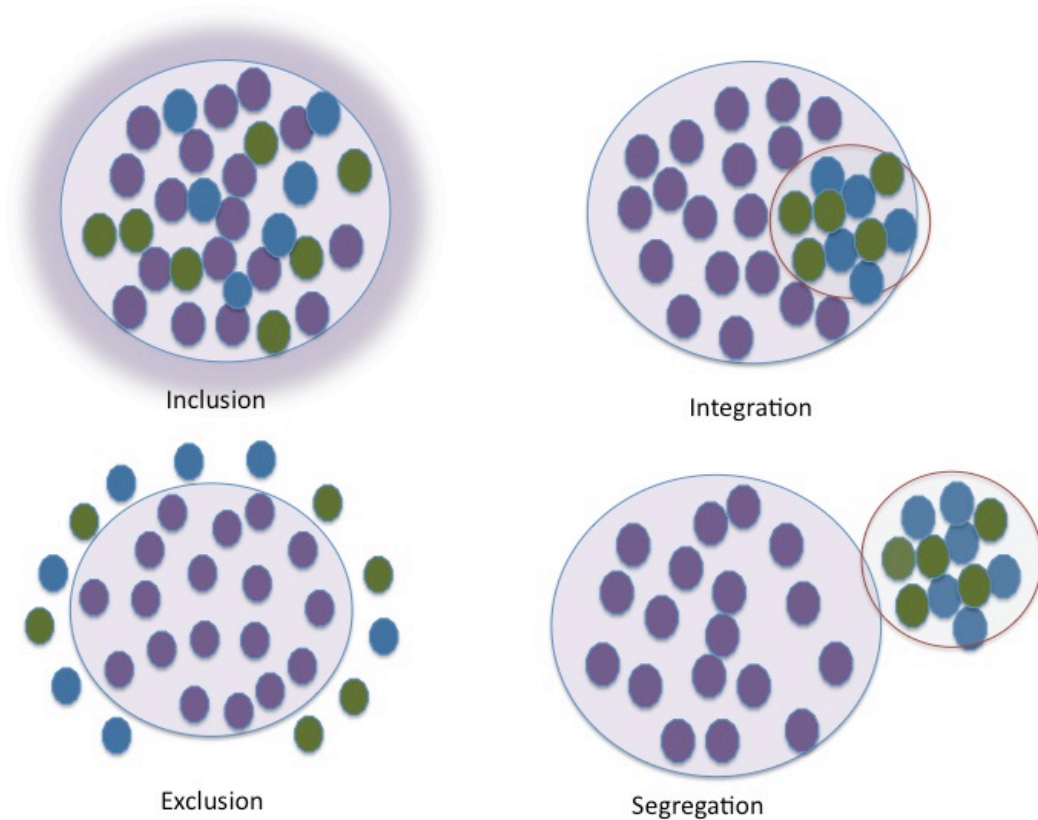
Audience here is key: if we are talking to people ‘in the know’, some shared terminology is fine. However, if we are taking our ideas to others (perhaps in a community dialogue, for example) then it is our respectful duty to make sure we are being as transparent as possible. This may mean using common terms, avoiding TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms), and allowing those joining our conversations the time and information they need to understand words or phrases we take for granted. The issue here is not one of complexity but how we enable people to feel involved in challenging conversations about difficult ideas.





What seems important is to be able to identify which groups ordinarily hold greater presence or power in our typical conversations. By doing so we are conscious of those voices that are not easily heard. More importantly we can think about whether the groups in which we find ourselves do in fact represent the diversity in the wider community. Furthermore, action may be taken to invite those who may hold views that confuse, challenge and finally allow us to extend our world view.

This idea of ownership shows how words often reveal the perceived locus of leadership and define whose ideas are given voice within debates. For example, the much-debated term 'inclusion' was originally chosen by disabled people to indicate an entitlement to education and the right to participation. However, despite the movement towards greater entitlement reflected in the terms *segregated*, *integrated* and *mainstream*, transformation has yet to be achieved.<sup>40</sup> The figure below illustrates the ideas behind these terms.





## Changing ideas

I love the following stories describing different aspects of how we draw meaning from our words. The first was shared by a colleague who had been waiting outside a classroom where I had been concluding a session on equality. She told me that she had been introduced to the phrase 'Black World Majority', and every time she used it she intentionally remembered that despite white dominance, black people are a *world* majority. It is surprising to realise that such a majority of people remain subject to the racist ideas which still dominate so many cultures. While people from smaller groups are often referred to as minorities, they may in fact belong to much larger groups across the world. If the focus is on their numbers within our communities or their lack of representation within institutions, this can add to the perceived personal deficit which is fuelled by stereotypes. 'Black' used respectfully denotes a group that faces racism due to an underlying belief that white people are superior. Black World Majority explicitly contradicts the minority status.

Then there is the story of the man who taught his son to speak Klingon. I find this very interesting, mainly because the son did well at learning the language but lost interest when there was no-one who could share his conversation. Viewed as a social process its value possibly lies in the connections created between speakers. In some places (eg schools), speech is viewed as personal skill, one requiring individual development to attain imposed standards. Unfortunately, this creates a problem for those individuals for whom the spoken word may be difficult. The point is that language is far more than spoken words: we often speak loudest when we say nothing at all. Furthermore, for those with speech delay or no verbal speech, there are still ways of having a conversation. The beauty of these conversations is that they challenge so many conventions and make us listen differently – not only with our ears but with our hearts, souls, intentionality and mindfulness.





## 10. Communities of practice

The site of a community of practice can be viewed as the purposeful relationships existing across boundaries that are not always defined by institutions. The different relationships are meaningful connections between individuals sharing the same purpose. A community of practice might therefore comprise colleagues within an institution (photo 1, bottom left), or an international association in which many professionals from different fields share a

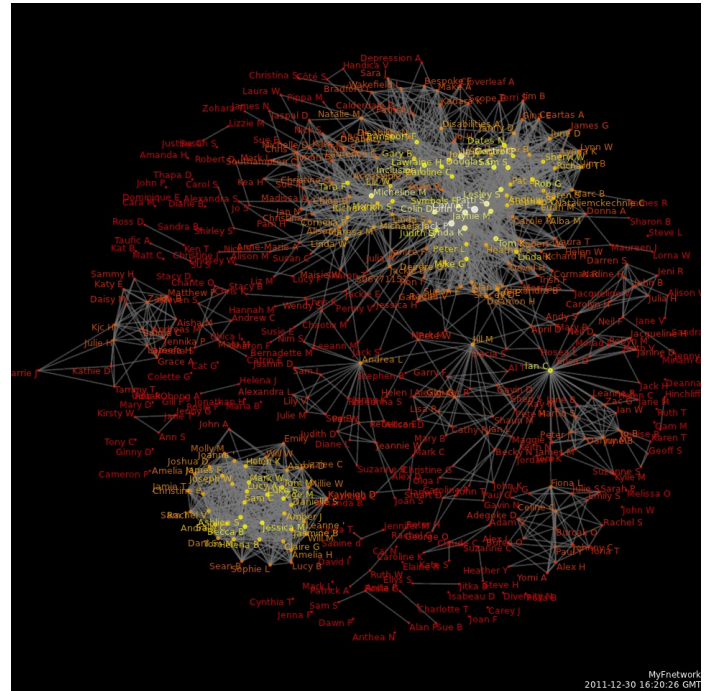


Photo 1

common vision for their profession (photo 1, top right).

Professional conversations need a mindset shift to achieve authenticity and mutuality, because the way people talk about their work reflects not simply what people are doing, but **how they think and plan their actions**. In order to work together across institutions, we may need to work beyond our job boundaries with a different idea of what constitutes community. By doing so, our own learning community can also challenge the structures and barriers created by institutional procedure.

Where we seek to affirm our own humanity through our own language it implies that we value other people's belonging in the workplace. When we view our community as cross-institutional, acceptance presents a clear statement against the exclusion of some groups. Clients are not seen as 'end users' in a service; they are called 'partners' and are included in a co-constructed, worthwhile experience. The barriers to be overcome between professionals and the outside community exist in a community of practice in which relationships extend beyond institutional boundaries and where associations are willing and respectful. For those already included in the conversation of the organisation, the responsibility is to extend the communication in such a way so that it may be understood by others outside the organisation.



Clothing, badges, office locations and door tags are symbols of individual hierarchy and confidence. In contrast, where norms in an institution suppress sharing, relationships will develop outside or alongside lines of authority, and also outside the institution.<sup>41</sup> This suggests that in organisations where respect is high, belonging is viewed as more important than systems or paperwork: people will feel secure and professional exchanges are easier. We probably feel more threatened admitting mistakes where we do not feel valued. Therefore, we are more willing to share when our competence is trusted, suggesting that individual skill needs to be explicitly valued for self-respect to flourish. Learning is stifled where people feel judged as it seems that mastery and reputation are linked, with self-respect growing both from personal development and from the affirmation of others.<sup>42</sup>

If judgement is formed through reflection for action, then being unable to talk about what is not yet understood will negatively affect learning. Joint activity depends on relationships that give space for thinking, conversations where mistakes are reviewed and different action planned to achieve different outcomes.<sup>43</sup>

In terms of growth, where an attainment culture skews the perception of who is considered a 'good learner': those who learn from trial, or need to make mistakes in order to progress, are judged as 'bad learners'. As children we are often expected from an early age to get things right. Where individuality is not embraced, with the measurable getting more recognition than effort or achievement, growth is stifled even for so-called talented people.<sup>44</sup>





## 11. Changing the conversation - equality of respect

Research suggests that there is a significant distinction between *belonging* and *fitting in*<sup>45</sup>. People seem to distinguish between belonging, being *accepted* for who you are and having to adapt in order to be *integrated*. This would suggest that creating environments where people can choose to belong is going to be a greater challenge where institutional rules and procedures inhibit openness and trust. It may be that while personalisation remains a priority, we may need to speak more clearly about the greater vision: **inclusion**. A vision such as full personalisation cannot be realised until institutions transform far more radically. As it stands, the choice is not available: the only options are special institutions (segregated), mainstream (integration), but not always inclusive practice (towards inclusion).

### *Personal values*

On the subject of diversity, commonly held and personal views must not be equated. There are many values, but individually we hold dear only a handful. Trying to decide which are best or which to impose on others implies a hierarchy or correct order: such imposition is oppressive. Failing to engage with a plurality of values is in itself a lack of respect for man's humanity. Shared values far outnumber personal ones, 'for all human beings must have some common values or they cease to be human, and also some different values else they cease to differ, as in fact they do.'<sup>46</sup> Being able to understand what is of value to another lies at the heart of respect – the reflexive thought with which we dissociate what *we* need from what *others* may need, so that we can offer them something of value. People who can articulate their values at work in this sense are better able to 'play an indispensable role in making connections with those who are isolated and marginalised.'<sup>47</sup>

### *Above compliance*

*Compliance* and *commitment* are two broad approaches to the way we develop inclusive practice. When applied to ethical purpose they influence the development of strategies for change. Some articulate the *compliance approach* as a legislative reasoning for minimising unfair treatment.



We quite naturally see things from our own world view and find it very difficult when other people don't. But you can learn something from someone else's world view that gives you more respect.





They frame discrimination as a problem caused by group difference.<sup>48</sup> Merely responding to legislative demands may avoid claims of unfair treatment, for example, but reinforces the fact that some people have deficits, which articulated through stereotypes, impact on group characteristics.<sup>49</sup>

### **Positive discrimination**

Positive discrimination is illegal but operates at the level of compliance. It allows people to impose a certain conversation by helping those who join in, but critically forbids them to question what is taken for granted. Otherwise referred to as affirmative action (eg favouring candidates from certain groups for advancement or recruitment) such discrimination has been criticised because the basis for promotion often rests on a characteristic that has nothing to do with a candidate's positive qualities. It is a short-term means of addressing underrepresentation, but because it fails to address wider inequalities or systemic discrimination, the very individuals it seeks to help also feel wrongly treated.

Many believe that compliance strategies are not morally sound as they fail to address the institutionalised discrimination supporting inequality. As many point out 'the effect of these labels is that they keep many community people from seeing the gifts of people that have been labelled.'<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, needs-based classification leads to hierarchy and social comparisons which impact negatively on people's self-respect and wellbeing.<sup>51</sup> More specifically, when people in positions of authority are forced to put down others by highlighting problems rather than strengths, disrespectful behaviour becomes a means to secure resources. Equality of opportunity is not equality of respect: a divisive strategy fuels resentment and strengthens the stereotypes underlying prejudice.

The ambiguous relation between character and potential ability often also troubles those who benefit from affirmative action policies, as Bowen and Bok themselves admit:

"Do I personally deserve this opportunity, have I been given a chance only because of my race?"  
52





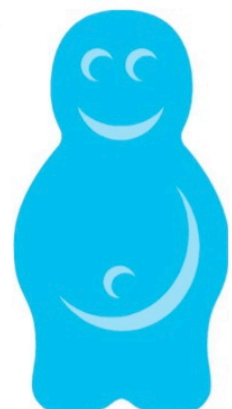
## 12. Growing professionalism

Acting professionally may actually prevent people from expressing themselves honestly. Examples might be where behaving according to institutional norm denies respect, or where 'fitting in' costs an individual too high a price. There is wide variation about what people understand as professional behaviour: aspects may include dress code, expert language and manners. The extent to which norms impact on the conversation will depend on their rigidity and how they are used in achieving conformity.

The correlation between the development of professionalism and a changing institutional culture seems to suggest that individual strength of character is needed for the sharing of knowledge. When professionals are too afraid to show weakness, they add little to their own understanding and have little to share. Shared work seems to be achieved through the process of seeking a common language, one that reflects and affirms shared principles and equal humanity.

Individual choice of association is important, as positive emotions energise the development of professionalism within a community of practice. However, because it is important to appreciate one's own capabilities, other people's recognition of skill is as important as our own. This appreciation of skill suggests again that the personal and public dimensions of how we learn are deeply interwoven with our perception of ourselves as members of a professional group. Leadership development may have more to do with how we perceive that fit, as well as what needs to be done to secure it further for ourselves and for others.

**A lot of it is very subtle, because a lot of it is the nonverbal, the body language and way people look at you... Sometimes it's more important than the spoken language.**





### 13. Soulful authority

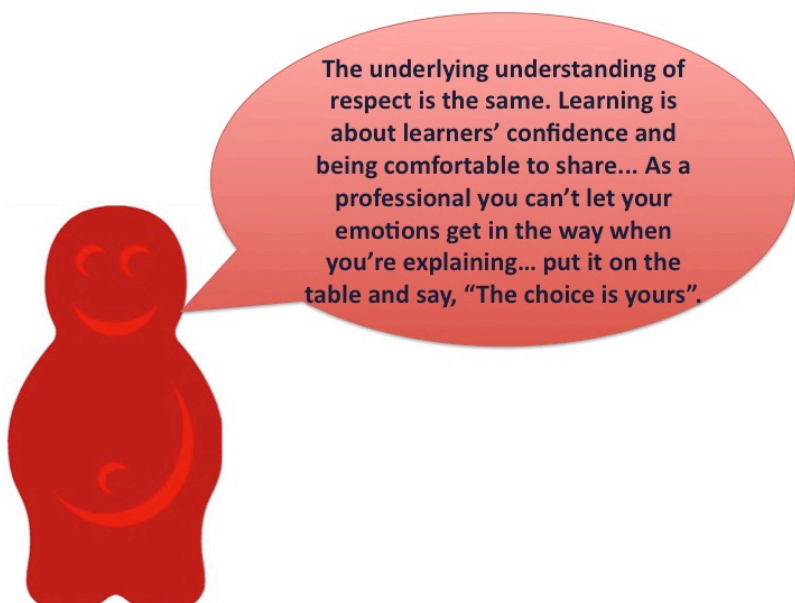
There are a number of approaches or elements of approaches to leadership that are consistent with inclusion... most importantly, they illustrate how leadership can operate within equitable, horizontal relationships, and as a collective process that is organized specifically to strive for inclusion.<sup>53</sup>

Leadership implies more than a questioning of daily activity, process, attitude and behaviour: change is fundamental to any discussion about respect. Some describe it as a life journey, becoming self-aware, reaching self-respect through understanding, fitting in to society and then acting to make ethical changes for others.

Leadership fails as an academic discipline where it is seen as behaviour not action, psychological not spiritual and related to people not ideas. Viewed as leadership activity more specifically, inclusive practice helps us articulate the holistic nature of personal growth and power<sup>54</sup>. 'We have separated the hand of leadership from the head and heart... Moving the moral dimension of leadership to the centre of practice forces us to rethink widely accepted assumptions about the values that undergird management theory' and the definition of leadership<sup>55</sup>.

As our understanding deepens through learning opportunities and our knowledge widens. Understanding new experience gives us more grounded approach, a more visceral interaction with those we share our world. As our knowledge deepens our vocabulary is also likely to change. Soulful authority describes the active spiritual self, and suggests an intentional 'intellectual leap ... to an alternative world in which we can never write the same thing.'<sup>56</sup> The aim is to be able to use moral judgement to identify the negative and unhelpful ideas so often used to describe the lives of those who are labelled by their difference.

What people say can never be neutral or value-free. Therefore, while purpose and people are essential to a full definition of





leadership, establishing shared principles will encourage the critical conversations that change leadership activity. This aspect of leadership development may be seen as a mutual quest to define moral principle, the search for congruence between ethical ideas and desired activity to reach goals with personal meaning. In simple terms, it may be interpreted as helping others to believe in their ability to learn, to change, and to achieve success. Because respecting other people's learning is a generous act, being a leader requires the confidence to give. As a leader, a teacher proves his or her own worth and enables others to develop theirs.

Mutuality needs to be expressed clearly within co-production otherwise there is a problem of using language as a means of control. Fundamentally a moral basis has to be agreed. Otherwise, language is no more than a tool for reinforcing status or hierarchy. The challenge of leading with soul is to follow authority – not impose power. For me the difficulty lies in finding a way of turning personal values into ethical principles and moral practice. In practice though I have found it harder to follow than direct, in other words to unintentionally copy those who have overpowered me in the past.

**When it works, you build a consenting community who share a model of respect... What is so difficult is when a new member of the community fails to acknowledge the criteria... Really effective learning groups, have this mutual respect which liberates them to communicate effectively.**



It is argued that leadership action means working in partnership to define an emerging vision of an organisation's purpose. It is suggested that co-production "incorporates notions of ethical behaviour and fairness to all constituents . . . this is both morally right . . . for this to be achieved, change must be done with —rather than to —people."<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it is in the conversation with others on a daily basis that I reveal whether I am true to my principles. If respect is reciprocated, then it becomes a morally sound relationship. If it is exploitative or one-way, then it would be morally unacceptable. Sharing a positive experience can help lessen the feeling of inequality and lead to better understanding of another person's experience, particularly



when conversation is used to explore what works well. Conversations employed as a means to help each other reach a more sophisticated model of expertise will catalyse more authentic exchanges.

### ***Positive action***

Positive action is probably the most accurate articulation of inclusive practice. Because it best describes the two-handed nature of intentional action intended to deliver positively and with a double purpose. Firstly it identifies the specific character of marginalised groups so that different ways of working may be tried in order to reduce inequality and restore parity. That is to say, it identifies the negative ideas within conversation that may harm marginalised groups. Secondly, thought is given to how *they* articulate their experience. Phrases are then given intentional meaning restoring strength to the group without any individual members having to be identified. The accent is on the ideas within conversation, the way of saying things that give certain groups a power they then may hold without question. I would like to break it down a little more at this stage in order to summarise points covered above:

### ***Inclusive practice:***

- does not hang in a vacuum: it is a way of talking governed by deeper motivation. In essence the task we may perform today is guided by reflection, grounded in moral understanding, and helps to bring about change towards a vision
- is not merely best practice but a strategy built on good practice that helps deliver different outcomes
- is reflexive, it takes account of the vulnerability and strengths of others in order to achieve a difference.
- looks outwards and reaches beyond current boundaries with the notion of boundaries and borders, inclusive practice happens at the edge where activity exists
- is a by-word for leadership activity: it is through our daily reflection that our conversations spell out the dreams to which we aspire
- is about moral ambiguity: most decisions we are faced with do not have an ideal outcome, many only satisfy the most favourable option which therefore require an expert judgement.



### *Final thoughts – The respectful visitor*

**I define vulnerability as uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.** ... To put our art, our writing, our photography, our ideas out into the world with no assurance of acceptance or appreciation – that's also vulnerability.<sup>58</sup>

Respecting people's ownership is the traveller's job. In this analogy, inclusive practice is like walking onto another's patch. It requires a willingness to sit for a while with the unfamiliar and unknown. It takes time to fall into step with nuances, tones, and rhythms. When travelling across different lands it is up to *me* to pick up on local custom. Rather than feeling daunted or afraid, I enjoy the discovery of new fabric: with each different locality come new ideas and new meaning, even if the spoken words are shared. I grew up in France, and being bilingual meant I had one vocabulary that was twice the size of my peers'. What I still find fascinating is that when I speak in one or the other language the words follow a different sequence even when the topic is the same. Re-sequenced, ideas can deliver the unexpected and previously unexplained.





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- <sup>4</sup> (Gilbert, 2006)
- <sup>5</sup> (Wheatley, 2002, p. 37)
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- <sup>7</sup> (Shohamy, 2006)
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- <sup>17</sup> (Holtgraves, 2002)
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- <sup>22</sup> (Sennet, 2003)
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- <sup>34</sup> (Reagan, Case, & Brubacher, 2000)
  
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- <sup>36</sup> (Spolsky, 2004, p. 129)
- <sup>37</sup> (Sennet, 2003, p. 82)
- <sup>38</sup> (Pennycock, 2010; Shohamy, 2006)
- <sup>39</sup> (Reagan *et al*, 2000, Shohamy, 2006, Montgomery, 2008)
- <sup>40</sup> (Ryan, 2012)
- <sup>41</sup> (Montgomery, 2008; and Simpson & Mayr, 2010)
- <sup>42</sup> (Sennet, 2003)



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<sup>43</sup> (Reagan, Case, & Brubacher, 2000)

<sup>44</sup> (Dweck, 2006)

<sup>45</sup> (Brown, 2012)

<sup>46</sup> (Berlin, 2001, p. 12).

<sup>47</sup> (Russell, 2011, p. 9)

<sup>48</sup> (Daniels & Macdonald 2005)

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<sup>51</sup> (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009)

<sup>52</sup> (Sennet, 2007 p. 77)

<sup>53</sup> (Ryan, 2012)

<sup>54</sup> (Sergiovanni, 2011)

<sup>55</sup> (Sergiovanni, 2011, p. 37)

<sup>56</sup> (Pennycock, 2010, p. 50-51)

<sup>57</sup> (Holbeche, 2012, p.35)

<sup>58</sup> (Brown, 2012, p. 34)