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Mannion, Jess , Vincent, Lori B , Kroeger, Stephen D , Blee, Tricia, Daly, Oisin, Gallagher, Rhena, Higgins, Bryan, McHugh, Mairead, Wolfer, Kerri and Hayes, Brittany E.  (2024) Researching Together: Researchers With and Without Disabilities Engage Across National and Interdisciplinary Boundaries. British Journal of Learning Disabilities. ISSN 1468-3156

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12634>

Publisher: Wiley

Version: Published Version

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Additional Information: This is an open access article which first appeared in British Journal of Learning Disabilities

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RESPONSE OPEN ACCESS

Researching Together: Researchers With and Without Disabilities Engage Across National and Interdisciplinary Boundaries

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Received: 19 August 2024 | **Revised:** 24 October 2024 | **Accepted:** 7 November 2024

Keywords: academia | co-produced research | international | learning disability

ABSTRACT

Introduction: The Relationships and Sexuality Research Team consists of researchers with learning disabilities who specialise in research on sexual citizenship and use visual and creative research methods. They are collaborating with academics on an innovative, cross-national, interdisciplinary and co-produced research project that brings together research teams from Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Together, we gauged how effective this way of working was for use with an international research team.

Methods: Each of the 10 researchers participated in an interview using graphic narrative to co-create their story in comic form, uncover the origin stories and motivating elements of our mutual involvement and identify, in a formative way, conditions of equitable participation. Two focus groups followed this to explore perceptions and experiences of this project, one with the researchers with learning disabilities and one with the non-disabled academics and practitioner-researchers.

Results: Many benefits were identified. This approach fosters learning new perspectives and innovative research methods, leading to meaningful and equitable research outcomes. However, we identified various barriers relating to power and communication due to professional jargon, cultural terminology, speech and articulation differences, accents and online communication. This led us to devise several strategies to implement to work towards more inclusive research.

Conclusion: For research teams with diverse teams, there needs to be the opportunity to build trust and find common ground. Reflecting on the process and making changes early on is crucial, as well as focusing on inclusion and equity rather than agendas.

1 | Introduction

Disability studies have become a critical form of social and educational advocacy and activism internationally. Although disability studies is a somewhat new phenomenon, it is grounded in research and scholarship (Connor et al. 2008). Scholars are broadening how they conceptualise disability in education and how they use this work to influence both

research and practice (Connor et al. 2008). Disability studies embody an array of theoretical and methodological approaches. One of these methods is to include disabled people¹ in theorising about disability. There is also value placed on the knowledge gained from the lived experience of disabled people. Emancipatory approaches are advocated for where disabled people are included in the process and which challenges research methods that do not meaningfully include disabled

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Summary

- The research team consists of researchers with learning disabilities and neurodivergence from Ireland and the United Kingdom who collaborate with university researchers in the United States.
- We wanted to find out how we could make our research more inclusive.
- We were all interviewed and co-created a comic to tell our story of why we are doing this research.
- We each participated in a focus group to share our perspectives and experiences of being a researcher on this team.
- We found areas that worked well, such as having new opportunities, experiencing equality, finding common ground with other researchers through art, using technology to research in different countries and building trust with others in our team.
- We identified areas that needed improvement. These included communication challenges, concerns about expectations and issues with power in the team.
- We devised strategies to overcome our challenges to make our work more inclusive.
- We want to share this with other research teams to help them to do inclusive research in universities.

people (Connor et al. 2008). Researching together plays a significant role in the creation of knowledge, enhances skills in collaborative disability research for all involved and enables the transformation of research (Puyalto et al. 2016).

Inclusive research was created by Walmsley and Johnson (2003) and includes a range of approaches that engage people with learning disabilities² in initiating, doing and disseminating research on their own lives. People with learning disabilities believe that inclusive research must be undertaken to address their exclusion from knowledge production and the injustice of being unheard (Milner and Frawley 2019). Although there is an increase in co-produced disability research, there has been limited attention to the perspectives of such experiences from the people with and without learning disabilities who have engaged in the research process (Puyalto et al. 2016; Vega-Córdova et al. 2020) including their roles and relationships (Vega-Córdova et al. 2020). Since the disability rights movement, those who have subscribed to it have sought to address institutional power imbalances in research (Milner and Frawley 2019). However, Nind (2014) pointed out there is a tension between the demands of universities and the aims of inclusive research.

As collaborative disability research can be challenging, it is important to reflect on the facilitators and barriers as the process evolves to work towards more equitable studies (Puyalto et al. 2016). As Kyriazis, Pomeroy and Marciano (2023) pointed out, reflecting on the process together allowed for the academic researchers in their study to realise and overcome their unconscious bias.

We are a research team focused on co-production. This is a large project which will evaluate a sexual health education programme for students with learning disabilities run in the University of Cincinnati (UC). Later, we plan to develop the sexual health education programme into a peer-led programme. Our research methods consist of surveys, visual and creative research methods and experiences of participating in the programme. However, this paper will focus on our experiences and perceptions of the disabled and non-disabled researchers working together. Collaborating across countries and online with academics who were not all experienced in this area would evidently pose new challenges. Now that we had a plan, we wanted to reflect on how participating in this research team was going for everyone and what we needed to do to improve it. This reflection allowed us to identify the challenges and benefits and make recommendations to move forward. First, we introduce our research team from our unique perspectives.

2 | Background

2.1 | Our Research Team

Our research team is a unique amalgamation of researchers with learning disabilities and neurodivergence, as well as non-disabled researchers from Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Our diverse disciplines include lived experience of disability, disability studies, health and social care, education, special education, psychology and criminal justice, creating a rich mosaic of knowledge and viewpoints for this project. Our innovative team, consisting of an artist, a musician, a practitioner, academics and researchers leading in visual and creative research methods, further enhances our approach.

2.2 | Relationship and Sexuality Research Team (R&S Research Team)

One research team is the R&S Research Team, which consists of four researchers with learning disabilities and two neurodivergent academic researchers. Before the international research team forming, the R&S Research Team had worked together for 2 years so that they had built effective working relationships and developed accessible ways of working together.

The R&S Research Team are well-versed in all aspects of research, including deciding what and how to research, facilitating research meetings and applying for funding. They are leading in visual and creative research methods to include LEGO SERIOUS PLAY, Joint Sandboxing, third objects, participant poetry, rap, creative performance and practice and art/drawing. These methods assist the research team in exploring the topics in an accessible and enjoyable way. The team also hold expertise in evaluating sexual health education programmes and resources. Their co-creation of a new creative, collaborative and accessible data analysis method contributes to research and provides future opportunities for researchers with learning disabilities to be involved in all stages of the research process (Mannion 2024). The team disseminated their work widely, including publishing an academic blog, producing a

film on research findings to showcase at a community awareness event and presenting at conferences in Dublin, Manchester and London.

2.3 | UC Research Team

The other research team is made up of three academic researchers and one practitioner researcher from the UC. The Transition and Access Pathways (TAP) Program at the UC is a four-year post-secondary certificate programme for adults with learning disabilities and autism.³ Staff in this programme develop courses specifically to support the needs of their students for their college experience and beyond. It was during a collaboration between a staff member of the TAP Program and a researcher at UC that the topic of sexual health curriculums was first discussed. Specifically, the staff member referenced a research project conducted at another post-secondary certificate programme that did not offer a course in sexual health. Given individuals with learning disabilities are often denied access to sexual health education (Roden, Schmidt, and Holland-Hall 2020), it was evident UC is an early adopter in sexual health education to support the lifelong self-determination needs of students with learning disabilities and autism.

To better understand students' perspectives, experiences and interests before, immediately following and a semester after the sexuality and sexual health course, a 2-year mixed methods pilot research study was designed.

At that same time this pilot study was being launched, the researcher made important connections. The first was with another researcher at UC in the School of Criminal Justice who was interested in ways to decrease the risk of sexual victimisation among people with learning disabilities. The Criminal Justice researcher was also interested in knowledge-based approaches that focused on learning about consent and boundaries, which are content covered in the UC TAP Program, sexuality and sexual health curriculum.

The other connection was with the R&S Research Team. This connection was made by another researcher at UC who attended an international action research conference presentation by the R&S Research Team. Together, the research expanded to replicating the UC sexual health curriculum with researchers with learning disabilities in Ireland so they could evaluate it from the perspective of people with learning disabilities, who had expertise evaluating such programmes.

2.4 | Methods

The current study is to reflect on the collaborative process thus far between the research teams and to identify strengths and barriers to this work. The research questions for the current study were as follows:

1. What are the feelings and insights of the research team members about involvement on the research team?

2. What have been the strengths of this collaboration?
3. What have been the barriers in this collaboration?
4. How could these barriers be addressed moving forward to increase equity and inclusion across this collaboration?

2.5 | Interviews

Interviews were held with each of the 10 researchers using the method of graphic narrative (Chute and DeKoven 2006). Each researcher met with a researcher from the UC team and UK team to co-create their story in comic form (see Figures 1–3 as examples of comics made on this project). This helped them to uncover the origin stories and motivating elements of their mutual involvement and to identify, in a formative way, conditions of equitable participation.

3 | Significance of the Comics

The use of the zine and comics emerged from our practice to engage one another in meaning making. Chute and DeKoven (452; Meyer 2011) explained that comics present verbal and visual information in a way that has the reader not only fill in gaps between panels but also ask the reader to look for meaning. Frey and Fisher (2004) used comics as forms of popular culture to provide visual vocabulary for scaffolding writing techniques such as dialogue, tone and mood. Wilson (2004) contended that comics construction constituted a kind of pedagogical site where participants collaborate to make connections and interpret webs of relationships (Haraway 1991) among the images made.

In her study of citizenship and agency in international contexts, Howard (2024) explained how qualitative and participatory methodologies (Wheeler et al. 2020) help to explore subjective experiences while also building trust, supporting self-value and facilitating dialogue. She further argued that participatory methods enable counternarratives, revealing stories that have been marginalised or excluded in the telling of official narratives (Peters and Lankshear 2013). These insights resonated with our comics work.

3.1 | Focus Groups

Further data were collected for this project during focus groups and transcribed verbatim. Both focus groups were semi-structured, in that specific scripted questions or prompts were initially asked and then additional, non-scripted questions were asked as follow-ups based on the responses and group discussion. The questions used during both focus groups are provided in Table 1.

All researchers wanted to be co-authors in this paper. However, writing was not accessible to all so the R&S Research Team met online for a focus group to give this feedback verbally. This allowed for the collection of the data to reflect on the perceptions and experiences of this collaboration. This included four researchers with learning disabilities and one neurodivergent academic researcher facilitating the discussion. This discussion

TABLE 1 | Focus group questions.

| R & S Research Team | UC Research Team |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you want to work with academic researchers without disabilities? • Have your views changed on academic researchers in this process? • Why do you want to work with researchers with disabilities? • Have your views changed on disabled researchers in this process? • How did you feel when you joined the project and how do you feel now? • Do you feel you can contribute enough, are listened to and are you an equal member of the research team? • Is this research accessible to your needs? • What is working well in working on this team? • What are the benefits of working in this team? • What are the challenges in working in this team? • Do you have any recommendations for working in this way going forward? • Is there anything else you would like to share about being a researcher on this team? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do you want to work with researchers with disabilities? • What does it feel like to be taught by researchers with disabilities? (future). • Have your views changed on researchers with disabilities in this process? • Why do you want to work with academic researchers? • Have your views changed on academic researchers in this process? • How did you feel when you joined the project and how do you feel now? • Do you feel you have the opportunity to contribute enough, are listened to, and are you an equal member of the research team? • Is this research accessible to your needs? • What is working well in working on this team? • What are the benefits of working in this team? • What are the challenges in working in this team? • Do you have any recommendations for working in this way going forward? • Is there anything else you would like to share about being a researcher on this team? |

lasted 45 min; one of the researchers was sick and although they wanted to attend, they did not contribute as much as usual and one researcher was absent. The focus group was recorded, and the findings were analysed thematically and written by the neurodivergent academic researcher. The R&S Research Team then met for one more meeting where the neurodivergent academic researcher read the findings to the research team, and they had the opportunity to make changes to it. The findings below are the R&S Research Team's words but were provided by them verbally. Names were omitted from quotes to provide some level of anonymity, so the findings are coming from the group rather than individuals.

The findings from the R&S Research Team focus group were brought to the UC Research Team for reflection. Additionally, the UC Research Team were asked the same focus group questions as the R&S Research Team. This meeting also occurred online, lasted for 66 min and was facilitated by the same neurodivergent academic researcher as the previous focus group. This facilitated their response and allowed for the gathering of data on their perceptions and experiences of the collaboration. The focus group was recorded, and the findings were analysed thematically and written by a UC researcher.

4 | Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) was used to analyse the data from each focus group. A member of each respective research

team reviewed the transcripts and identified themes related to strengths, barriers and areas for future improvements. Once themes were identified, the team member verified with other team members that themes were accurate based on their perspectives.

5 | Positionality

The R&S Research Team are disabled, White and cisgender, including four females and two males. Two of the researchers are academic researchers and the remaining four are non-academic researchers. One of the reasons the R&S Research Team set out to work with non-disabled researchers was to educate them through their life experiences of disability. They wanted to teach the non-disabled researchers about disability and rights. This would enable the non-disabled researchers to have a greater understanding of disability and what they are going through and have more empathy towards disabled people. The R&S Research Team believed that non-disabled researchers often do not demonstrate this empathy, which leads to feelings of frustration. As one of the R&S Research Team members said,

You can have all the studies, all the papers, but you do not know what we are going through unless you walk in our shoes.

The UC team included in this paper comprises four researchers. All the researchers identify as White and without an identified disability. Three research team members identify as cisgender

females and the other as cisgender male. All members of the research team have experience working with and/or as family members of disabled people. One researcher is primarily practitioner-focused, two researchers are academic researchers and the final researcher is emeritus academic faculty. All the researchers believe that people of all abilities are welcome in all spaces and that research related to people with learning disabilities needs to include people with learning disabilities to be meaningful and to limit the social reproduction of ableist ideas that exist within our society, and especially in academic and higher education settings.

6 | Results

Based on thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022), themes from both focus groups were incorporated into the benefits and challenges of this collaborative work, goals and future plans. These themes are incorporated below across both research teams to provide a broader reflection on this work from the perspective of all researchers.

6.1 | Benefits

6.1.1 | New Opportunities

According to the researchers with learning disabilities, the benefits of being a researcher on this team include building relationships, having the opportunity to talk and be listened to, increasing confidence, learning skills and gaining knowledge, talking about the research topics, enjoying the process, getting new experiences and by getting to know others with similar disabilities who they can relate to. One researcher is a trumpet player, and he is glad for the opportunity to share his skills with the group. He plays at the start of our conference presentations, and in some of our research meetings, and the R&S Research Team enjoy seeing the mood of the audience uplift when he does. One UC researcher is an artist who draws comics. He introduced this initially by taking notes in comic form to make the research more accessible. This then developed to using the method of graphic narrative to co-create each researcher's story through drawing comics together. The R&S Research Team voiced that using comics in the research made it more accessible and enjoyable.

The researchers with learning disabilities never thought they would have the opportunity to teach non-disabled researchers. They have developed a workshop for the UC team on visual and creative research methods. As one R&S Research Team member said,

This feels empowering.

Another team member said,

We are the experts on disability, and we can now teach them, which is amazing.

The UC team expressed excitement about having the opportunity to learn about visual and creative research methods. They expressed that this is an area they do not have knowledge in and

are excited to learn from the expertise of the R&S Research Team.

The UC team expressed that working with the R&S Research Team, and especially the researchers with learning disabilities, has given them new perspectives on this work and taught them innovative ways to conduct research that is meaningful. One UC researcher said,

So that is cool, because it informs what I'm doing differently. And [R&S research] the team, the stories are different than my students [with learning disabilities]. [R&S research team members] older adults, some of them. And so some of, what their histories are, my students haven't had, and I need to hear all of that. It gives me this opportunity to learn new things as well and to help my perspective of things.

This researcher's sentiment articulates how each team is constructing new knowledge as they collaborate and learn together. It also shows how the insights from this process are carried to other parts of our jobs. These insights highlight how traditional research team formations have historically omitted or excluded vital knowledge sources.

6.1.2 | Equality

One major benefit was a sense of equality for the R&S Research Team. The researchers with learning disabilities voiced in their focus groups past life experiences of being unequal due to their disability but felt that this work made them more equal. Additionally, while the UC team have all had professional and personal relationships with people with learning disabilities, none have been like the current context. Specifically, working with researchers with learning disabilities as colleagues was a new experience for the UC team. Similarly, the researchers with learning disabilities had not previously worked with non-disabled academics. The UC team spoke about how this work has shifted their perspective on researching with people with learning disabilities and how much they learned from the researchers with learning disabilities and greatly enjoyed being their colleagues in this work.

6.1.3 | Common Ground

Finding common ground with the non-disabled researchers was important to the researchers with learning disabilities and was something that helped break down communication and power barriers. Initially, there was a gap between those with and without disabilities in the research team. The researchers with learning disabilities felt they could only relate to the disabled academics. As one R&S Research Team member said,

That's makes me feel more equal to you.

We then discovered that art worked as a unifying element. We did not need to be the same, but equal. And this process of working together on the comics brought us closer together.

When we co-created comics we worked at a slower speed without the focus of linguistics, which broke down the communication barriers we had previously experienced. The art also gave the researchers with learning disabilities a voice through a different format.

One of the researchers with learning disabilities collects and reads comics, and many are interested in art and said,

I liked that about him (artist), I've always been into art.

It also gave the research teams the opportunity to experience a new research method of graphic narrative. All members of both research teams loved this method. It was enjoyable, it helped us to create and analyse our own stories and it was an accessible dissemination method. The R&S Research Team would like to continue using this method to collect and disseminate data. They stated that as they are experienced in using visual and creative research methods, it was beneficial to learn a new method.

6.1.4 | Technology

Another benefit has been the use of technology and openness to modifying processes to be more accessible to all. At the start of the collaboration, a neurodivergent academic member of the R&S Research Team noticed that email communication from the non-disabled researchers was lengthy and possibly inaccessible to researchers with learning disabilities. The neurodivergent academic researcher requested email communication be shorter and to the point. Then later and through this study we discovered that communication in online meetings also needed to be modified. The R&S Research Team expressed that these emails and meetings are accessible to them now. Although the R&S Research Team miss meeting in person, they note that the advances in technology have allowed them to work across different countries easily, which has been a huge benefit.

6.1.5 | Building of Trust

At the start of the research, some members of the R&S Research Team voiced they were nervous as could not envisage exactly what it would be like but do not feel like this now. This same sentiment was also expressed by the UC team. Both research groups entered this collaboration with little knowledge of one another and admitted that this was challenging. However, both teams recognised that their anxiety decreased as the two teams began to develop trust. Showing up in a space where you do not know what will come of it and trusting others you do not know takes courage. Specifically, one of the non-disabled researchers developed a sexual health curriculum for her students with learning disabilities, which she has shared with the R&S Research Team. The researcher shared how terrifying it was to share one's work with others knowing it may be critiqued, but that the trust being built between these teams gave her the ability to accomplish this difficult task.

6.2 | Challenges

6.2.1 | Communication

The main challenges we identified with both research teams focused on communication. The R&S Research Team highlighted these challenges to bring to the UC Research Team and decided to look at ways to address these barriers. The communication barriers included not understanding each other's cultural terms, or different communication styles between researchers with and without disabilities. As one researcher with a learning disability said,

They don't understand me, what I'm saying, because if I am saying something, they don't hear me right.

This researcher said they did not feel comfortable clarifying this due to embarrassment. The R&S Research Team identified some of the challenges they believed led the non-disabled academics to have a lack of understanding. This may have been due to how people viewed them and communicated with them, as they had dyslexia and speech impairments. One researcher said,

We should still be equal.

When this was brought to the UC Research Team, they identified that it was sometimes difficult to understand others due to a combination of speech impairment, the Irish accent and sayings and challenges with technology (sound cutting out and/or low volume). Additionally, the UC Research Team members indicated that sometimes they feel comfortable asking someone to repeat something if they did not hear them, but if they do not understand after repeating, they also feel embarrassed to ask for clarification again.

Although there were communication challenges identified, the R&S Research Team felt these could be improved by vocalising them to the non-disabled academic researchers to make them aware and by trying out new strategies to communicate. Indeed, it highlighted the many ways communication is at play during meetings.

6.2.2 | Concerns and Expectations

The R&S Research Team felt that they did not know most of the UC researchers well as they had only met them online for some meetings and had not yet established common ground. The UC researchers agreed. They expressed that initially, they felt unsure about what this collaboration was or what expectations the R&S Research Team had in their collaboration with the UC Research Team. The R&S Research Team was more established and had already completed research projects, while the UC team was very recently formed and were only beginning their first research project. Initially, we felt the first step should be determining what this collaboration would be. However, in this process, some of the getting-to-know-one-another-better was missed. Both teams recognise that there is now an opportunity to get to know each other, including having one-on-one

meetings between the two research teams to allow each member of the team to get to know the other better. The R&S Research Team would also like to learn about their US culture, as said they have built stereotypes from the media. As an R&S Research Team member said,

The perception of the media is very different to reality.

However, through the process of this study, we learnt that art was an effective method to get to know each other better and establish common ground, something we will now continue.

6.2.3 | Power Differentials

The R&S Research Team highlighted some power differentials in the group. They felt the non-disabled academics spoke a little bit more than them in the research meetings. One researcher with a learning disability said,

To be honest, I feel they are taking over a bit. Because, maybe they have more knowledge than we do. I have a disability. But maybe they know more than I know because they may be smarter than me. Maybe they think she's disabled and I can talk over her.

In the focus group with the UC researchers, there was a reflection on this power differential and especially talk time in meetings. The team identified that there was unequal talk time, but that it was not due to them not valuing what the researchers with learning disabilities had to contribute. On the contrary, most of the UC researchers remember specific things their colleagues with learning disabilities had said in those meetings and their comments were hugely impactful. Rather, as one of the UC researchers had been scheduling the meetings and developing the agenda, this has also led to this person often facilitating and trying to keep the group on task. Additionally, discussion around US culture in research and academic meetings discussed how, for some, jumping in or talking over someone happens often, even if not intended. The virtual platform also made exchanges challenging as sometimes it seemed someone was finished talking, but perhaps they were not. Others, given the frequency in which they are in online meetings, left themselves unmuted. Upon reflection, it was easy to see how all these unintentional behaviours created an imbalance in the power dynamic and one that the UC team is eager to address as they see equal value in all team members and want everyone to feel equally included. These dynamics in communication equity are part of the knowledge-generation process. When historically marginalised people join research teams, the entire team need to acquire and develop equitable communication expertise.

These views may have been due to communication issues in the group, as initially, the R&S Research Team voiced that they had more knowledge of disability due to their lived experience. However, there were meetings where there were discussions about the criminal justice system, which the researchers with learning disabilities said they did not understand and which might be compounded with the different legal systems. For

instance, the UC's research team is depending on mandatory reporting policies, which are largely non-existent outside the United States. This discussion was not accessible. The following is a series of quotes from the UC team,

I want to make sure that we create more spaces for [the researchers with learning disabilities] to fully participate. Their stories, their experiences, their insights, like it's just a different perspective than any other team I've ever had. And it's just so valuable. And I just think it drives the work in a much more meaningful way than a bunch of non-disabled researchers saying, 'Well, what do we think's important for this population?' because maybe we get some things right, but we probably get a lot of things wrong. And so this work needs to be done together.

The R&S Research Team decided that a way to address this power differential would be for the non-disabled researchers to speak in a more accessible way and to get to know each other so that everyone would be more comfortable speaking out and vocalising when they do not understand or feel they have not had the opportunity to participate in the meeting fully. When this barrier was brought to the UC team, they agreed that their speech is likely often inaccessible. Some of the UC team noted that in many of their workspaces, the use of 'academic' jargon and non-accessible language is praised and so between different meetings they must code-switch their communication style, which can be challenging. The UC Research Team is committed to working on more accessible and equitable communication and they discussed developing a way for anyone in the group to indicate when they do not understand any terminology or what someone is saying. Possibly using a hand raise or another virtual emoji in the meeting could signify to the speaker that their communication is not accessible or being misunderstood by some in the group.

Additionally, some of the disabled researchers have different processing speeds and the UC Research Team noticed that academics seem to fill spaces with talking rather than pausing for a while. This can be addressed by adding in more wait time between speakers and/or using hand raises or other ways to communicate. The UC team noted one challenge in these meetings is the number of people on the virtual meeting. It is of great benefit to have everyone included in these meetings and they want to continue to include everyone from both teams, but it would be helpful to create a meeting structure to ensure everyone can talk and can continue to do work together that moves towards shared goals. Both teams also felt that some indication that someone is talking too much could be helpful, although if the team developed a meeting structure that allows for equal communication time and everyone agrees to pause after someone finishes before starting; this may decrease the need to tell someone in the meeting they are talking too much.

7 | Select Segments From the Comics

Due to the constraints on space, we are unable to share all forty pages of comics for the reader. Nevertheless, we wanted to

provide snippets from three of the ten comics that we made together for this project. In Figure 1 titled *Mr. Talkie*, the comic follows Bryan's story about a superhero who knows how to help start conversations. The protagonist of Bryan's story is Christopher, and Christopher has a tough time talking with young women who he might like to date and with whom he would like to develop a relationship. The story takes place in a carryout



FIGURE 1 | Mr. Talkie.

restaurant and goes from there. In Figure 2 titled *Rhena*, the panels we see follow Rhena's telling of her story about her liberation from institutionalised living. She described her movement from isolation to community and then to a place where she wants to help others. In the third and final snippet titled *Kerri* (Figure 3), we see the final panels of the UC faculty member's story. Kerri developed a course on sexual health, and she described a moment of vulnerability she experienced when asked to share her syllabus in an international context. As you read these imagine multiple panels before and sometimes after the snippet you are reading.

7.1 | The Future

First, the R&S Research Team's longer term goal is to present at a conference in the United States and another in the United Kingdom, but they would need access to funding for themselves and carers to make this happen. Both research teams collaboratively applied to present at an international conference in the United States and were successful. Even with lower registration costs for participants with learning disabilities, the cost for the conference was too high for the R&S Research Team to travel to. Even when there are ways to ensure accessibility, cost can be a major factor. Funding for international research teams also remains quite limited. Another goal is to write a book together

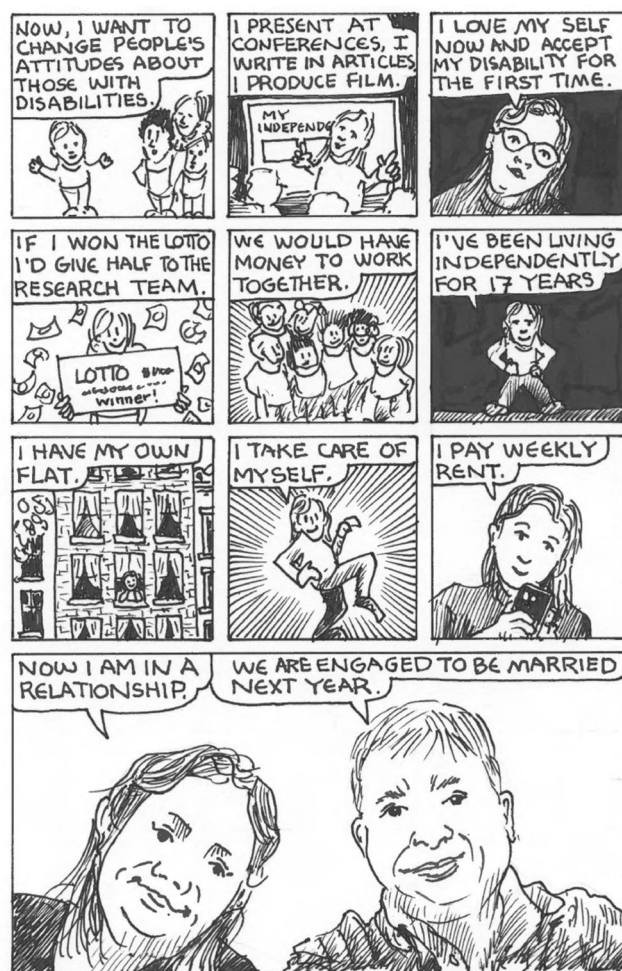


FIGURE 2 | Rhena.



FIGURE 3 | Kerri.

about this collaborative research with a focus on researchers with learning disabilities. An aim stemming from this reflection is for the research teams to get to know one another better. Although communication challenges were identified, the R&S Research Team are experienced in speaking out and feel that these barriers are already starting to be addressed. Both research teams believe the benefits have outweighed the challenges and that this experience is a learning experience for all researchers to work towards inclusive disability research.

For the UC Research Team, the future goals include increasing the inclusion of people with learning disabilities in research at UC. This would include the current research study on sexuality and sexual health curriculum and expand beyond this project to other research projects that impact people with learning disabilities, both at the university and within the community. The UC team looks to the R&S Research Team for guidance and expertise on the process of forming this team and ensuring all research team members feel welcome and included. The collaboration with the R&S Research Team, including their honest feedback on the process, has provided the UC team with valuable information to ensure the process is more accessible, inclusive and equitable.

As the collaborative team moves forward, the major goals for the future are to increase the researcher's knowledge of each

other as they continue to build trust as a team and understanding of each other that can inform this work in meaningful ways. Additionally, the team will need to collectively identify strategies and procedures for meetings that increase the equity of all members and balance the power across teams and individuals. Additionally, these focus groups provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on our collaboration. There is a need to determine ongoing ways to continue this honest reflection to ensure everyone on the team feels valued, equal, safe and comfortable to be themselves. As one UC researcher said,

the way a team works is when you have trust. It can be more efficient and more effective.... and so it's recognising when and how to do that, which can be really, really hard. So for the relation building part, it's the trust, and then a few folks [UC researchers] have said vulnerability a couple of times. And that takes time, that is not something that happens right away.

8 | Discussion

The current study is a self-reflection of the collaboration between two cross-national, interdisciplinary, disabled and non-disabled researchers. One team includes researchers with learning disabilities and neurodivergence, and the other aspires to become an inclusive research team. The teams were tied by their shared interest in sexuality and sexual health education for people with learning disabilities and are beginning to find their path of collaboration. Upcoming collaborations include the R&S Research Team providing training for the UC Research Team on visual and creative research methods and the R&S Research Team evaluating and modifying the sexual health curriculum developed by one of the UC researchers. After the curriculum is modified, both teams plan to pilot the curriculum in their communities with the curriculum being taught or co-taught by adults with learning disabilities to other adults with learning disabilities, other disabilities or non-disabled people.

While these teams have a clear goal, the process of working as a team is essential to the success of a team. It is especially important to reflect on teams that include both marginalised and privileged identities. For the current team, we have both researchers with disabilities who experience oppression both within society and academic settings and researchers without disabilities who experience the privilege of matching the societal expectations of a who can be a researcher. Many research teams, those with and without the inclusion of disabled researchers, include diverse researchers and need to consider the power differentials that may exist within that team due to role, race, ability, gender, age and background. Examining the marginalised and privileged identities of each research team member may allow teams to address those power differentials in meaningful ways to create more equitable and inclusive research teams.

The interviews and focus groups revealed many benefits to this collaboration and doing this work. The researchers with learning disabilities felt empowered doing this work, and the non-disabled researchers felt a need for perspective change in

why, how and with whom they do their work. Both groups expressed initial anxiety and uncertainty at the start of the group that has begun to dissipate as trust between members begins to build. As such, one of the challenges is developing that trust, which can be a time-consuming process for those committed to inclusive research.

In addition to these benefits, challenges to this work have been identified. As the teams have joined together, there have been power differentials within the meetings that need to be addressed. From the perspective of the non-disabled researchers, talk time has been focused on efficiency and meeting agenda goals; however, this has created unequal opportunities for all members to participate. The researchers with learning disabilities bringing this to their attention has been incredibly valuable, not only in addressing changes in structure and procedures of these international meetings but also for all meetings. Additionally, meeting formats should include various methods of communication including opportunities for written participation and use of close captions. Likely, in other spaces, these formats of meetings lead to power differentials, and changes to this structure are beneficial in all spaces.

Planned changes within the current collaborative team meetings include changing the goal of meetings (i.e., focusing on inclusion and equity rather than agendas), the set-up of meetings (e.g., who leads the meeting, adding more time between people talking for everyone to process, ensuring everyone has a chance to talk by using functions within the online meeting platforms) and building of trust to provide feedback directly to one another when something is not working. Another challenge for both teams is that researchers often do not understand each other due to the use of professional jargon, cultural terminology, speech and articulation differences and accents. Hopefully, as team members continue to get to know one another, it will assist in understanding one another and develop the trust for team members to ask for clarification when something is not understood.

The R&S and UC research teams are both currently participating in developing a comic book, sharing their personal origin stories, experiences and their stories of why they do this research. This work brought us on an unexpected path. The UC researcher who has been conducting these interviews and developing these stories with all the researchers said,

the notion of vulnerability is really profound for me here.

Researchers ask 'subjects' all the time to 'tell all'. In the interviews, the notion of trust came up several times. This trust relates to research relationships, that we have confidence (or not) and we have each others best interest at heart. Entering new relationships takes a certain amount of risk. A vulnerable person can be wounded (hurt in some way), stepping into the unknown—like a trust fall, we expect to be caught by those behind us. We started the interviews with the researchers with learning disabilities and the transformation that has occurred in their lives as related to this. During this time, the realisation came about that all researchers should be interviewed and not just those with learning disabilities. At the heart of all these interviews was vulnerability—seeing each other and allowing

others to see us. We made a choice to be vulnerable and to be seen by others in the team. An act of courage from one of the researchers with learning disabilities in their interview made an act of vulnerability more possible for others. We crossed a threshold in the research world when we were mutually vulnerable—each to their own level of trust and willingness to be seen.

9 | Conclusion

The current self-reflection identified challenges in several areas identified as principles for inclusive research teams, specifically respect, removing barriers and language choices (Dark 2024). In the focus group, non-disabled researchers clearly expressed a deep respect for their disabled colleagues and acknowledged the value of their lived experiences. However, feedback from the researchers with learning disabilities suggested that they did not perceive this level of respect from their non-disabled counterparts. Conversations around equal participation may help solidify what respect looks like to each team member. In future meetings and encounters the non-disabled researchers will need to better communicate their respect through both their words and actions. This current reflection also identified several barriers to this international work, including using more accessible language and communication, a more equitable meeting structure, more evenly distributing responsibilities and power and identifying ways to build rapport despite limitations with virtual platforms (due to geographic distance). Additionally, future work should challenge the traditional formats of primarily spoken communication to examine if inclusion of other methods of communication, including written or visual supports, increases equity and inclusion across research team members. Future research should reflect on how well the collaborative teams, those inclusive of disabled researchers or researchers of other marginalised identities, are able to address these barriers to inform future inclusive, cross-national research collaborations. We believe that through open and honest communication, humility and authentic vulnerability, disabled and nondisabled researchers can develop equitable and inclusive research practices together that benefit all.

Acknowledgements

This work would not be possible without the students and staff of the University of Cincinnati Transition and Access Pathways (TAP) Program and the Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Education Center (IDD EC). The authors received no specific funding for this work.

Ethics Statement

The pilot research study of the Sexuality and Sexual Health course at the University of Cincinnati was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at that institution.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹We acknowledge the importance of language and individual choice. For this paper, we have used identity-first language, that is, disabled people, unless referring to a diagnosis, that is, a person with a learning disability.

²The definitions of learning disability vary widely between the United Kingdom/Ireland and the United States. For this paper, we are using the term learning disability in the UK context, which differs from the US context. This is because the researchers in this study identify as having a mild or moderate learning disability and because this paper is published in a journal from the United Kingdom.

³Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are a diverse group of conditions where the individual's needs and abilities are varied. Autistic people can have challenges with communication and social interaction, and atypical patterns of activities and behaviours (World Health Organisation 2024).

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