

# **Talking about disability or ticking the box? A study of Equality and Diversity Training in UK Higher Education**

## **Introduction**

This paper presents extracts from a doctoral study which explored how, if at all, Equality and Diversity (E&D) training in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) represents the voices and lived experience of disabled people. Article 1 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) includes the principle that people with an impairment have ‘full and effective participation and inclusion in society on an equal basis with others’ (2006: 5) and UK HEIs have a specific duty, framed by the Equality Act (2010), to promote equality and diversity. The Act requires universities to have due regard to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between ‘persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it’ (Equality Act, 2010: s149). HEIs were the subject of the National Association for Mental Health (Mind) inquiry (1999) which highlighted the need for increased awareness and understanding of people with a disability through training. Studies suggest that that, despite legislation, HEIs ‘under-support, under-represent and marginalise the voices of disabled people’ (Kikabhai, 2018: 176), and adopt ‘practices which work to the disadvantage of disabled people’ (Barnes, 1995: 66). Brown and Leigh (2018: 987) write of an ‘internalised ableism’ in a sector which is simply ‘ticking the box’ through the delivery of E&D training.

## **Aims and questions**

The goal of my research was to understand:

- Whether the portrayal of disabled people in E&D training offered by UK HEIs reflected their lived experience.

The research asked these questions:

1. What is the nature and purpose of E&D training in HE and how is it defined and delivered?
2. How, if at all, does E&D training for staff employed in HEIs provide space to explore the lived experience of disabled people?
3. What level of engagement do learning and development professionals in HEIs have with disabled people when designing E&D training?
4. What are the perceptions of disabled people towards the way they are portrayed in E&D training in UK HEIs?

## **Approach to the study**

This study was medium in scale, with participants drawn from staff development practitioners, academics and professional services staff in HE. The study, figure 1, adopted a ‘multi-method’ (Gilbert and Stoneman, 2016: 126) approach which comprised an online survey, training workshop observations from which collages were created, and semi-structured interviews with members of the Disabled Staff Network (DSN). The online survey was sent to 107 HEIs with responses received from 22 staff development forum (SDF) members, 20.5% of the available sample. Invitations were subsequently received to observe four E&D training events hosted by institutions in the North East.

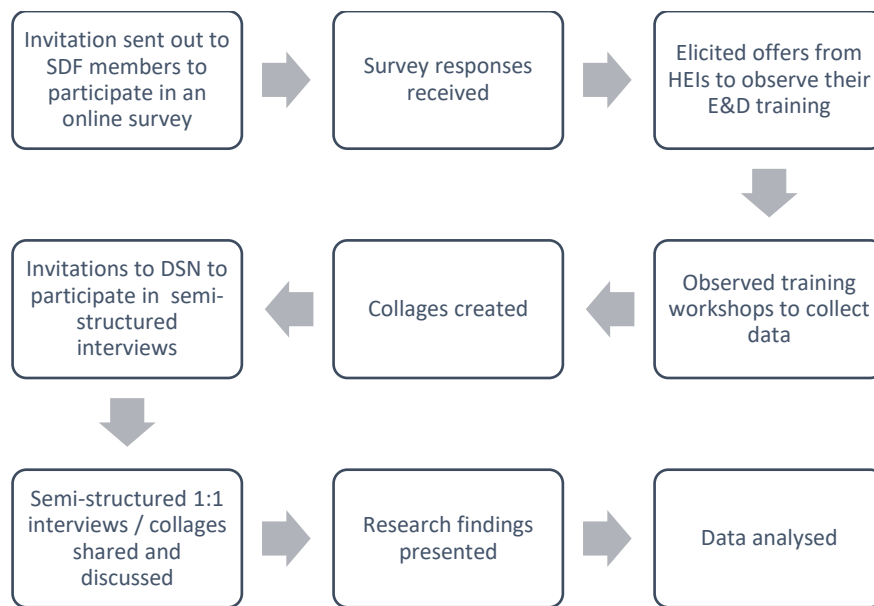


Fig. 1 Research phases.

The collages, created following each observation, provided a partial visual representation of the images, text, language, stories and metaphors used by both facilitators and participants at the training workshops. The study culminated in four semi-structured interviews with staff from the DSN. Interview participants were invited to bring a personal object to the interview which described how they felt about their impairment. The objects provided an opportunity for hearing valuable personal accounts of each participants' experience of being disabled and created a useful segue from which to explore the collages. These interviews, while small in number, were rich in their exploration of the lived experience of disabled people and enabled an in-depth analysis of views.

### Survey responses

From the 10 SDF regions, responses were received from Scottish and English HEIs. 54.5% (n=12) of respondents identified as working in institutions of between 501-2999 staff, with 18.2% (n=4) in HEIs of between 3000-3999. Institutions with less than 500 staff were represented by just one respondent while 22.7% (n=5) identified as working in an HEI with more than 4000 staff.

In considering the purpose of E&D training all respondents agreed that it was to raise awareness with 20 of 22 stating it was to comply with legislation. Furthermore 81.8% (n=18) noted the drive to embed cultures of inclusivity on campuses with one respondent suggesting:

'The ambition [in providing E&D training] is to influence culture'

In response to the question 'Which area is responsible for the governance of E&D training at your institution?' the range of views suggest ownership being shared across a range of functions, most prominently Human Resources and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion teams.

## Setting targets

Respondents were asked whether E&D training was mandatory, figure 2, and, if so, whether this was for all staff or for named categories, for example academic or professional services staff. 81.8% (n=18) of respondents stated training was mandatory and, of these, 100% (n=18) identified this as being for all categories of staff. The 18.18% (n=4) of HEIs who stated that E&D training was not mandatory were those where staff numbers were between 500-2999. While 18.2% (n=4) of respondents stated their HEI had not established a specific target, 54.5% (n=12) had set targets of between 75-100% of staff completing training. A further 22.7% (n=5) of respondents were unable to provide a response suggesting the data was not readily available or that targets had either not been established or were not communicated to staff. 45.5% (n=10) indicated that staff were required to refresh their training while 54.5% (n=12) confirmed that staff were not required to do so.

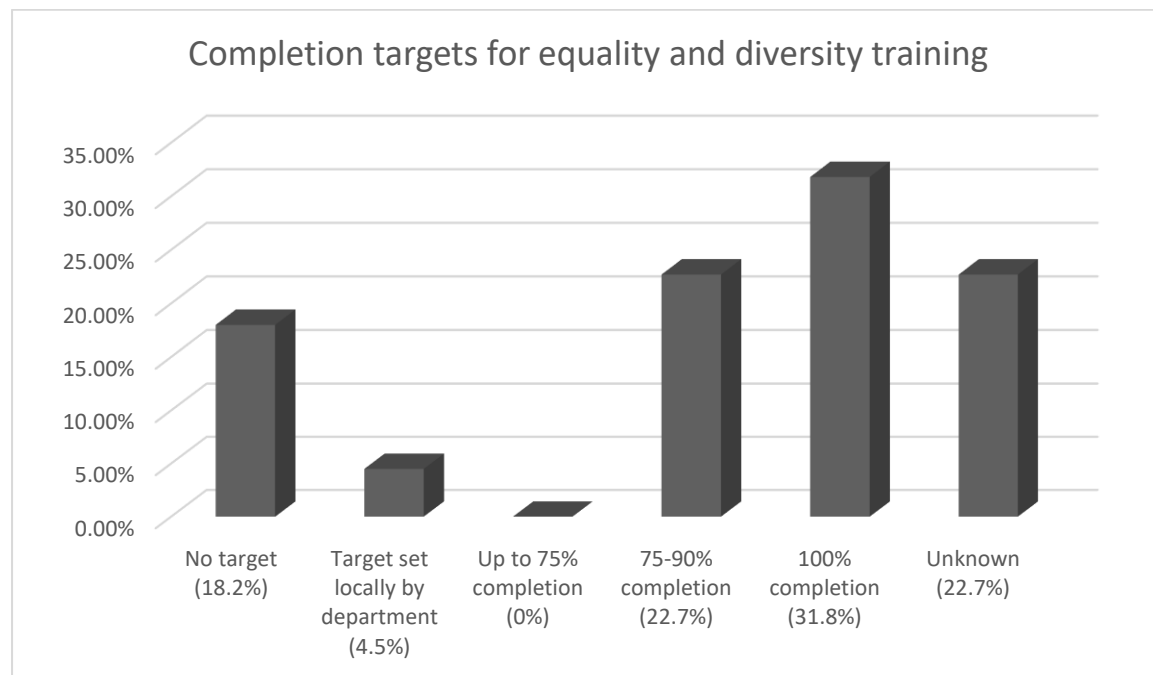


Fig 2: HEI completion targets for E&D training

It was interesting to note of those HEIs which had established a target of 100% completion (n=7) only two had achieved their goal. Of the respondents in this group one indicated that they did not know how many staff had completed the training with 28.5% (n=2) indicating completion rates in their HEIs of less than 50%. When comparing these completion rates with the institutional purpose of E&D training results indicate that, of 90.9% (n=20) of HEIs who stated the purpose was to comply with legislation, 30% (n=6) were not able to access completion data in order to demonstrate levels of compliance. Furthermore 20% (n=4) reported E&D training completion rates among staff of less than 50% with 15% (n=3) reporting rates of up to 75%, figure 3.

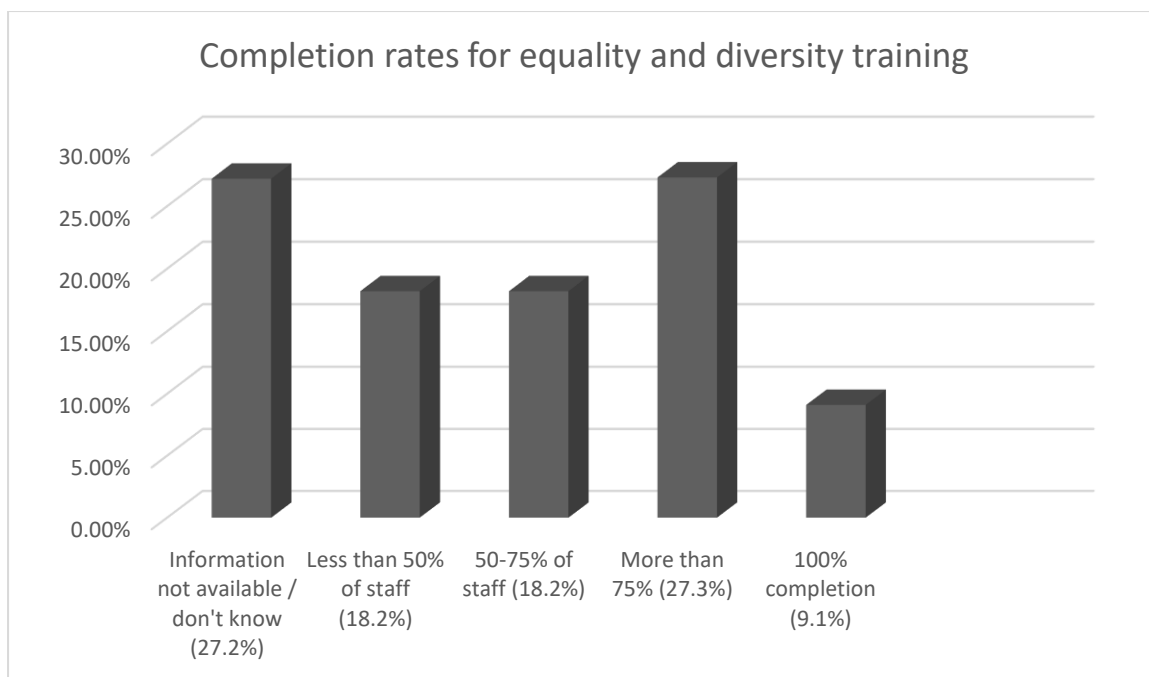


Fig 3: HEI completion rates for E&D training

### Design and delivery of E&D training

The most frequently employed delivery method of E&D training is online courses used by 95.5% (n=21) of respondents. Alternative delivery methods include workshops, chosen by 77.3% (n=17), with 18.2% (n=4) using quizzes, 9.1% (n=2) facilitating drama-based learning environments and one institution using contextualised simulations. Alternative methods included:

‘Facilitated Action Learning Sets’

‘Group Coaching Conversations’

‘Ad hoc training is provided, e.g, when the new Transgender inclusion policy was launched, training was provided across the institution’

‘Voluntary training courses for staff to support disabled students including mental health issues’

‘We deliver ‘Building Disability Confidence’ training to educate staff on adjustments that can be made and the impact of this on staff and students’

‘Autism, dyspraxia and ADHD specific training focussing upon supporting staff in providing reasonable adjustments’

The survey asked about who was involved in the delivery of each form of training, seen in figure 4. Online courses were excluded from this question as, once designed and made available, they require no face to face involvement from a facilitator. In the case of drama-based training both HEIs which had identified this as a delivery method said that an external expert was solely responsible for delivery. The sole HEI, who had earlier stated they facilitated contextualised simulations, said delivery was shared with an internal expert while other forms of delivery, including workshops and quizzes, required the collaborative involvement of a range of internal and external experts.

‘Collaborative responsibility between Equality, Diversity & Inclusion and Learning & Development for design of training. Learning and Development are responsible for the delivery of it’

‘E-learning materials tailored for the University in partnership with HR’

‘Our People and Culture and Professional Development teams deliver this work’

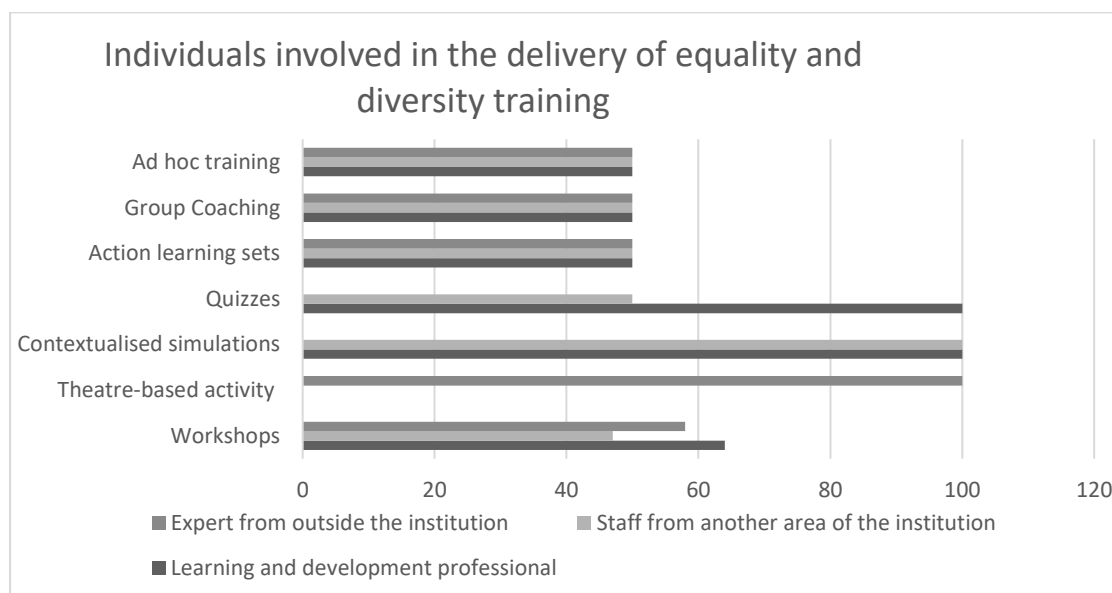


Fig 4: Individuals involved in the delivery of E&D training

Insights from disabled people were considered with the question ‘To what extent, if any, are disabled people involved in the design of your equality and diversity training?’ 33.3% (n=7) noted no involvement while 47.6% (n=10) sought views of people with impairments through local networks. One respondent stated they invited people with impairments to pilot activity in order to gain their views and four HEIs provided additional information about how people with impairments were involved.

‘The EDI team are proactive in seeking input from other professionals and colleagues’

‘Designed by an external facilitator with a disability’

‘Training is delivered by a social enterprise who engage with those who have lived experience of disability’

‘Specific impairment related training is sometimes developed and delivered by people with that impairment (i.e. Deaf Awareness)’

The content of facilitated training events was explored with respondents being asked ‘to what extent, if at all, is discussion about the lived experience of disabled people included in your E&D training?’ 13.6% (n=3) stated their training provided no opportunity for discussion while 45.5% (n=10) of respondents indicated they encouraged open discussions about the lived experience of all individuals. 22.7% (n=5) actively encouraged open discussion specifically around the lived experience of disabled people with the remaining 18.1% (n=4) saying that discussion was invited but was limited in scope.

## Training workshop observations

The training workshops took place between 13<sup>th</sup> November 2018 and 5<sup>th</sup> March 2019 and were attended by staff, both academic and professional, from each host HEI. While each workshop differed in respect to learning outcomes, some being generally related to the Equality Act 2010 and others specifically designed to raise awareness of disability related issues, the core focus for each was that of E&D in HE. The four workshops included some opportunity for discussion and for questions to be posed by the audience. Two of the workshops invited audience participation in the form of short quizzes, one involved a short role play and another included two short video clips. The events ranged in duration from two to four hours and attracted audiences of between six and eighteen participants. The facilitators were professional and academic experts drawn from the respective institution's learning and development, E&D and disability services departments.

Each workshop included space for discussion focussed on participant experience of working, learning and engaging with disabled people. The conversations ranged from how to adjust working practice and the physical environment to enable disabled people to participate in work, study and social life, to participants sharing stories of their own life experience and discussing the currency of language associated with impairment. Contributions from participants and facilitators with regard to accommodating different needs included:

'When you've met one person with autism then you've met one person with autism...everyone's lived experience is different' (Female, facilitator)

'But we can't afford to make adjustments' (Female, academic)

'I freaked out when I knew I had a student with a visual impairment' (Female, academic)

'Giving information in advance spoils the didactic path of the lecture I'm giving' (Female, academic)

'Adapting your teaching to facilitate learning' (Female, academic)

'When you exclude someone because of their disability it leads to feelings of isolation, anger, frustration and sadness' (Female, facilitator)

'[making an adjustment provides] personal independence' (Male, academic)

A range of visual images, embedded in the collages, an example of which can be seen in figure 5, were taken directly from the presentation materials designed by the event facilitators. Three distinct categories of images were used across the various training events. Firstly, those which were added to Microsoft® Powerpoint slides as visual aids to enhance the narrative and add variety to the presentation materials. These included images of a wheelchair user at a desk, in a stylised group of people and a wheelchair at the foot of a flight of stairs. The second category of images included a paper tree and a promotional poster for an art installation, both images being used to promote and celebrate the work of disabled people. Thirdly, images were used which represent organisations or campaigns linked to, or supportive of, equality, diversity and disability. An example is the green ribbon with sunflowers, the symbol adopted by many UK airports who provide lanyards to passengers with hidden disabilities who wish to indicate they require assistance.

# Creating an inclusive environment

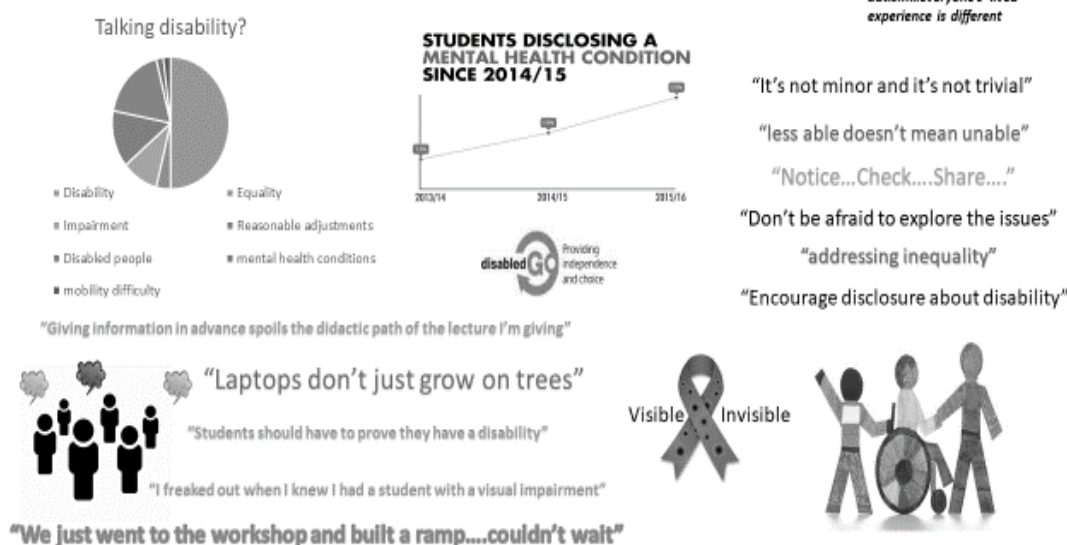


Fig 5. Collage created following one HEI workshop observation ©Martha Kember 2020

## Talking to disabled people

Each interviewee was asked the same series of questions, with follow up questions posed, as appropriate, to guide the conversation, and was invited to view and discuss the four collages which had been created following the training workshop observations. The first question was designed to open up a conversation about the language associated with disability with each participant being asked how they defined themselves. In response participants said:

'Probably as a strong person. I always think there is someone worse off than me. I've never really looked at it as a disability, I just say I've got a long term condition. If you have something that's wrong with you, if you want to call it that, you're slightly different in some way' (Participant a)

'I have a specific learning difference, I don't say impairment, I don't say disability, I say difference because I don't feel impaired' (Participant b)

'I want to regard myself as a politicised self-identified disabled person, disability is part of my political affiliation it's not necessarily a kind of description of any impairments I have' (Participant c)

'For me it's what I am, I don't feel particularly strongly, I'm not ill' (Participant d)

In defining themselves individuals also talked about how language was a factor in the way society viewed disabled people. Participants commented on how the language of disability was used in daily life.

'If I was filling in a form I would have to tick 'disabled'' (Participant b)

'I'm very happy to tick boxes to say I am a disabled person' (Participant c)

‘Disability can be a label. I think the words disabled and impaired are labels. It’s not a conscious thing, you see someone in a wheelchair and then label them as disabled but the person in the wheelchair may not see it that way’ (Participant a)

‘You need to differentiate between the physical difference or malfunction or deformity or whatever it is. Impairment is a rather better way of talking about that’ (Participant c)

The personal objects that participants had brought with them led to participants describing how their disability, whether physical or neurodiverse, shaped their view of the world, defined their lives, their politics and their relationships with others. These discussions were, without exception, positive, with participants not simply accepting their disability but drawing strength from it.

‘Because it’s a part of you, I don’t think of it as being any different, it’s enabling’ (Participant a: drawing attention to a metronome and the passage of time, in that her disability was a constant in her life)

‘I make connections that other people might not make. I think that enables creativity within my thinking’ (Participant b: a reference to the digital images which helped her to describe the way in which her cognitive function enabled alternative thinking)

‘You do live in this slightly different world and you see things and interpret things differently’ (Participant d: referring to a toy animal which she used to describe how her perception of the world was framed)

## **Conclusions and recommendations for practitioners**

The study highlighted an increasing tension between statutory compliance and training effectiveness. The increasingly competitive HE landscape (Stevenson et al., 2014) being shown to compound the ‘tick-box’ (Brown & Leigh, 2018: 987) nature of E&D training. Secondly, the study revealed that the most effective forms of delivery, drama-based training, contextualised simulations and the inclusion of guest speakers in training events, are those which are becoming less likely to be offered given their cost and complexity. The study raises important questions about the suitability and sustainability of online courses as a single method of delivery, a conundrum for broader consideration and application across the sector.

The study also found that academic staff in UK HEIs are more likely to engage in optional E&D training which provides practical solutions for teaching related activity than that which is mandatory and generic in content.

The study identified evidence of a direct link between the confidence of the facilitator and the maturity of dialogue from the audience when invited to engage in stimulating, relevant and contentious conversation. Where facilitation confidence is low, the evidence is that workshop participants, whose level of understanding is mixed and whose views may be ill-informed, are unlikely to learn much, if anything, about the lived experience of those with impairments. Of particular concern is that a facilitator with low confidence is less likely to contradict or dispel inaccurate representations of impairment when expressed by one or more workshop participants.

As staff development practitioners in institutions which publically promote equality and inclusion, social responsibility and ethical integrity, through our published mission and values statements, we should be leading the way in terms of inclusion and zero tolerance of discrimination in all its forms. While confined to the exploration of the lived experience of disabled people, the study raises questions about how disability is linked with gender, age, class or ethnicity, be that from the perspective of research participants, facilitators of training or those attending training events.

I hope that for the professional staff development community my research provides an opportunity to consider our own practice and to enhance E&D training activities which are both useful and transformative.



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