

How deafness may emerge as a disability as social interactions unfold

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My hearing loss ranges from moderate to profound in both ears. I use spoken English, written English and Auslan (Australian sign language) to communicate, and rely heavily on two hearing aids, lip reading skills and my vision to interact with other people. Here I demonstrate how my deafness tends to emerge as a disability through interactions with other people within the health and wellbeing context of group yoga practice. I compare two experiences from practicing yoga in group classes (which involves physical interaction and requires attendance to non-spoken tasks), and use these experiences to explore what the label 'disability' does not capture, how this term reflects my lived experience of deafness, and what this might mean for health and wellbeing professionals engaging with clients who experience types of deafness.

All human interactions are uniquely and intersubjectively shaped by the actors, how they communicate, and what they are doing while interacting. In my case, if someone is simultaneously attending to some task while talking with me, this may mean that I cannot see their face and therefore cannot access their spoken utterances. During group conversations, others may overlap their spoken turns at a pace faster than I can visually track and therefore I cannot access the dynamic content of the group conversation. In these situations, my deafness may manifest as disability. This contrasts with interactions where I engage with other signers using Auslan, where my deafness does not manifest as disability at all. For me, deafness as disability tends to be an emergent characteristic of my interactions with other people, rather than a constant feature of all interactions, or all moments of a single interaction. It emerges most prominently through interactions with strangers, and less during interactions with social intimates. This characterisation contradicts the concept of disability as a fixed feature of an individual that impacts uniformly on all aspects of their experience.

I regularly practice yoga and have done so for many years. I enjoy participating in classes with other students, as we jointly learn and develop practices that challenge and illuminate different aspects of our lives. "At the heart of all yogas lies the manipulation of visible, accessible means to reach invisible, intangible ends" (Givón 2005: 23). How one manipulates their visible, accessible means depends on one's personal physiology, psychology and sociality. Over the years I have developed various strategies that enable me to participate in group practice and engage with other students and teachers without over-reliance on teachers or mediation from Auslan interpreters. I have mostly come to depend on observing how the teacher and other participants move (or even how shadows on the wall infer that they move) and interpreting their movements in context of the group practice.

For example, by placing myself at the front or the middle of the class, I can observe the movements of others from several viewpoints in order to synchronise my own with theirs as the practice unfolds. Through experience, I can distinguish when these movements are intentional and when they may be accidental. By combining these strategies with one-on-one discussions with teachers before or after class, as well as doing my own research, I can subsequently learn about teachings that may be verbally expressed during classes and later match these with various teachers and practices over time. These strategies enable me to adapt to a situation where it is impossible to experience consistent face-to-face interaction and where it is difficult to access spoken instruction.

Group yoga classes usually begin with the teacher sharing some comments or a story to prompt the theme of the class. This helps us to integrate our exploration of action with the exploration of "invisible and intangible" goals. As a class, we observe our teacher's intentional movements and mirror these both mentally and physically. As the class progresses, the teacher migrates around the class observing and attending to

individual students with adjustments and other assistance. Throughout the class, the teacher alternates between observing, demonstrating and assisting, while simultaneously instructing the class verbally.

Most of the students in these group classes can draw upon both spoken and visual aspects of instruction, while I primarily rely on the visual aspects. Regardless of our different accessible means, we gradually synchronise our movements as a group, thus creating one collaborative and social organism. It is this synchronisation that enables me to participate and enjoy the group practice. Sometimes I catch the eye of someone and we assist each other using speech, gesture and/or movement. If I partner up with someone during the class, we first discuss what each of us would like to achieve before attempting a pose, rather than waiting to direct each other verbally during the course of a pose in which face-to-face communication is difficult to maintain, such as during inversions. In this way, through synchronised movements and joint interactions within the group, yoga for me is both a physical and social practice. I learn through other students as well as with them. All of these adaptations allow me to negotiate my own learning with that of other students, albeit in a different way to other students and over many classes. The extent to which other students share my experience of yoga is probably dependent on their own personal idiosyncrasies, including visual and auditory access as well as experience with the group practice.

A few months ago I returned to a class that I had previously attended on a regular basis. The teacher remembered me and we had a conversation where I reminded her how I function in group classes. The class proceeded in the usual way, until the teacher directed us to rise into a headstand without using the wall as a psychological or physical support. I believe the point of this exercise was to explore and challenge the extent of our individual vulnerabilities. I observed the students opposite me place themselves on their mats so that they would rise from the mat with their backs facing into the class and away from the wall. I decided to adapt the instruction so that I could see my fellow students as they were guided by the teacher's spoken instructions and therefore synchronise my movements on the basis of my observations. I placed myself on the mat so I could rise from the mat with my back facing into the wall and away from the class, which meant I could see the students opposite me when I was upside down. My concession to this adaptation in terms of challenging vulnerability was to place myself far enough from the wall that I could not balance upon it during the pose.

After some time, I felt ready to come down from this headstand. As I relaxed into a resting pose with my face to the ground, I felt the teacher tapping my leg, and turned around to see her chastising me for using the wall. Flustered, I explained that I felt it was better and safer for me to adapt her direction so that I could see the other students, because I could not follow her spoken instructions. I am not privy to what this teacher thought or felt upon hearing this explanation (which the entire class must have heard too), but from her facial expression it seemed to me that she realised she had not perceived this aspect of my participation and she quickly apologised.

Unfortunately, the trust implicit between teacher and student in yogic practice (i.e. that both attend and adapt to each other mindfully, rather than delivering or acting upon *carte blanche* instructions) was already broken for me. I felt humiliated, upset and overly vulnerable. I felt that my own understanding of my body was unfairly questioned and that the teacher had expected me to participate in the group class on her terms alone. I felt that there was no room for me to adapt comfortably. As our interaction unfolded, I perceived this teacher's approach to group practice as rigid and non-negotiable, which in turn contributed to the emergence of my deafness as a disability within our interaction. Since then, I have not returned to her class because I feel I am unable to safely participate in her group practice. Future adaptations on my part would need to be undertaken with an uncomfortable risk that they may be misinterpreted and result in getting told off, which I would prefer to avoid if possible.

This contrasts starkly with an experience from another class that I attend on a much more regular basis. The teacher of this particular class has developed an expert practice in non-spoken and somatic interaction. To me, it seems that her strong training in movement manifests partly as a general sensitivity to the non-spoken aspects of all kinds of human interaction. This sensitivity became particularly evident to me during one class when she enlisted me to partner with her in a demonstration of a handstand for the group.

Partner work in group practice is a supportive way for participants to develop advanced poses and their understanding of these poses. It generally involves two or more people. One person undertakes the pose while the others provide additional strength and balance support. Depending on the experience and physiology of participants, partner work may involve a range of spoken and non-spoken interaction. However, it always entails a mutual yet implicit trust that all participants attend and adapt to each other mindfully (and not, say, get distracted or become half-hearted about the interaction when one's partner is upside down in a potentially dangerous position). While partner work may seem like a scary situation, it is usually very giving, intimate and rewarding.

Despite this, I initially felt alarmed when my teacher asked me to assist in the demonstration. However, she reassured me that all I had to do was to do what she had seen me do minutes earlier. In place, I rose into a handstand. My teacher balanced my hips. I sensed her talking to the class. She then gently ran her hand along the bottom of my left ribcage, slowly, and then repeated this movement. I interpreted this as an intentional communication for me to inhale and pull my ribcage in, thus rising higher, lengthening my spine, and moving my body into a stronger pose. After some time, I felt ready to come down from this handstand. The teacher assured me we had achieved what she intended, and commented how great it is to be able to communicate bodily through touch in such a situation. It is great. I felt she had trusted that I would understand my own body and 'listen' to what she was suggesting. As our interaction unfolded, I perceived this teacher's approach to group practice and partner work as dynamic and negotiable, which in turn contributed to the non-emergence of my deafness as a disability during our interaction. Since then, I have returned to her class many times because I feel I am able to safely participate in her group practice. All accessible means are open and available to be recruited for the exploration of action towards "invisible and intangible ends".

By comparing these two experiences, I hope to have demonstrated that the concept of disability as a fixed feature of an individual that impacts uniformly on all aspects of their experience does not capture the graduated, contingent, and dynamic manifestation of disability according to individual experiences and interactions.

Given my exploration of what the label 'disability' does not capture, what does this mean for health and wellbeing professionals engaging with clients who experience types of deafness? In my case, it is a term that only partly reflects my lived experience of deafness. The degree to which deafness manifests as disability tends to be shaped by all of the individuals engaging in an interaction. I have experienced interactions where deafness results in inaccessibility and interactions where it does not. In yoga practice at least, I have found that it is possible to negotiate and adapt my accessible means to enable me to participate and enjoy group practice in both a personal and a social way. As I build up relationships with teachers and students over time, we grow to accommodate each other. We work out how to facilitate interaction between ourselves, such as by alternating between attending to movement and attending to spoken or signed communication, rather than insisting that these things are achieved simultaneously, and by consciously expanding the context of interaction to include bodily movement and appropriate touch. Health and wellbeing professionals expect to work with their clients, as well as for them. I think this collaboration is easier if all

participants are open to accommodating each other during their interactions. I believe this kind of negotiation is valued and enjoyed by all humans regardless of their subjectively shaped experience. When it comes to human interactions, it is negotiation that builds our relations more so than any rigid insistence of how they should unfold.

Givón, T. (2005). *Context as Other Minds: The Pragmatics of Sociality, Cognition and Communication*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.