

PIRL Blog Post

Lynn Cockburn, January 2022

Title: Why I stopped using the acronym “PWD” in writing, and the discussions we have had about it

Summary: In early January 2022, I proposed that PIRL would not use the acronym PWD in our writing. This blog is about why I proposed the change. After a month of discussions, you might still see PWD in some of our work, as we do not have consensus about its use.

Language is always evolving, and good writing takes time. As we rounded up the year in late December, some of us were working on a paper about accessibility and disabilities. The lead author had used the acronym “PWD” or “PwD” to mean person with disability throughout the paper. As I read through, I realized that I had become uncomfortable enough with the acronym “PWD” to make comments and to ask for discussion about not using it.

So, we did have a discussion in that writing group. Some of the co-authors did not really see why I was raising this issue, while others understood it easily. Some explained why it should not be used in their own words. After a bit more discussion, we had reached consensus and agreed not to use it in that paper.

Then, in January, as our PIRL Team was getting geared up for a season of writing, I asked all of the members of the core team to also commit to not using the acronym in our writing. This time the discussion was a bit more complex and took longer. Several people on the team consider themselves a “PwD” as part of their identity, and it is used often in organizational documents and everyday work.

While some quickly supported not using the acronym, others talked about how the words and acronyms didn’t really matter, and that it was attitudes and social practices that we needed to address. They made the case that someone could use the acronym or not use it, and still have discriminatory attitudes that would prevent disabled persons from participating in society and living well. They also said that we should not spend too much time

talking about this acronym when there was much more important work to be done.

These interactions made me think and re-think more about why I was making this request not to use it. We gathered information and explanations. Here are the main points - We thought you might like to know more about these discussions.

- 1) **Explicitly naming disability is important.** There is a growing recognition that recognizing disability is important, and that society needs to talk more about disability issues, explicitly naming disability. For example, on Twitter, Lawrence Carter-Long (@LCarterLong) advocated for using the terms "disabled" and "disability". His tweet was: "I use person-first language, identity-first language & community-first language in rotation, interchangeably, to honor the origins, intentions & evolution of each option. Doesn't much matter where the words #DISABLED or #DISABILITY are placed as long as they're used. #SayTheWord"
https://twitter.com/LCarterLong/status/1284273074825621504?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1284273074825621504%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.usatoday.com%2Fstory%2Flife%2Fhealth-wellness%2F2021%2F06%2F11%2Fdisabled-not-special-needs-experts-explain-why-never-use-term%2F7591024002%2F This discussion about naming disability also calls for people to not use euphemisms such as "special needs".
- 2) **Spelling the words out in full is symbolic.** Using the full phrase symbolizes the importance of seeing people in their fullness, allowing for space to be taken up by persons with disabilities. As Martin (@Martinsy) tweeted: "Please don't use the acronym PWD. Address them in full, person with disability (or people with disabilities for plural). Acronym is used for clarity and space, so as to avoid long sentences; but this does not apply to people, especially marginalized and vulnerable groups."
<https://twitter.com/martinsy/status/1185373244234199040>

Some people believe that using the acronym can subconsciously imply that people with disabilities should take up less space.

- 3) **There are many opinions about how people with disabilities are marginalized, and language can contribute.** It is important to remember that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group, and they have a wide variety of experiences and opinions and social locations. People with disabilities experience many different forms of discrimination and oppressions, in ableist societies, due to their disabilities, compounded by other identities that are marginalized.

Spelling out the words in full can be seen as one strategy to address these oppressions.

- 4) **Language shifts and changes.** Some people say – “We have been using this acronym for years, we are comfortable with it.” A response to this concern is that language is constantly evolving, and just because we have used a word for a long time does not mean we should continue using it. Comfort alone is not a good enough reason for not making changes. But it can be a good reason, in the midst of lives and spaces where there are many other changes and unpredictability, to not change.
- 5) **Other groups are usually not reduced to acronyms.** Most other groups are not reduced to an acronym. In many places, such as lists in policies or in documents where other groups are mentioned, usually other groups are spelled out in full and not reduced to acronyms. We hear about older adults and senior citizens, pregnant mothers, and people who use substances. Often in these kinds of lists, it is only persons with disabilities who are described in acronyms. Yes, there are a few exceptions, such as the acronym PLWHA (or variations) that is used in the HIV and AIDS sector to mean a person living with HIV or AIDS – but maybe it is time to revisit that acronym as well.
- 6) **Community leaders are increasingly encouraging the use of full phrases, not acronyms, about disability.** While the acronym has been supported by some community groups, large groups such as the WHO and the UN do not support the use of the acronym PWD. See, for example, these guidelines by the UN:
<https://www.ungeneva.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Disability-Inclusive-Language-Guidelines.pdf> Several others are writing about this change as well. Here is one example from a group in the Philippines: <https://www.cdp.org.ph/news-1/2017/09/25/pwd-or-person-with-disability-to-acronym-or-not-to-acronym>

One of the most important questions is: Does not using the acronym change social attitudes and discriminatory behaviours? For the reasons stated above, some of us would say yes, it is part of a process of understanding how language can shift attitudes. Others, however, say that it doesn't make that much of a difference - attitudes change in other ways, and use of the acronym is not going to make that change. Some say that it is another example of privileged pressure from Global North funders, and so grant recipients will do it to comply, but it does not really make a difference to their lives.

Some people in our group asked about whether they could use "special needs". This topic warrants a discussion on another day, but the short answer is: please don't use special needs.

In summary, while I initially proposed that PIRL would not use the acronym PWD in our writing, you might still see it in some of our work. We do not have consensus about its use.

Personally, I am going to steer away from using it.

As a group, some of us are gradually making this change away from using the acronym PWD but not everyone agrees, and some people will continue to use it. Like many other topics, it will be revisited and discussed.

We would love to have your comments on this topic – share below or write to us at PIRL@utoronto.ca .