Learners’ Experience (LX)
Disability and Online University Programs

Djenana Jalovcic
Doctoral Candidate, Athabasca University
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Overview

- Why is it important to study LwDX in online HE?
- What do we know about it?
- What is this research about?
- What are the findings?
- So What?
- Now What?
Disability is a result of an interaction between persons with impairments and their environments with barriers that hinder their full, effective, and equal participation in the society.
Why is it important to study experiences of learners with disabilities (LwDX) in online HE?
Increasing number of students with disabilities

http://www2.cuny.edu/current-students/student-affairs/student-services/disability/
22% of first-year students self-identify as having a disability, according to Canadian University Consortium Survey, 2016.
Percentage of first-year students self-identifying as having a disability

Students seeking support from disability services at Alberta Universities 2007 to 2014


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Notes: The count represents the number of students with disabilities seeking and receiving services and accommodations from Alberta’s 26 publicly funded institutions. Includes data for the Banff Centre.

Source: Alberta Advanced Education.
Digital technologies = new opportunities

Educational and assistive technologies
Students seeking support from disability services at Alberta Universities 2013-2014
Alberta Advanced Education (2016). [Campus Alberta planning resource 2015.]
Equal access to postsecondary students with disabilities
It’s the law!
Despite these trends, legal obligations and opportunities, students with disabilities still face barriers, and their overall participation and attainment rates lag behind those of their peers without disabilities.
What do we know about LwDX?
Literature review

Disability studies

- Medical, social, human rights model
- Digital inclusion
- Digital capital

Policy studies

- Human rights based
- Patchwork of jurisdictional and sectoral policies
- Policy paradoxes

Disability and online learning

- Diverse and emerging
- Accessibility, needs, support services, and academic achievement
- Mostly quantitative, atheoretical

Theoretical and philosophical inspiration

- Phenomenology
- Moore’s interaction theory
- Disability as an interaction
A gap in the literature
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<td>Working longer hours than non-disabled peers</td>
<td>Lack of interaction</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
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<td>Misunderstood by faculty</td>
<td>Lack of understanding of SWD by faculty</td>
<td>Academic challenge</td>
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<td>Reluctant to request accommodation (stigma)</td>
<td>Privacy concerns</td>
<td>Ownership</td>
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<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Acquiescence</td>
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<td>Having more time to process information</td>
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<td>SWD Services did not provide all info about accommodation</td>
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What is my research about?
The purpose of my study is to describe the experiences of interactions for learners with disabilities who study in online university programs.
Research process

1. Research proposal
2. Ethics approval
3. Institutional approval
4. Recruitment
5. Data collection

6. Analysis
   - Read transcript as a whole
7. Analysis
   - Assume phenomenological attitude
8. Member checking
9. Transcripts verification
10. Transcription

11. Analysis
    - Determine meaning units
12. Analysis
    - Transform meaning units
13. Analysis
    - Write description of the structure
14. Report findings
    - Preliminary report
15. Report findings
Research questions

What is the structure of experience of interactions for undergraduate and graduate students with disabilities who study online?

- Interactions with content, instructors and/or tutors, other students, the university system, and support services?
- Barriers and facilitators

Image by geralt from Pixabay
Philosophical and theoretical inspiration: phenomenology and Moore’s theory of interaction
Research method

Descriptive phenomenological method according to Amadeo Giorgi (2009)

- Gaining deeper understanding of experience by revealing its nature
- Describing experience with its essential structures
Participants

Criterion based participants' selection

- 15 students who self-identify as having a disability
- Who completed at least two online courses
- Who were enrolled in one online course at the time of interview
Participants

Criterion based participants’ selection

- Enrolled in a single mode Canadian University that offers undergraduate and graduate programs online
  - Undergraduate programs are self-paced with year round enrollment (interactions with instructors and materials and limited interactions with students by design)
  - Graduate programs are cohort based with fixed semesters (interactions with instructors, students and materials by design)
## Participants

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<th>Program</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>Undergraduate programs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Certificate programs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate programs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
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Average age of participants: **48**  
Average age of students in Master’s programs: **56**  
Average age of students in Bachelor’s programs: **40**  

Disabilities: Multiple sclerosis, Asperger’s, learning disabilities, mental health disorders, multiple disabilities, health condition, traumatic brain injury, concussions
Data collection

- Semi-structured phone or Skype interviews
- 15 hours and 15 minutes of interviews
- 136 pages, single line spacing of transcript
- 1523 meaning units
Findings
Structure of experience of interactions for students with disabilities in online university program

- Having access
- Working harder
- Being supported
- Belonging
- Becoming
Having access to

- Technologies
  - Mainstream (laptop, tablet, phone)
  - Assistive (software)
  - Educational (CMS, chats)
- Materials
- Financial support
Isabel, 27, an educator, entrepreneur, and disability advocate, was enrolled in a Bachelor’s program. This was her second degree in a major that she had started but could not finish because of her learning disabilities. This online university gave her everything she was looking for, it was isolating but worked well for her. She had difficulties getting recommended accommodations at the exam centre.

“I found everything that I’m using to be helpful. I think my only challenge is being consistent with it. This is another thing I realized too: assistive technology comes in many different forms, and sometimes certain ones, you need to actually sit down to get the full benefit of use and be trained on it.”

“[Studying online] feels really good because I feel so much in control about stuff. I think that actually is about my restriction because I’m not in control of the way my mind processes things, but on campus, there’s someone in control in the classrooms. So it means I have to adhere to their way of deadlines and stuff. But here, I can control the way how my learning’s going to happen.”
Working harder

- Planning coursework and requesting alternative formats (self-awareness)
- Organizing learning materials
- Learning to use technologies
- Communicating about disability (self-advocacy)
- Prioritizing group work
Elaine is 50 year old undergraduate student, who completed 29 online courses. She has a physical disability that was a result of a work related injury over two decades ago.

“If you wanted to see the course material package to make that decision about whether you take that course, you have to order it. And it’s very cumbersome process to do that because you have to do that through the library. Then once you’ve reviewed the course, you have to put in a request with the Disabilities Department to have the materials requested for you. And part of the issue is even if you’re registered as a student with disability, you have to do this each and every time that you take a course. So you have to fill out their necessary paperwork, their processes, and then it goes to the Assistive Technology Department, and then they review it. And then, even though I e-mail them back and forth, they tend to do everything in piecemeal because it’s almost like every course that they have, they don’t necessarily have all the printed materials. There has to be an assistant assigned, and then she has to go through the course package and she has to go through everything to print off everything and/or to put it on a CD. So it’s kind of like a one off. If I apply for a course, then they have to go through the whole course and then they have to print off all the materials. They have to go to their budgets to get the books, they have to always ask the same questions, “Did you get a grant for any of the finances for the printing?” And when I say no, then their Department has to get it approved through their internal processes in order to give me the materials. Sometimes they say that they weren’t able to get materials, and then I have to turn around and I have to e-mail the Manager of the Disabilities Department to say, “I’m having this roadblock. Could you please deal with this issue?” because it’s too frustrating for me as a student to try to deal with a department who’s telling me that they can’t print off materials because of their budgetary constraints. That’s the other thing. It’s sometimes two to four months ahead of time, and if I don’t give them that 60-days notice, that means that I don’t necessarily start my course when I want to start the course. Sometimes it has to be pushed back. They’re working on that deadline of the months that I want to start my course on.”
Being supported by

- Instructors/tutors
- Support services
- Students
Being supported by instructors tutors

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**Adversarial interactions**

- Questioning needs, accommodations, and ability to study because of disability
- Not understanding disability and accommodation
- Inflexibly applying the rules
- Not approving the ASD recommended accommodations

**Supportive interactions**

- Available and responsive
- Problem solving attitude, creative solutions, and flexibility
- Value, respect and trust the student
- Needs fully accommodated
Megan was a 37 year old graduate student. She had careers in arts and education. Megan started this program after she got a chronic illness that resulted in multiple physical disabilities, pain, and fatigue. She also had learning disabilities. Online learning gave her the flexibility to study when she felt well. It also gave her social contacts that she had lost.

“I find my people.. for the most part, understand where I'm coming from, but also appreciate my thinking and my ideas. I feel like I have something in that situation to offer and to give which I often don't in my physical life in my interactions with other people. [Experiences with instructors] have ranged from really awful to really, really amazing, to instructors who say, "You make good contributions, you have good ideas, we can see that you're eager and willing to learn and engaged in the program, so just take it at your own pace and make whatever decisions about your participation that you need to make and we won't count that as a mark against you as long as you just keep us in the loop." ... at one end I've had really critical instructors who make me justify every accommodation and why I might use it in an accusatory way that feels like they're accusing me of not being organized or being lazy or procrastinating. And at the other end, I have had instructors who trust me to be able to manage my own situation through the course. And there's been a lot of middle areas. It's been a full spectrum.”
Being supported by students (graduate students)

Very few negative experiences

- Working in a group with another student
  - Poor communication
- Silences in forums

Mostly supportive interactions

- Feeling valued
- Feeling respected
- Feeling understood
Paolo is a 65 year old engineer in the final year of his Master’s program at the online University. He has been living with a disability for 40 years. He used wheelchair for mobility, had problems typing and handling printed materials. He lived in a busy and noisy long-term care facility.

“So my first thought was, "Oh, I’d better contact somebody about the textbook in [this course]". However, the textbook arrived with a note saying, "And on the course website, you will find an E-book version and a PDF version. So that’s going to be fully addressed.”

“I had concerns about how well I would identify with the other students and whether there would be developing a camaraderie, and so on. My advice to others would be don’t sweat it because I think generally in the group, we developed quite a good relationship.”

“My experience was that when I identified potential issues and problems the general message coming back was, "Oh, that won’t be a problem."
Being supported by service providers (ASD)

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Less supportive interactions

- Slow to respond
- Could not ensure that recommended accommodations are implemented
- Did not know how ASD can help

More supportive interactions

- Available
- Responsive
- Knowledgeable
- Understanding
Belonging

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From isolated (undergraduate, some graduate)

- Feeling isolated
  - Needed more interaction with instructors and peers
  - But comfortable with it
- Not liking forums as they were not interactive

To integrated (graduate)

- Feeling socially connected
- Building relationships through forums and group
  - Sometimes contributions not relevant and timely
- Establishing friendships and camaraderie
Sandra, 57, was an undergraduate student. She worked for the government agency and brought up her two grandchildren. Sandra started online program because she needed a degree for her work. She got a mild brain injury. Sandra’s experience was frustrating because she had to fight for the ASD recommended accommodation (cue sheet) in every single course. It was difficult and isolating. She did not interact with other students but did not really miss it. She just wanted to get it done.

“I know that the online University, it wasn’t hard to have them send me the letter saying, “Yes, we’ll do this.” What’s hard is to have them live up to what they’ve said they’ll do. [The bottleneck is] with the head of the department approving the cue sheet. What I’m basically having to do is every single time before I write an exam, I’m having to talk to someone with no medical training who I don’t know and explain my whole medical history, and it’s just humiliating. It’s really horrible. And then to try and have them understand it.”
Becoming

Graduate students were able to

- Maintain and improve their physical and mental health
- Self-confidence by regaining life purpose, dignity, and pride
- Renew their identities and careers
“My husband says you can clock the changes in me and my mental health improvement, too, 'cause I was getting depressed prior to all this. It's just improved exponentially since I started this program. I just keep growing.” Jennifer, 47

“I go out to the community and speak about my disabilities and how the art therapy and my schooling has helped me stay quite healthy; mentally, physically.” Study Girl, 68

“I’m in this transition from who I was to who I am going to be. And I’m really open about it because I find that suggestions and things that my course mates have to say are often helpful in feeling understood, people getting where I’m at.” Megan, 37

“I am at a period where I’m finding I can do more than I used to do but in a different area in a different way...For the moment, I would say I’m feeling very upbeat and I’m really looking at it as being my time and launching myself in a new area.” Paolo, 65
Barriers
Barriers

- Process of accessing accommodation: Cumbersome, repetitive, difficult to disclose over and over again
- Inconsistency in ensuring accommodation
- Lack of awareness of disability, accommodation, and legislation among instructors
- Over-reliance on a single mode, or single medium
Facilitators
Facilitators

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Flexibility of:

- Processes (admission, withdrawals)
- Time (studying any time, setting own schedule, getting extension)
- Infrastructure (studying anywhere, being accessible, multimodal)
- Course design (studying any time, anywhere; presentation, student assessment)
- People (responding to disability and accommodation requests with flexibility and creativity)
- Funding (more options to assist students with disabilities to access funding)
Conclusions

- Overall LwDX was positive, however, almost all learners had at least one negative experience.
- Students with disabilities who did not register with the ASD office had described their experience as mostly negative.
- Constituents of the structure are the same for all students with exception of belonging and being supported by students.
- Constituents represent a continuum rather than a singularity of common constituent.
Trustworthiness: Employed strategies

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**Credibility**
- Adoption of well recognized methods
- Familiarity with culture
- Examination of previous research
- Triangulation
- Ensuring honesty in informants
- Iterative questioning
- Achieving saturation
- Member checking
- Negative case analysis
- Thick description
- Regular peer debriefing and review
- Debriefing with supervisors
- Reflexivity and iterative engagement with methodological literature

**Transferability**
- Providing sufficient background data and thick description of the phenomenon to allow comparisons

**Dependability**
- Providing detailed description of methodology to allow for study replication

**Confirmability**
- Providing detailed description of methodology to allow for examination
- Disclosing researcher’s beliefs, assumptions, knowledge and experiences
- Audit trail
So what?
Implications: we can design for diverse learners

- Diverse experiences on a continuum
- Interactions with instructors, peers, materials and system depended:
  - Attitudes
  - Knowledge
  - Design
  - Accessibility
  - Choice and control
- Inconsistency of ensuring accommodation points towards interventions in the environment
- Value of University education for graduate LwD: education is transformational
Limitations

- Self-selected participants
  - No participants with major hearing or visual impairments
  - Participants were older than an average undergraduate or graduate student who study online
  - No younger students doing their first university degree

- Could be used in similar situations
Now what?
Learners with disabilities

Recommendations

- Knowing yourself
- Knowing your rights
- Speaking up
- Registering with ASD
Recommendations

- Recognizing diversity of LwDs
- Designing flexible, inclusive learning environments that maximize affordances of technology
- Educating themselves about disability, accommodation, rights, and obligations
- Being available, responsive, supportive
Service providers

Recommendations

- Streamlining the process of getting accommodation
- Eliminating repetitions in the process
- Educating instructors about different types of accommodation
- Improving the response time
Policy makers and administrator

Recommendations

- Streamlining the policies
- Minimizing the need for negotiations of accommodation if approved by the ASD office
- Ensuring implementation of policies
Researchers

- More research on pedagogy and theory on LwDs and online learning
- Understanding of experiences of younger students with disabilities, and students with hearing and visual impairments
- What is the impact of use of specific pedagogical theories and approaches on LwDX (COI, UDL)
Thank you.

djenana.jalovcic@gmail.com
https://atdistance.wordpress.com/
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