

# Differentiation in Practice

Debbie Scholes

## Differentiation in Practice: A Reflection

At the recent Australasian Society for Intellectual Disability (ASID) forum regarding differentiation and de-differentiation for people with intellectual disabilities, I overheard a discussion commenting that the debate was certainly interesting, but how could such intellectual concepts apply in practical terms? As a highly nuanced policy topic with various arguments on each side, and implications for the human rights and dignity of many people (Clegg & Bigby, 2017), it may be difficult to conceptualise in terms of daily practice with individuals. This prompted me to reflect on an example I experienced as a disability worker supporting 'Janet'\*.

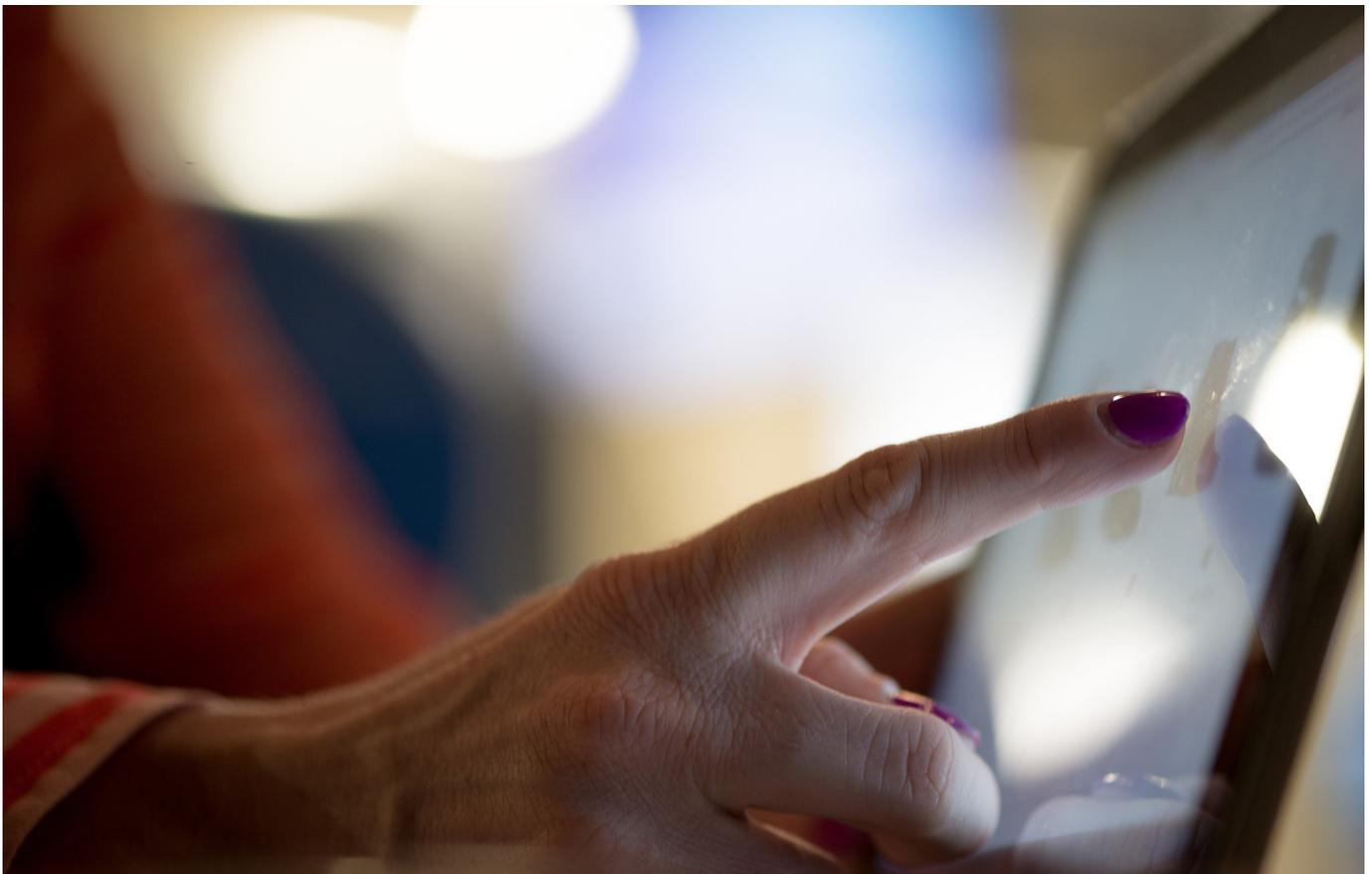
I worked with Janet for over a year, using a practice framework incorporating person-centred and strengths-based approaches. Janet has a mild intellectual disability, and through working with her I developed a good sense of her situation, her ambitions and difficulties, and support strategies she liked. Rather than assuming that Janet's intellectual disability prevented her from understanding or making decisions, I made information accessible to her with appropriate vocabulary, visual representations, and written summaries. Many people with mild intellectual disabilities dislike differentiation and labels of disability, and instead prefer the social model of disability that attributes difficult experiences to societal barriers (Shakespeare, 2013). I usually found it easy to support Janet from this perspective, but sometimes when Janet had to interact with other people, this could become more complicated.

Janet had difficulty understanding many long or uncommon words, found it difficult to follow flowing conversation, and required pauses to process information. In the community, many people in customer-facing roles were prepared to simplify their vocabulary or allow extra time for Janet. Others could become annoyed at the extra effort required, causing her distress. If Janet did not understand fully or felt under pressure, she used coping strategies: relying on the other person to summarise, and employing gratuitous concurrence (Eades, 1992) to avoid confrontation or embarrassment. These strategies could be harmful in circumstances where people were prepared to take advantage of Janet's lack of understanding and acquiescence. As a result of this vulnerability at the interface between her impairments and the behaviour of others, Janet was already in financial difficulty due to repayments for unwanted debts and subscriptions taken out in her name.

During our time together, Janet considered undertaking a Certificate 3 course. Viewing Janet as an individual with a right to self-determination, not differentiating her as a person limited by an intellectual disability, I supported Janet to explore her goal. She had previously studied at level 3, but after several months had completed only one of the required units. Reflecting on this, Janet identified that she would

need to go through the course material slowly, with extra assistance to understand it. Her financial situation meant she would be unable to pay fees. Janet had seen a for-profit college at a local shopping centre, and wanted to visit. I supported Janet to visit and ask questions, and compare the answers she received to the needs she had identified. Janet concluded that the college was unsuitable; the enrolment would last for only six months, after which she would have to pay again to continue studying. She could not afford the fees, and self-paced work and extra support were not available. Despite Janet's decision, the sales person pressured her to sign up for a full Diploma course, and to take out a loan in order to pay for it. The sales person spoke quickly, used vocabulary unfamiliar to Janet, and understated the repayment implications of the loan. Janet's intellectual impairment meant that she could not process and evaluate what she was being told. The sales person summarised: signing up for the full Diploma immediately was a good deal, and taking a loan meant no large fees. Based on this summary, Janet agreed to sign up. She was not aware that the sales person was trying to take advantage of her impairments for financial gain, and consequently was unaware that she might need to protect herself. In this situation I had a duty of care to Janet. I had to recognise Janet's disability and its implications, and advocate on her behalf to prevent her from coming to financial harm. In doing so, I had differentiated Janet as having an intellectual disability and prioritised my own judgements of Janet's capabilities and best interests.

Janet's potential to become vulnerable to people seeking to take advantage of her impairments, in transactions and social interactions, sits uneasily with her right to not be considered as 'intellectually disabled'. This event highlighted that while people with intellectual disabilities often don't wish to be considered as intellectually disabled, those same people may face extra barriers in society



*Enroll online*

compared to disabled people without intellectual disabilities. While dedifferentiation and the social model can reduce barriers to the physical environment, this may do nothing to reduce social marginalisation and exclusion (Clegg, Murphy, Almack, & Harvey, 2008). I believe that to support a person most effectively, awareness and recognition of their impairments is required, as well as understanding the barriers they may face in society. If I did not support and respect Janet's rights to agency and self-determination without differentiation, then I would have failed her. However, if I didn't acknowledge her impairment and the ways in which it could lead to vulnerabilities, then I would also have failed her. There is a paradox in support between a person's right to not feel 'disabled', and the unfair risks that arise from objective impairments. There can be no one answer that is right for every situation, but as professionals it is our duty to have these difficult conversations, to further our understanding of the arguments for and against differentiation, and to work to improve our best response in each situation.



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\* All details altered to protect confidentiality.

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