Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning

Troubles Online: Ableism and Access in Higher Education

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Book Review

ABSTRACT

In the foreword to this book, Joy Dolmage, founding editor of the Canadian Journal of Disability Studies, states (p. xxii):

> I think we can all agree that, before the pandemic, our schools had too many unnecessary barriers in place for both students and faculty. COVID-19 has provided new reference points for evaluating long-standing social problems, allowing us to view old problems from fresh perspectives (Sherwood et al., 2021). If we want to push toward online education as just another temporary retrofit, then we need to build something that is much more accessible and sustainable.

And so, the scene is set for what this volume advocates for. Co-editor Lisanne Binhammer states explicitly that the purpose of this book is not simply to critique, but to move to a place of active resistance. This volume, therefore, acts as a call to arms for what its contributors all claim needs to be exposed – that online pedagogy is somehow the solution to academic ableism. Her fellow co-editors, Chelsea Temple Jones and Fady Shanouda, state that the crux of this book is that while digital learning is touted as readily available to all, in-person and online approaches to such delivery remain inadequate. Instead of falling prey to simple yet persuasive arguments that online pedagogy is an automatic win for access, the intent of Online: Ableism and Access in Higher Education is to provide a new orientation to critical, digital, and accessible pedagogy.

KEYWORDS

ableism, accessibility, disability justice, critical digital pedagogy, online education.

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Gearing, N. (2025). Troubles Online: Ableism and Access in Higher Education. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning, 29*(ii). 15-21. https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.743

Gearing, N.
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.743

Book Review

Jones, C. T., Shanouda, F., & Binhammer, L. (Eds). (2025). *Troubles Online: Ableism and Access in Higher Education*. Athabasca University Press. https://doi.org/10.15215/aupress/9781771994163.01

Introduction

Troubles Online: Ableism and Access in Higher Education comprises ten thought-provoking chapters on a myriad of themes relating to ableism and access in online education. In Chapter One, the editors build on their intent to challenge the illusion that online pedagogy is exempt from academic ableism. They advocate politicising online learning and teaching, particularly what they believe is mounting pressure to embrace a (post-) pandemic 'new normal'. This new status quo, they argue, merely repeats ableism by rejecting the crisis conditions that forced us online in 2019. All the while, institutions have continued to profit, as they did before the pandemic, by branding their online initiatives as neutral and accessible, when in fact they are neither (Price, 2011). Concurrently, the editors posit that the literature on embodied difference continues to reside on the fringe, as a liberation-focused agenda. The result is that disabled, d/Deaf, neurodivergent, queer, and mad students are relegated to the status of being an afterthought. Mad is used as a scholarship to reclaim identity and an analytic lens for understanding experiences that psychiatric discourse labels as mental illness. As used in this literature, Mad is often brought into dialogue with queer theory (and crip/critical disability theory) to critique normativity, pathologisation, and restrictive models of subjectivity (Le François et al., 2013). The editors, therefore, challenge the often-espoused suggestion that online learning and teaching can work for everyone, which they believe directly contradicts their own experience.

In collaboration with their co-authors, the co-editors identified seven distinct troubles underpinning ableist online learning and teaching, providing a focus for the book. They include:

- Illusions of online pedagogy as a solution to the problem of inaccessible higher education.
- Misinterpretations that digital classrooms are universally accessible and available to all.
- Failures of new modes of digital praxis being attributed to individual users.
- Pandemic-related shifts in online teaching and learning have put this praxis in crisis with an unreasonable expectation of recovery.
- The unresolvable nature of the complexities of online teaching and learning.
- The fallacious presentation of online teaching and learning as apolitical and ahistorical, resulting in the erasure of crip, neurodiverse, and other digital creators' world-making.

- The invitation to cause troubles online through active resistance to and remaginings of our digital futures (Jones & Shanouda, 2025, p. 3)

Literature Review

In Chapter Two, Felicita Arzu-Carmichael explores her growing awareness of bodies oriented towards online education and the factors leading to this orientation and positionality. This is largely informed by her experience of seeing the merits of working as a teacher and researcher online as a new parent in *Virtual Bodies, Material Implications: Black Feminist Epistemology as a Framework for Online Education*.

Chapter Three is *Critical Digital Pandemic-Based Pedagogy: A Conversation with Jesse Stommel and Sean Michael Morris*. Chelsea Temples Jones and Curtis Maloley, Director of Teaching Development and Digital Learning and Teaching at Toronto Metropolitan University, both interview the authors of *An Urgency of Teachers: The Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy.* They discuss the challenges associated with the near-universal shift to online learning and teaching delivery due to COVID-19, as well as why students were initially reluctant to learn and teach in this new environment. Both acknowledge their disdain for teaching online, which serves as motivation to do so, and to establish why what happens in their classrooms does not translate online. They argue that online learning is not a place where people can see each other, be authentic, and be excited.

Chapter four introduces the reader to a research study comprising interviews with 28 students and faculty staff to ascertain their views on how neoliberal university restructuring impacts the online learning and teaching ethos – specifically the transfer of critical pedagogies to online formats. In *Online Social Work Education in Canada: Disappearing Disability in the Academy,* Kimberlee Collins, Kristin Smith, and Donna Jeffery posit that crip theory must be central to resistance against neoliberalism. Crip theory is an intersectional analytical framework that unsettles binaries, such as normal and abnormal, and gestures to the slippery slope of difference (Chen et al., 2023). More recently, scholars have noted how the pandemic exposed the inaccessibility of higher education and how exhausting emergency remote learning mirrors the experiences of disabled students and faculty attempting to receive institutional accommodations.

In Chapter Five, Elena G. Garcia and Erika Johnson examine the complex relationship between Mormonism and online technology in *Ethical Challenges of Digital Technology and the Utah Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. As women of colour and non-members of the Latter-Day Saints (LDS) religion, they argue that they are therefore well-positioned to examine the largely undiscussed conflicts related to digital technology they witnessed as teachers at Utah Valley University. These include the church's seemingly contradictory relationship with technology, which is seen as a powerful missionary tool but also exposes members to online dangers that must be guarded against. This contradiction was only exacerbated by the sudden shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. As with the experiences outlined in chapter two, many LDS members have children and study online, not by choice, but necessity, as commuting to a campus may be problematic while caring for children at home.

The shortest chapter, Chapter Six, provides a unique insight into how disabled students experienced the effects of COVID-19. In *Poetic Journeys: College Students with Disabilities Navigating Unanticipated Transitions during the Pandemic*, Mina Chun centres the insider voices of two disabled college students by utilising poetic inquiry and a participatory approach. Their responses reflect and reveal the difficulties of navigating the abrupt, unanticipated transitions during the pandemic.

In Chapter Seven, *Materializing Access in the Dematerialized Space of Higher Education Online Classrooms*, non-indigenous disabled teachers Fiona Cheuk and Esther Igagni adopt a colonisation critique to examine the desire for access through the landless and placeless digital space. These authors contend that their employer, Toronto Metropolitan University, occupies a settler society and that indigenous sovereign nations are present in our encounters – even in digital spaces. From this standpoint, they critique the neo-liberal university as a colonial institution that perpetuates disability for those who do not conform to the prototype of normal students. Having the power to determine who accesses an institution's spaces when it is built on stolen land reinforces the notion that the same institution can grant, deny access, or remove those who do not fit the owner's intended desires.

Chapter Eight is entitled *Students as Designers: Framing Accessible Participatory Learning as a Social Justice Approach to Online Course Design*. In it, its authors, Hannah L. Stevens and Mary McCall, advocate for students who will be undertaking first-year writing courses to be directly involved in the design of them. The impetus for such advocacy is that online versions of such courses disrupt the traditional face-to-face nature of them, and by not providing the same level of attention from instructors, are therefore linked to issues of student retention. The authors argue that involving students in the design process must be viewed as a social justice imperative for achieving fully inclusive and accessibility-driven course design.

In Chapter Nine, *Making Accessible Media: An Interview,* Nathan Whitlock and Anne Zbitnew examine how a request by an incoming student that all videos in class be captioned raised questions about how Humber College, Toronto, could be more proactively prepared regarding accessibility issues. This chapter takes the form of a recorded conversation among key members of the team behind the resulting Making Accessible Media public pedagogy project. This open-access course offers training in designing inclusive and accessible digital media, highlighting why such content is a social responsibility.

Finally, in Chapter Ten, *Moments of Reckoning in Learning and Belonging in Spaces of Postsecondary Education with/beyond COVID-19*, Jessica Vorstermans and Elizabeth Mohler advocate for moving beyond the rupture the pandemic caused to a place of inclusivity rooted in the principles of disability justice. Disability justice is rooted in the imaginings and labour of people of colour, and queer and gender non-conforming disabled people, as a response to the failure of the disability rights movement to imagine and produce justice for all disabled people (Sins Invalid, 2017).

Strengths and Weaknesses

The major strength of this book lies in the sheer diversity of examinations of how, in particular, COVID-19 impacted the online learning space**.** In terms of representation, the diversity of voices that depict these troubles is commendable – comprising teaching academics, scholars specialising in disability, and students, some of whom have disabilities themselves. Their critical reflections take the form of narratives, poetry, interviews, and scholarly studies, incorporating disabled, mad, sick, queer, and crip pedagogies to passionately advocate for a more socially just approach to online pedagogy. To crip is to reject binaries and thereby challenge compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2018). In this context, the pandemic is positioned as a cautionary example of what not to return to – access being treated as an afterthought. While online education is often touted as the solution to all problems related to accessibility in higher education, this book strongly argues against this premise. In doing so, its contributors largely fulfil their brief by focusing on the seven troubles intended to underpin this volume.

However, Collins et al. (2025) argue that it is essential to think critically about how individuals with disabilities experience online educational spaces. They claim this should be done by centring the voices of the disabled and marginalised students. That notwithstanding, with the exception of Mina Chun's chapter, which centres on the insider experiences of two disabled students, the student voice in this volume is largely interpreted by their teachers.

Final Reflections

If we take a broad view, as Reid and Shanouda (2025) do, arguably the biggest challenge with digital learning is that it deprives teachers of opportunities to provide students with moments of reassurance and students of access to or engagement in informal discussions. The fact that learning management systems are not designed to replicate those moments or even acknowledge their existence is the issue that potentially affects any online learner. While this volume has done a commendable job of raising awareness of multiple troubles that continue to plague the online learning pedagogical landscape, I look forward to its companion volume, in which students themselves describe their online learning troubles.

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Acknowledgments

No personal acknowledgements made.

To ensure the academic integrity and transparency in AI-assisted scholarship authors agree that this submission was reviewed, edited, and refined with the assistance of Gemini Pro 2.5 complementing the human editorial process. The human author(s) have critically assessed and validated the content to ensure academic rigour. The final version of the paper is the sole responsibility of the human author(s).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests.

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Please cite as:

Gearing, N. (2025). Troubles Online: Ableism and Access in Higher Education. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning, 29*(ii). 15-21. https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v29i1.743

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