Practice-Based Article

Face Value: How Living with an Appearance Difference Informs Library Customer Service

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ABSTRACT

This reflective article explores how living with a visible difference shapes professional practice in a public-facing academic library role. Drawing on personal experience with craniofrontonasal dysplasia (CFND), the author examines how visibility, empathy, and self-awareness inform interactions with library users, colleagues, and the wider university community. The article highlights the importance of representation, inclusive service delivery, and human-centred approaches in library practice, linking personal insight with institutional frameworks for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). By integrating lived experience with professional practice, the author demonstrates how understanding and valuing difference can enhance user experience, foster belonging, and cultivate meaningful connections in academic library environments.

KEYWORDS
visible difference, connection, empathy, inclusivity, user experience

INTRODUCTION

"We all have marks on our face. This is the map that shows where we've been and it's never, ever ugly." — Auggie Pullman, Wonder (2017).

This line has always resonated with me, and I will reference the film numerous times throughout this article.

I was born with a rare craniofacial condition called craniofrontonasal dysplasia (CFND), which I did not inherit. The unpredictability of this condition has been a mental challenge; it can feel unfair when life-altering conditions appear unexpectedly. If you are someone who sits there thinking "why me?", then I empathise. I have had many moments like that throughout my life.

I carry many stories on my face as a result of my visible difference. As a library assistant in a public-facing academic role, I am often taken at face value therefore, I value my face. I am not solely referring to my physical appearance either. As a member of a user-facing, student-centred library team, my professional face and overall character carry significant weight in how successful I am in my career.

MY EXPERIENCE LIVING WITH A VISIBLE DIFFERENCE
The term 'visible difference' is defined as "physical appearance that is different to the societal norm" (University of the West of England, n.d). I am happy that visible difference is now being researched in an in-depth way in both the medical and surgical spheres but for me, the psychological impacts are equally, if not more important.

My condition has impacted the shape of my face, the length of one of my legs, the shape of my shoulders, my hair texture, and nail strength. For many, it may be surprising to realise how extensively a medical condition shapes my appearance. Some people might assume that my hair type is inherited, or that my years of playing youth sports are to blame for my weak nails. Now the hours spent on a GAA all-weather pitch, in all weathers, certainly didn't help, but no, all of these things are symptoms of CFND. The medical aspects are complex but what most affects my daily life — especially in a public-facing role — is living with a visible difference.

While family, friends, and medical professionals may say this condition does not define me, I have learned that it does—and that understanding this is essential for professional growth. This understanding informs how I live, work, and how I strive to support others. I have long sought to bridge the gap between my personal journey and my professional experience in customer service.

Earlier this year, I took on an additional role and began serving as a Public Contributor for Children Health Ireland's Craniofacial Research Group (CRG). CRG meetings are hosted monthly at Children's University Hospital, Temple Street and chaired by Mr Dylan Murray, Consultant Paediatric Plastic Surgeon and Lead Clinician for the National Paediatric Craniofacial Centre (NPCC). My role involves providing patient and family insights based on my experience transitioning from paediatric to adult clinics. I attend alongside other NPCC team members, and we discuss and review current surgical and psychological projects.

PERSONAL INSIGHT INFORMS PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

For much of my life, I avoided defining myself by my condition, working hard to challenge assumptions. Integrating my lived experience into my professional identity is now crucial for me and I am still relatively early in my librarianship career. This perspective informs my work at Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin), where I aim to enhance understanding of visibility, empathy, and human connection in public-facing roles.

Those born with visible differences know what it is to be "read" before speaking. Over time, I learned not only to be read but to read others — tuning into subtle cues, unspoken discomfort, and ways people reveal themselves unintentionally. My current role centres on helping students navigate resources, spaces, and systems, but the moments between questions — grounded in empathy, patience, and presence — are often the most significant. These attributes align with user experience (UX) principles and inclusive service delivery, where understanding emotional and social context is essential to supporting users effectively.

SELF-CARE AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

In any public-facing role, emotional labour is an inherent part of the work. We manage not only questions and tasks, but also the feelings that circulate around us — stress, confusion, anxiety, or sometimes joy and relief. For me, there is an added layer: the constant, silent awareness of my visibility. Being visibly different has taught me that care is both inward and outward. The more I understand and accept myself, the better I can care for others. This mirrors empathy-driven approaches in library service, which emphasise reflective practice and emotional intelligence as cornerstones of effective customer interaction.

A disconnect between internal self-perception and external presentation can hinder public-facing work. Part of maintaining that alignment for me has involved prioritising self-care. A concrete example of this is my approach to hair care. For years, I spent hours each week struggling to wash and dry my thick, curly

hair, which was exhausting. There were hours of frustration and tears, often late at night or in the early hours of the morning, in university accommodation, trying to avoid disturbing my housemates. Recognising the impact of this on both my wellbeing and professional presence, a few years ago, I decided to prioritise self-care by visiting a hairdresser once a week. This forty-five-minute weekly routine now leaves me relaxed and confident, allowing me to focus fully on my work.

A small act of self-care like this illustrates how attending to personal needs directly supports professional presence and effectiveness. It demonstrates how nurturing self-awareness is both a personal and professional strategy. For me, it allows me to maintain presence, patience, and empathy for the students I serve. While this particular self-care may seem like vanity and even highlight certain financial privilege, what it actually does is underline the importance of self-care in supporting a public-facing role. By managing the aspects of my appearance that previously caused stress, I reduce distractions and can engage more fully and authentically with library users.

I often reflect on the idea of seeing and being seen. For those of us with visible differences, being seen is unavoidable but being understood is something we build through connection. In the daily rhythm of library work, understanding can be cultivated through small acts of kindness, presence, and respect, both for others and for ourselves.

REPRESENTATION, EMPATHY, AND USER EXPERIENCE

I vividly remember seeing *Wonder* (2017) for the first time at age twenty-one. *Wonder* depicts the life of Auggie Pullman, a young boy born with a rare medical facial condition that affects the shape and appearance of his ears, eyes, cheekbones, and chin. The film not only delves into his own experience of the world, living with an appearance difference, but how that affects his family. There were many themes that reflected my lived experience so intensely and accurately that at times it was hard for me to remain in my seat, however, I stayed because I was in awe of the representation that I felt was given to me in that moment.

I think because I saw the film as a young woman, Julia Roberts' depiction of the maternal fears and anxieties for her child was what really struck a chord with me the most. I could relate to Auggie because in a lot of ways, I was him as a child. It was very powerful for me to see the interplay between the two parents (father played by Owen Wilson) because those conversations had been kept away from me. That is as it should be, and is, of course, not a criticism. My parents gave me all the courage in the world to just go out there and be me but as an adult, I understand now that they would have had their trepidations.

Without too many spoilers, because I truly would recommend the film to everyone, it does end on a happy note. Auggie has friends, he has found his own little place in the world, in school, for now. I think that's why it was a poignant moment for my family when my parents gave me their insight. They said something to the effect of "the ending was a bit too happy-ever-after", however, I interpreted the ending as "happy for now." I don't blame my parents for how they initially reacted; the film does end on a very high note and I think our conversations and reflections afterwards were needed. When I told my mother that I was writing this piece, without any indication from me that I would be discussing *Wonder*, she spoke of the day we saw the film and how it was a teaching moment it was for her.

'Yes, Auggie is happy, but he is still a child.'

'I was a happy child too.'

The complexities of life for those with visible differences extend far beyond moments of recognition or acceptance. I had a great group of friends in school, who accepted and supported me. However, Auggie will one day become a teenager, and have to deal with more obstacles - then he will become an adult - a whole different stratosphere of learning how to navigate life when you know you stand out. I would personally love to see more representation of adults with appearance differences.

The themes that I am referring to, the insecurities and anxieties, are, of course, not limited to those of us with appearance differences – that is the universal reality of being a human. I am just better able to speak on my own nuanced understanding of what it's like to walk into a room and stand out. I know that some people will never have met anyone with a craniofacial condition before. I also know that the stares and double takes are less about judgement and more about curiosity. I am a curious person too.

As a library professional, my lived experience enables me to meet students as whole people, providing guidance, support, and empathy grounded in this perspective. Short interactions at a library desk rarely allow for "happily ever after" outcomes. What we can offer are "happy for now" moments and encourage students to return as their needs evolve. As Steven Bell (2019) notes: small moments of joy accumulate into meaningful satisfaction. I experience this joy when helping a student locate a book or resolve an account issue. This doesn't mean that that student will never have stress or anxiety in college again - a week later they are likely to not be able to print properly; they won't be able to format their table of contents in Word for their thesis or locate the right room for their lecture. Surely though, if we can eliminate one stress from their lives, that must count for something, right?

As Auggie reminds us, "Be kind, for everyone is fighting a hard battle. And if you really want to see what people are, all you have to do is look" (Wonder, 2017). I strive to ensure my professional face conveys both value and recognition to others - a face shaped through years of effort. I feel fulfilment when recognised as a library professional—I will even embrace the glasses, the bun in my hair and the cardigans if it means that I am happy with how I appear.

EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION IN PRACTICE
Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) articulates its commitment to EDI principles in its 2023 – 2028 Equality Statement as does RCSI in its 2024-2027 EDI Strategy Document. I refer only to Dublin-based universities here but all of them, including Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and Dublin City University, have well-researched policies in this area. What is worth noting, however, is that appearance differences such as craniofacial differences, generally fall under the umbrella protected ground of "disability" (Employment Equality Act, 1998), which includes medical conditions. I, on the other hand, would, advocate for "visible difference" to be regarded as open to a separate form of discrimination as currently, protection only appears to exist when it overlaps with one of the other nine listed grounds.

I am personally proud to be an Irish library professional, a member of the most accepting and welcoming community. I couldn't have chosen a better area to work in as it has allowed me to just be "Maeve" and I have never felt as though my difference has affected my professional life - if anything, it has helped me thrive in my work and be an advocate for change.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on these institutional frameworks, I also consider how my own experiences with visible difference inform my professional practice. Over time, I've developed a heightened sensitivity to tone, body language, and atmosphere: the small cues that reveal how someone is feeling beneath the surface. This helps me a lot with developing supportive working relationships with both my colleagues and with library users. There are also certain quirks I only later realised were connected to the way I look and which have informed both my personal and professional identities. For example, I prefer being the first person to enter a room rather than the last. If I don't enter first, there is that agonising moment when everyone is waiting: the staring, the subtle attention it can all be overwhelming. This sensitivity helps me connect with students who are nervous about asking questions or who feel out of place in the university environment. I can sense when someone needs reassurance before information. I understand, in a quiet way, what it feels like to be looked at, to feel uncertain about belonging. In this way, my lived experience informs my professional one: empathy becomes not just an ideal, but a practised skill rooted in daily reality.

My experience has not been about overcoming my appearance difference but about integrating it into who I am as a professional and as a person. In doing so, I hope I contribute, in some modest way, to a culture where every student, staff member, and visitor feels they belong — not despite difference, but alongside it.

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Maeve Kerins was born with craniofrontonasal dysplasia (CFND) and spent her childhood and adolescence being treated by the National Paediatric Craniofacial Centre in Temple Street Hospital in Dublin. Maeve is currently employed in Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin) Library Services as part of the Teaching and Learning Team. Maeve is also Co-Chair of TU Dublin's Equality Diversity and Inclusion Champions Network and in addition, serves as a Public Contributor for Children Health Ireland's Craniofacial Research Group.