Equality in higher education opportunities: Practitioners' perspectives from global, rural, post-colonial disability

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Abstract

This paper gathers practitioner perspectives on tuition-free online courses and their potential to improve equality in higher education. Through an intersectional lens of race, gender, income, and indigeneity, this paper focuses on the experience of people living with disabilities (PLWD) as a further marginalized sub-population within diverse marginalized populations. Of note, disability-knowledge held by PLWD and by their family members can position them as sensitive and effective healthcare or disability-care providers. At the same time, society often does not grant an easy pathway to this education and licensure. The existing landscape of massive open online courses (MOOCs) may present tuition-free learning, but accreditation can rest upon payment and other complex structures. Even after PLWDs gather financial resources for official accreditation, prospective employers have the autonomy to determine whether this learning is valid. In a global context, low-income families may experience internal competition for financing between PLWD and non-disabled siblings. Securing a future in which payment models and disability-needs are accommodated for in MOOCs can alter multiple life trajectories in the families of PLWD and ensure that the intersectionally marginalized may equally benefit from open education.

Keywords: disability; poverty; intersectional inequalities; digital technology; practitioner perspectives

Introduction

People living with disabilities (PLWD) and their family members, even after receiving education, are often forced to settle for lower-paying employment positions which neither make use of their previous education, nor validate the

knowledge accumulated through lived experience with a disability. As a result, PLWD are often required by society to increase their competitiveness in a labor market which expects career or educational achievement beyond those of non-disabled jobseekers. At the same time, career achievements are largely out of reach for PLWD, especially for PLWD seeking their first acceptance into the labor market. With educational achievements as PLWD's only other option to demonstrate capacity to employers, this option is oftentimes also eliminated by a variety of barriers preventing PLWD from accessing higher education. Education, even if achieved, may not bring PLWD into their occupation of choice, nor any feasible occupation. In certain cases, education can be minimized as years of committed work which do not directly lead to inclusion in society (Bines & Lei, 2011). The following discussion emphasizes realities related to the exclusion of PLWD from poverty-reduction initiatives, in addition to the limited options PLWD may access in terms of self-help under existing social structures (Bunbury, 2019).

Education is not all about employment, and education for PLWD can bring other improvements to their lives beyond financial livelihood (Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997). Still, the fact that higher education requires financial investment—but may not lead to any employment for PLWD—denies them the social mobility that is offered to many other students. For PLWD who are raised in a context of poverty, education may serve as the empowerment tool to break cycles of poverty and marginalization for their families (Parnes et al., 2009). Yet, without an education-employment transition (Rusch, 1992) within their reach, there are limited alternative options for PLWD to turn their skills into tangible self-help capacity for themselves and for their families.

Aim

This paper will discuss perspectives of practitioners who actively work with people living with disabilities (PLWD) or bring lived experience due to a disability. Specifically, the paper seeks to understand how an existing landscape of open online education in the form of tuition-free Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) may be mobilized towards attainment of higher education opportunities and essential livelihood—in terms of opportunities to find basic resources for subsistence—for PLWD. Given a social context in which PLWD may still face barriers in finding paid employment after completing such online education, the paper takes an interdisciplinary approach in considering various intersectional issues as presented by practitioners.

Our point of departure

This discussion paper applies a theoretical framework of Freirean pedagogy to understand how PLWD may consistently be forced into a positionality of the oppressed, especially in educational contexts which Freire considers as designed by the privileged to maintain privilege (1970). Of note, disability-specific frameworks are not applied in this paper, to emphasize that PLWD do not necessarily fall into another subdiscipline within educational inequalities. PLWD can also belong as part of oppressed gender minorities, racial minorities, and other social minorities as constructed by their immediate physical contexts. As such, this paper seeks to emphasize the intersectionality and solidarity between oppressed groups, operating on the assumption that barriers which PLWD face may also be barriers that, as but one example, women may face (Buchmann et al., 2008)—for the simple fact that PLWD can also be women. The choice of using women as an example is based on brevity, as decades of education research exist to show various other oppressed populations who are simultaneously marginalized by a disability. As such, removing PLWD from the other populations they belong to may lead to greater segregation in discourse. Under a Freirean framework on oppression viewed in its totality, investing identical time, effort, and financial resources while receiving inequitable outcomes in terms of livelihood emerges as a form of inequality common to the disability experience.

Our discussion is informed by the perspective of key informants who work with people living with disabilities as practitioners. As a limitation, lived experience is not collected qualitatively from the families these practitioners work with. Still, most key informants engaged in this study also live with a disability themselves, or are family members of an individual living with disability.

This paper emphasizes a heterogenous lens on disability. Among people who live with disabilities, there are those who are further marginalized through living in a rural or remote community; living in a developing, or postcolonial, country; facing discrimination for their gender and identity in the aforementioned sociocultural contexts; or, identifying with indigenous groups who have been deprived of governance and land. The emphasis on highest-need populations informs this discussion, with a marked emphasis on the global south.

We want to clarify that this inquiry originated from community-education work with the Lisu, an indigenous people who are currently viewed as ethnic minorities in China, India, Myanmar, and Thailand. The division of Lisu land by four modern colonial boundaries brings forth complexities in research and ethics, which can lead to further sidelining and invisibilization of this oppressed people group. In our inquiry, India emerged as the focus. As English is positioned as one

of the nation's two official languages—and that the landscape of MOOCs is dominated by English-based content—this initial choice of inquiry represents a first-steps attempt at scholarly investigation. However, we are aware that access to English education in India is arguably not yet universal within existing social structures and, while the sidelining of China, Myanmar, and Thailand in this paper is detrimental, it could not be assumed that PLWD from these three countries could access MOOCs based on language-accessibility alone.

The inquiry was based on two categories of data: existing barriers preventing PLWD from equitably benefiting from MOOCs, and potential opportunities for equal access to education and social mobility through tuition-free online education. Kemmis et al.'s (2014) critical participatory action research (CPAR) informed our practitioner-oriented approach—specifically, the conceptual basis of the study expands the roles of researcher-practitioner and theorist-practitioner to view practitioners as equal-power participants in the research process. The dual role of key informants as both practitioners and people living with disabilities position them to inform the study via lived experience, 'a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing' (hooks, 2014 pp. 84). Unwelcome truths were specifically encouraged, to maintain the critical lens that is often missing in action research towards addressing the status quo (Kemmis, 2006). Emphasis on action and tangible benefits on-the-ground informed the process of inquiry, towards identifying gaps between current hierarchical structures and an equitable future.

Author positionality and ethics

Ethics approval was not sought via a university, but rather through a collective understanding by practitioners from the field. All practitioners interested in equitable access to higher education were invited to contribute to the study, and likewise were free to withdraw at any point in the process. Practitioners were also invited to contribute as co-authors, a process which seeks to eliminate power differentials between the researcher and "subjects" of research. The positionality of the authoring team represents diverse disciplines, differing abilities, and north-south lived experiences to explore what constitutes equality in open online education. Amidst this diversity, an interest in differing abilities, neurodiversity, and various forms of disabilities prevail among all participants.

Equitable education—a discussion

The following sections provide the results of inquiry, with significant emphasis on participant-determined themes in relation to open online courses for PLWD. The themes do not represent a holistic consideration of equitable education for PLWD, as data saturation is limited by the practitioners' perspectives. All considerations which emerged during the key informant interview process are presented below to suggest both diversity in range of interconnected issues, as well as potential directions for future research.

Lived experience as value to society
Practitioner input determined a specific direction for PLWD to contribute to society after accessing higher education. From a societal perspective, there is significant potential in supporting PLWD and their family members into careers that build upon their lived experience with disabilities. Lived experience with a disability is not just a deviance (Fitch, 2002), but can be treated as an asset towards bringing added value into an employment setting, as well as into educational contexts. Occupational therapists, physical therapists, and other medical- and health-professionals can benefit from experience in managing a chronic health condition or disability, whether for the self, or for others as familial caregivers. While teaching how to manage these conditions to students without a background in disability may require considerable dedicated training, PLWD and their family members, on the one hand, contribute with existing knowledge that gives them familiarity and detailed insights to provide assistance to patients and, on the other hand, improve the educational context and the learning experience of their peers without such experience. Research suggests that when education is made inclusive to PLWD, long-run economic benefits to society emerge (Ballis & Heath, 2021). This suggests further untapped economic potential in valuing the knowledge and lived experience of PLWD and their caregivers. While economic contribution to society cannot be an indicator of value of any subpopulation, the fact that PLWD and their disability-knowledge are sidelined suggests that inequitable forces exist to the detriment of both PLWD and society.

Not all PLWD will have disability-sector and health-sector positions as their occupation of choice. More tragically, not all PLWD will be able to meet functional requirements due to their existing conditions (Grigal et al., 2013). Still, the active inclusion of PLWD and their caregivers into disability-related professions through education has significant potential to provide PLWD with social mobility and means to break cycles of poverty. Particularly in an international development context, PLWD are often deemed as unable to contribute to their families in

agricultural or other service roles (Artiles & Hallahan, 1995; Eleweke & Rodda, 2002)—when in fact, PLWD and their caregivers may possess knowledge that would allow them to serve more efficiently in the higher-paying roles of health and disability services. As for education, the current MOOC landscape can be enhanced by targeting PLWD to optimize their disability-knowledge for health practices and future professions.

Transition opportunities through MOOCs
Professional positions often depend upon education beyond a bachelor's degree. Meanwhile, completion rates of PLWD enrolled in bachelor's degrees already require significant attention (Carroll et al., 2020). Just as PLWD experience difficulties in meeting admission requirements to university programs, PLWD who have earned a bachelor's degree can face similar challenges in accessing the relevant master's or professional programs after graduation. Inclusive education requires significant planning and strategizing (Bowe, 2004; Connor et al., 2008; Gaylord-Ross, 1989); it does not happen automatically, and, in higher-level programs, strategies to include PLWD often cease.

Failing to transition becomes a significant barrier for PLWD (Foley et al., 2012). While some PLWD find themselves unable to overcome the gap between education and employment, PLWD with existing degrees can also find themselves unable to overcome the gap between their first degree and a subsequent required degree. These gaps can present significant mental, emotional, or financial difficulties to PLWD at an age when they are learning to cope with their identity in society (Ferguson & Ferguson, 1993). Functionally, these gaps can also nullify all previous learning completed by PLWD, as education terminating before the acquisition of a professional license cannot effectively contribute to desired employment outcomes. Despite multiple studies into long-term outcomes, at a global scale, the exact number of PLWD affected by unsuccessful transitions into their occupation of choice remains difficult to capture (Kamenopoulou, 2018; Moore & Schelling, 2015; Ross et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2012). In turn, whether participation in education leads to any long-term benefits remains a question to some PLWD and their families (Butler et al., 2016). This does not suggest that education has limited value for PLWD, but rather, draws attention to how society assigns value to *incomplete education* when that is all PLWD can feasibly access within existing social structures. These inequalities are further exacerbated by a reality in which PLWD can find accepting spaces only in educational settings deemed to be at a lower-competency level (Hart et al., 2010).

With the global rise of MOOCs, transition towards employment or towards higher degrees may be considered. In this respect, the question of whether MOOCs

are designed to lead to long-term employment is of value to consider. Certain MOOCs target privileged learners who wish to advance hobbies or interests in a formal education setting. As these types of learners have the financial capacity to pay for subsequent courses or for official accreditation, there may exist a draw in a capitalist system to prioritize what may be perceived as interesting courses over employment-prerequisite courses. This phenomenon may not be linked merely to market structures, but also to the fact that MOOCs are currently not seen as valid learning by employers. As such, the mobilization of MOOCs to fill essential gaps in an education-to-employment trajectory for PLWD suffers from MOOCs' positioning as adult learning, continued learning, or lifelong learning, and not necessarily learning which leads to employment.

Tuition-free open online courses—an alternative or not?
Physical barriers—whether it is campus design, or the necessity of relocating from home to university—remain significant even after decades of design-based and legal interventions in the field of higher education. The digital format of MOOCs can be a natural response to these barriers faced by underprivileged students, including PLWD. Physical barriers are not always difficult to overcome, but they may be costly to overcome. The intertwining of physical and financial barriers often presents a second layer of marginalization to PLWD from low-income families, while MOOCs are also well-positioned to remove income as a barrier to higher education. A significant portion of MOOCs are open-access, which by extension means tuition-free. However, it is important to note that the tuition-free status of certain MOOCs is not guaranteed as permanent, and all these details form part of the evolving landscape of MOOC offerings over time. For students wishing to receive final certification of the completion of a degree, many MOOCs charge a fee.

The accreditation or certification aspect of MOOCs is intrinsically linked to societal views of online education. In certain international development contexts, online education is automatically associated with academic dishonesty regardless of the accrediting body. Of note, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a worldwide impact on transitioning nearly all the world's universities, regardless of ranking, to online-education for a period of time. Yet, the long-term impact on societal views of quality of online education remains to be assessed. The response of most MOOC providers is to follow traditional accreditation standards, which comes at a cost to revert the open-access design of MOOCs. While fee-for-service has been the dominant model in higher education accreditation across the world, in certain contexts, this can also lead to the automatic assumption that PLWD from lower-income backgrounds have not completed MOOC education at a similar rigor to

paying peers. If completion of open-access courses is not only viewed by society as less rigorous but also associated with academic dishonesty, this invalidates the point of PLWD participating in such education. In total, the lack of free accreditation by institutions upheld by the public compounds with the online nature of MOOCs to impact the practical utility of such open online courses for PLWD.

Employer-based accreditation—a way forward?
Employer-based recognition presents a new opportunity in higher education and MOOC accreditation. Employers, however, are often not viewed as authorities in higher education, and therefore may not be seen as appropriate accreditors of the education received by PLWD. At the same time, accreditation of higher education institutes and programs is and has historically been a private-sector industry, overseen by corporations. The current reality is that governmental authorities from the global south, such as various ministries of education in non-English speaking countries, are required to be accredited themselves by the private sector in the global north. As critical context for this paper, a community organization among the authoring team initiated conversations with 206 ministries of education and indigenous governments, seeking to build formal accreditation for MOOCs (prioritizing those offered by highly-ranked global universities) completed by PLWD. These efforts were not successful as governments are not the sole decision-makers in accreditation, but rather need to collaborate with and respond to private-sector accreditation boards in decision-making.

There is potential in exploring intentional collaboration with key employers, for employers themselves to recognize MOOC education received by PLWD. Employer-based acknowledgement or recognition is particularly promising, as some major employers are already designing and accrediting their own courses via MOOC platforms such as EdX. In other words, MOOCs have become conglomerate platforms offering both courses from publicly-recognized universities as well as employers, which may help normalize employer-accredited education — ultimately easing the transition from education to employment for MOOC learners. In other words, while societal views on the academic rigor of MOOCs can stay stagnant, the fact that employers are offering their own MOOCs shows promise in PLWD accessing employment after MOOC education.

MOOC as equality enhancer
One downside of online education is the lack of a university campus environment towards supporting learning and social mobility. Opportunities for networking, socializing, and peer-support are absent (Reindal, 2008), and in many cases, the presence of an instructor is also minimal. The role of the instructor can be life-

changing (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lews & Norwich, 2005; Tejeda-Delgado, 2009), and so can the classroom setting itself (Mintz, 2014; Spencer, 2013). A MOOC structure may remove all these factors from the higher education experience for PLWD, and lack in the providing of PLWD with skills and experiences that might be beneficial in a future workplace.

At the same time, it is important to note that online courses present a relatively universal learning experience to students regardless of their ability, function, or background. Specifically, there is no intended or unintended segregation of *special needs* learners – a nuanced topic of significant debate in education (Blanchett, 2009; Greenwood, 1991; Hallahan et al., 2012; Michailakis & Reich 2009; Miles & Singal, 2010; Smith, 2007). In an online learning environment, PLWD who choose not to openly disclose their disabilities can do so with greater comfort. The opportunity to blend in or be accepted just like their peers makes a significant difference in the academic setting for the marginalized student (Nicholls, 2011). More importantly, there is no initial labeling (Shifrer, 2013) of PLWD by their disability, which can also result in a markedly different learning experience for PLWD.

There is value in the PLWD as a student in a learning environment. The presence of a PLWD peer is a form of disability studies for other students, and presents an opportunity to develop awareness, sensitivity, and new perspectives on life. As important as disability studies can be for the student without a disability (Gabel, 2005; Pearson et al., 2016), it is also important for PLWD to have the opportunity to learn without the burdens and expectations of presenting information about their own disability to others. MOOCs do not present an optimal peer-learning scenario, but they present an alternative learning option which potentially grants PLWD a destigmatized experience. For some PLWD, MOOCs may be their first experience of social integration, or of being treated the same way as their more privileged peers.

Another feature of MOOCs is that they often do not require students to engage in education with a commitment of four years towards an undergraduate program. Rather, courses are offered on an individual basis, leading to the rise of micro-credentials. These potentially allow PLWD an opportunity to experiment and decide what is the most suitable educational route towards their long-term goals. From the perspective of the education provider, micro-credentials can reduce the burden of ensuring their programs fit all learners, as the practice of inclusion is a complex undertaking (Hodkinson, 2011; Jorgensen, 1998; Simpson, 2009; Hart et al., 2010). Via MOOCs, the path towards inclusion and finding the right form of education becomes one that PLWD can also take into their own hands. Of note, whether these micro-credentials have similar applied value as a traditional

bachelor's degree emerges again as a concern. While formal institutions like liberal arts universities likewise present flexibility and student autonomy in higher education, the fact that MOOC-based flexibility can be less socially acceptable highlights the applied value of privilege in society.

The intersection of MOOCs and human rights

Across various legal bodies, PLWD's access to education and employment are protected by legislation, from local legislations all the way to international conventions (Lord, 2020). Still, these legislations do not prevent stigma (Scambler, 2009) and function-based criteria which openly disqualify PLWD from certain professional training — for example, certain medical programs which involve passing a physical health-check as part of the application process. Although some disability organizations have been successful in legal advice and advocacy, the manifestation of disability legislation towards on-the-ground, tangible benefits for PLWD can heavily rely on the existence of these non-governmental bodies. In other words, under the same legislative framework, lived experience at a local level can drastically differ depending on the landscape of available advocates and non-governmental supports.

MOOCs present a unique opportunity to apply global legislation intended to protect the educational and employment rights of PLWD. As MOOCs in themselves are designed as global platforms open to all countries, the discourse surrounding MOOCs automatically escapes a local nature. If MOOCs can be reframed or redesigned as legal responses to international human rights laws, there exists significant potential for future MOOCs to be seen as valid education — beyond what may be conceptualized in the global north as hobby-based learning in one's spare time. Reorientation of MOOCs as a human rights response may help shift perspectives of independent, smaller employers to see such online education as not only employment-based learning, but a greater, international effort towards equality which their company can be part of.

Educational trajectory—a family perspective

Revisiting the issue of valuing the lived experience of PLWD in disability-related professions, it is paramount to support PLWD and their caregivers into education leading to such professions. A possible consequence of this support is the multiplier effect in economics that can come into play as a poverty-reduction strategy. For many families with disabilities, a considerable portion of their income may be dedicated towards regular access to disability-services or health-services. If these services are in turn provided by a professional who also lives with a disability or is a caregiver of a PLWD, then an expenditure has the potential to benefit two families

with disabilities. This potential *shared economy* in which obligatory expenses benefit another family with disability suggests that there is value in supporting PLWD and their family members into disability- and health-professions.

Families with disabilities in international development settings are often forced to make *optimized* educational decisions. With limited income for tuition, families may be forced to support a single sibling into higher education, often the sibling without disabilities and thus with the highest potential for income-generation towards the future. In other words, the unfortunate reality for some families is that familial and internal competition for educational resources—in terms of tuition at a base level—exist between the PLWD and their family members. Ultimately, this not only leads to potential learned helplessness of the PLWD, but also an unfair expectation that the family member must dedicate their educational trajectory towards taking care of the PLWD.

MOOCs which remain tuition-free present a significant alternative option for families in these situations. When tuition and relocation costs are removed from the equation, there is greater liberty with which families can make their educational decisions. The value of online, tuition-free degrees is not just its financial value if they were to charge tuition, but much greater – this value has the potential to change life trajectories of multiple members within the same family.

Marginalization Remains

It is important to note that after removing the barriers of physical relocation and tuition, open-access online education still excludes certain population groups from accessing higher education. Firstly, all regions without access to stable or affordable internet will not be able to benefit from MOOCs. While this reality is improving dramatically with time – particularly through the existence of local schools and library systems as providers of internet connection – this reality once again draws attention to the importance of physical accessibility of schools and libraries for PLWD.

Other barriers are more likely to be overcome by the disability-practitioner, but remain as significant and common barriers nonetheless undermining the efficacy of online education. Currently, MOOCs are largely offered in the English language, which arguably is also a useful language towards long-term employment prospects for PLWD. At the same time, PLWD from non-English speaking countries often face difficulties in accessing education which provides them with skills in English as a second language. Translation of MOOC content is an actionable leverage point, but it inevitably alters the accreditation of the final completed coursework; this will require future partnership and support from the end of MOOC providers.

Lastly, a literature search did not produce results for any MOOCs that provide specific accommodation for vision-impaired students, hearing-impaired students, or students with other needs for support. The role of the practitioner again is significant here, as many of these accommodations can be executed with the growth of freely accessible technology such as text-to-speech software. Overall, MOOCs are not designed with PLWD specifically in mind, and therefore may still require additional actions of the PLWD or their family to make learning happen. Researchers can aid in addressing this gap and maximizing the potential of MOOCs to bring tangible benefits to the lives of PLWD.

Securing a future through MOOCs—a reflection
MOOCs are provided for free, without condition, and therefore also without any guarantee for employable skills into the long-term future. On the other hand, all marginalized individuals deserve an education with a rightful promise: the promise that society will respect their labor towards a financial situation that allows for dignity of life. As MOOCs continue to evolve and devolve, with discontinued courses, increasing fee structures, and changes in accreditation status, the role of researchers becomes increasingly important. Securing a future where PLWD can feel safe about their decision to engage in higher learning is a task worth undertaking.

Conclusion

Considering the perspectives of communities living with multiple, intersectional marginalizations illustrates that tuition-free, open-access, online offerings in higher education may still require additional effort before disability-accessibility and legitimacy in society can be reached. The gaps are linked to employment, accreditation, and other existing socioeconomic structures which may not be easily overcome regardless of the continued expansion of MOOCs. A Freirean framework informing this paper suggests value in considering how MOOCs are mobilized by the privileged class for personal-interest learning after essential livelihood is secured. The landscape of MOOC offerings, as free resources, is notably dynamic as no institution is obligated to continue this provision into the indeterminate future. In combination, more privileged learners in the global north may have greater platform and voice to direct this evolution of MOOCs, while intersectionally marginalized individuals may find it difficult to self-help out of poverty through MOOCs.

MOOCs nonetheless present tremendous opportunities to enhance equality in higher education. Intentional design of MOOCs for individuals living with multiple marginalizations—particularly, towards their empowerment to find essential livelihood in society—may also result in course content appealing to privileged learners. In other words, learning for the Freirean oppressed and learning for the privileged do not have to be mutually exclusive, and integrated efforts to orient MOOCs for universal access to livelihood may benefit diverse learners alike.

The learning needs of rural, ethnic students living with disabilities in the global south are legitimate. Still, the forms of higher education accessible to these individuals may not be viewed with sufficient legitimacy to accreditation bodies, employers, nor society in general. Continued technological developments in conjunction with COVID has granted online learning heightened legitimacy; how this may be translated to legitimize intersectionally marginalized students suggest value in continued research on MOOCs mobilized for equality.

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