



Reimagining Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning in the Age of Academic Ableism



 SIMON PAUL ATKINSON

Editorial

* Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

ABSTRACT

This editorial interrogates the current state of accessibility within Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (OFDL), arguing that the sector is grappling with "academic ableism", a structural force that privileges normative body-minds while actively disabling others. Moving beyond the "retrofit" model of legal accommodation, the piece advocates for a framework rooted in epistemic justice and critical disability studies. The editorial synthesises contributions to this issue, including research on the faculty labour required for Open Educational Resources (OER), the application of Design Thinking and personas in MOOCs, and the decolonising potential of Ubuntu-based co-creation in the Global South. It explores culturally responsive storytelling and Pacific methodologies, such as Talanoa, as essential for ensuring psychological safety. Finally, the author addresses the paradox of Generative AI as both a potential "cognitive orthotic" and a threat to human connection, concluding with a manifesto that reframes culture as infrastructure and accessibility as a relational imperative.

KEYWORDS

academic ableism, epistemic justice, design thinking, ubuntu, generative Ai, universal design for learning, open educational resources, mooc.

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Atkinson, S. P. (2025).
Reimagining Open, Flexible, and
Distance Learning in the Age of
Academic Ableism. *Journal of
Open, Flexible and Distance
Learning*, 29(ii). 1-14.
[https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v
29i2.735](https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735)

INTRODUCTION

The discourse surrounding Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (OFDL) has historically been grounded in a rhetoric of democratisation. For decades, the foundational promise of this field has been the removal of barriers, geographical, temporal, and economic, to facilitate a more inclusive educational experience for all. The sector has positioned itself as the antithesis of the "ivory tower," offering permeable boundaries where traditional higher education constructed walls. However, as the global educational community navigates the turbulent aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, this techno-optimist narrative is increasingly under interrogation (Marcos, 2025). The forced digitisation of the academy did not merely solve access problems; in many instances, it exacerbated existing inequalities, illuminated the fragility of our inclusionary claims, and birthed new forms of exclusion.

This editorial seeks to dissect the current state of accessibility within OFDL, moving beyond superficial metrics such as enrolment and platform availability to address the deeper, systemic pathologies of the university. We posit that the field is currently grappling with "academic ableism", a pervasive, structural force that privileges normative body-minds while actively disabling those who deviate from the standard of hyper-productivity and neurotypicality. The editorial draws on the articles included in this issue as well as a selection of recent scholarship, comprising critical reviews of digital pedagogy, empirical studies of faculty engagement with Open Educational Resources (OER), investigations of design thinking in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and transformative methodologies from the Global South.

The urgency of this discussion cannot be overstated. As institutions rush to embrace a "post-pandemic" reality, there is a palpable danger of a "snap-back" to pre-pandemic norms. This regression frames the flexible modalities disabled students have long demanded as temporary "emergency" measures rather than pedagogical imperatives. This editorial argues that "access" cannot be defined simply as technical compliance or legal accommodation. Instead, access must be understood through the lenses of epistemic justice, critical disability studies, and culturally responsive pedagogy. It challenges the OFDL community to move from a retrofitting mindset to one of radical anticipation, asking not "How do we accommodate this student?" but "Why did we design a learning environment that excluded them in the first place?"

Deconstructing Academic Ableism in the Digital Sphere

The concept of "academic ableism," rigorously explored by Dolmage (2017) and recently re-examined in the context of online learning by Jones, Shanouda, and Binhammer in *'Troubles Online'* (Jones et al., 2025), serves as the theoretical fulcrum for this editorial. Gearing provides a book review of this volume in this issue (Gearing, 2025b). Academic ableism is not merely the presence of physical barriers or the absence of captions; it is the active production of disability as a negative ontology within the university. It is the systemic privileging of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness; valuing speed, productivity, neurotypicality, and physical stamina, while positioning disability as a deficit, a drain, or a logistical problem to be 'managed' (Dolmage, 2017; Gearing, 2025b).

A pervasive myth in OFDL is that digital spaces are inherently more accessible than physical ones. The logic suggests that by moving content to the cloud, we bypass the "steep steps" of the physical campus. However, recent scholarship critiques this assumption, revealing that digital environments are architected with the same biases as physical ones. As noted in Gearing's review of *Troubles Online: Ableism and Access in Higher Education*, the digital classroom is not a neutral vacuum. It is encoded with the values of its creators, often prioritising efficiency, surveillance, and standardisation over care and adaptability (Jones et al., 2025).

Atkinson, S. P..
 JOFDL
 10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

The editors of *Troubles Online* identify "seven distinct troubles" that underpin the current crisis in digital pedagogy. These troubles serve as a diagnostic framework for understanding why the promise of digital access remains unfulfilled for so many

Table 1: Seven Troubles of Online Pedagogy

The Seven Troubles of Online Pedagogy	Description and Implication for OFDL
1. The Illusion of the Solution	The false belief that online pedagogy inherently solves the problem of inaccessible higher education. This allows institutions to offload the responsibility of structural change onto the technology itself, ignoring the "digital friction" of poorly designed systems.
2. The Myth of Universal Access	The misinterpretation that digital classrooms are universally accessible and available to all. This conflates theoretical availability with practical usability, ignoring the reality of the digital divide, screen reader incompatibility, and sensory overwhelm.
3. Individualisation of Failure	The tendency to attribute failures of new modes of digital praxis to individual users. When a student struggles with a chaotic online module, it is framed as a failure of "resilience" rather than a failure of design.
4. The Crisis of the "New Normal"	Pandemic-related shifts have put praxis in crisis, driven by an unreasonable expectation of recovery. The rush to return to

	"normal" often involves rejecting flexible modalities that disabled students need, framing them as temporary "emergency" measures.
5. Unresolvable Complexities	The acknowledgement of the unresolvable nature of the complexities of online teaching and learning. This resists the solutionist narrative that every pedagogical problem has a technological fix.
6. Erasure of Crip World-Making	The fallacious presentation of online teaching as apolitical and ahistorical, resulting in the erasure of crip, neurodiverse, and other digital creators' world-making. It ignores the history of how disabled people have pioneered digital communication.
7. The Invitation to Trouble	The call to cause trouble online through active resistance to and remaginings of our digital futures. This reframes disruption not as an opposing force, but as a necessary intervention against ableist norms.

These troubles highlight the "epistemic violence" of a system that refuses to acknowledge the learner's embodied reality. For example, the third trouble, attributing systemic failure to individual users, is a hallmark of neoliberal education. It shifts the burden of access onto the student who is already marginalised, demanding that they perform "resilience" in the face of hostile design.

Dolmage's concept of the "retrofit" is essential to this critique. In architecture, a retrofit is the addition of a ramp to a building that was initially designed with stairs. It allows entry, often through a back door, but does not alter the building's fundamental design. In OFDL, the retrofit manifests as the *post hoc* remediation of inaccessible content, captioning a video only after a student requests it, or converting a document only when a complaint is filed. This "accommodation model" is legally compliant but pedagogically violent. It forces the disabled student to repeatedly disclose their disability, navigate complex bureaucratic hurdles, and wait for access that their peers receive instantly. It signals that they were not anticipated and are an afterthought. The evidence suggests that OFDL must move from a retrofitting mindset to one of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), but a UDL that is critical and politicised, not just a set of "tips and tricks" (Bracken & Novak, 2019).

Critical UDL goes beyond the "checklist" approach (e.g., "add alt text") to interrogate the pedagogical goals themselves. It asks: Why is this assessment timed? Why is participation defined as verbal speech? Why is the camera required to be on? By questioning these norms, educators can dismantle the ableist assumptions that make retrofitting necessary in the first place.

Atkinson, S. P..
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

FACULTY PERCEPTIONS

The Tension Between Openness, Equity, and Labour

Suppose the structural critique of ableism provides the "why" for change, then the lived experience of faculty offers the context for "how" (or if) that change occurs. The transition to open and accessible learning is not automated; it relies on educators' labour, expertise, and motivation. The study in this issue, entitled '*Perceptions of OER in Higher Education: A Liberal Arts College Perspective*', by Thapaliya and Mahoney, offers crucial insights into the material conditions for accessible teaching in a liberal arts context (Thapaliya & Mahoney, 2025).

Cost as a Barrier

The study reveals that faculty are primarily motivated by equity. Cost reduction for students was the predominant motivation for OER adoption, cited by 65% of respondents. This aligns with a social justice approach to education; faculty recognise that high textbook costs act as a gatekeeping mechanism, disproportionately harming low-income and first-generation students. In this sense, OER is viewed as a tool of economic accessibility. However, economic access is only one dimension of the accessibility matrix. While a free PDF removes the financial barrier, if that PDF is an image scan incompatible with screen readers, the resource remains closed to blind or low-vision students. The study indicates that while faculty are aware of the financial benefits of OER, there is a gap in understanding the technical dimensions of accessibility.

Pedagogical Flexibility and the Potential for Adaptation

Faculty in the study recognised the pedagogical flexibility of OER as a key benefit. The ability to customise content, incorporate diverse perspectives, and cultural references provides for a more appropriate curriculum. This adaptability is key to anti-ableist pedagogy. Unlike a static commercial textbook, an OER can be rewritten to include alt-text, remixed to offer multiple modalities (text, audio, video), and revised to remove ableist language or examples. The data show that 70% of respondents modified or supplemented OER materials, indicating a strong tendency for faculty to actively engage with course materials rather than passively adopt them (Thapaliya & Mahoney, 2025). This "active adaptation" is the sweet spot for accessibility work. It is in the remixing phase that accessibility features can be added and exclusionary content removed.

The Barrier of Labour

Despite high motivation, the study exposes significant barriers that threaten the sustainability of these initiatives. The most cited challenges were "difficulty finding high-quality materials" (57%) and the "time required to adapt OER" (43%). This finding points to a critical tension: accessibility requires labour. Creating a truly accessible, multimodal, and adaptable OER takes significantly

more time than adopting a publisher's package. Without institutional support, such as stipends, course release time, or assistance from instructional designers and librarians, this labour falls on individual faculty members. In the context of the "gig academy" mentioned in broader higher education trends, where a growing number of faculty are adjuncts or on precarious contracts, expecting this level of unpaid labour is unrealistic and exploitative (Culver et al., 2025). The "experienced faculty" identified in the study who are actively remixing materials are vital champions, but relying on individual heroism is not a strategy for systemic change (Thapaliya & Mahoney, 2025). (

Atkinson, S. P..
 JOFDL
 10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

Authenticity, Accuracy, and the Quality Assurance Dilemma

Thapaliya and Mahoney's study also highlights concerns regarding "authenticity and accuracy" in OER. The open nature of these materials allows continuous reproduction and modification, which is a strength for localisation but a risk for quality control. From an accessibility perspective, this is a significant concern. Suppose a resource is remixed by an educator who does not understand digital accessibility. In that case, semantic tagging may be stripped, colour contrast ratios may be violated, and alt-text may be deleted. This suggests that OER repositories need robust quality assurance mechanisms that specifically check for accessibility compliance. A "broken" OER is just as exclusionary as a commercial one, perhaps more so because it promises access that it fails to deliver.

Table 2: Faculty Barriers to OER Adoption and Implications for Accessibility

Barrier Identified (Thapaliya & Mahoney)	Implication for Accessibility	Potential Mitigation Strategy
Time Constraint (43%)	Faculty lack time to caption videos, tag PDFs, or redesign assessments for UDL.	Institutional grants for "accessibility sprints"; course release time for OER creation.
Discovery Issues (57%)	Faculty cannot find OERs that are already accessible, leading to reliance on commercial texts that are inaccessible.	Metadata in repositories must include specific accessibility features (e.g., "screen reader optimised").
Lack of Incentives	Accessibility work is invisible labour, often not counted toward tenure or promotion.	Align OER creation with Boyer's model of scholarship (Scholarship of Teaching and Learning).
Gaps in Ancillaries	OER often lack	Consortial pooling of

	accessible test banks or interactive datasets.	resources (like PALNI) to create accessible ancillary materials.
--	--	--

Atkinson, S. P..
 JOFDL
 10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

METHODOLOGIES OF INCLUSION

Design Thinking and Problem-Based Learning

Moving from content (OER) to process, the integration of Design Thinking (DT) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL) potentially offers a robust methodology for creating accessible learning experiences. The study in this issue by Arantes do Amaral et al. (2025) on a MOOC for R programming entitled '*Integrating Design Thinking and Problem-Based Learning in MOOCs*' demonstrates how these frameworks can enhance engagement and accessibility when deployed with empathy and rigour. Design Thinking is a human-centred problem-solving approach that proceeds through stages of Empathise, Define, Ideate, Prototype, and Test. The study found that the use of "personas" during the Empathise stage was critical for anticipating learners' needs. By analysing student data to create fictional profiles (e.g., "Undergraduate Student," "Teacher," "White-Collar Worker"), the instructors were able to design a course that accommodated diverse motivations and time constraints.

In an anti-ableist context, the use of personas must be expanded to include disability explicitly. A standard persona might focus on "learning goals," but an inclusive persona asks functional questions: "How does this student navigate the LMS? Do they use a screen reader? Do they have chronic pain that limits their time at a computer? Do they have anxiety that is exacerbated by cold-calling?" By designing for extreme users, or what the design field calls "edge cases", educators create a course that is more robust for everyone. Arantes do Amaral and colleagues found that creating concise, focused video lectures (microlearning) based on these personas reduced cognitive load and accommodated students with limited time. This benefits the student with ADHD or cognitive fatigue as much as the student with a full-time job.

Problem-Based Learning as Cognitive Access

The integration of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) provided students with "hands-on" engagement that was perceived as meaningful. Students solved real-world problems using the R programming language, allowing them to apply the concepts immediately. From an accessibility standpoint, PBL is powerful because it supports the UDL principle of "Multiple Means of Action and Expression" (Lepore et al., 2025). Instead of a standardised multiple-choice test, which often measures test-taking speed rather than understanding, PBL allows learners to demonstrate competency through creation. This shifts the focus from rote memorisation to application, which can be more accessible for neurodivergent learners who struggle with abstract testing formats but excel in practical application. However, PBL can also create barriers if the "problem" is poorly defined or the cognitive scaffolding is insufficient. Arantes do Amaral and colleagues noted that high engagement required significant instructor support (146 hours of workload), reinforcing the idea that high-touch, accessible pedagogy is resource-intensive (Arantes do Amaral et al., 2025).

The Limits of Empathy in Design

While the study highlights that "demonstrating empathy" served as a motivator, critical disability scholars caution against "performative empathy." In Design Thinking, empathy exercises (such as simulating a disability) can sometimes reinforce stereotypes rather than dismantle barriers. Actual inclusive design moves beyond simulation to participation. It involves disabled students not just as subjects of empathy, but as co-designers of the learning experience. The Microsoft Inclusive Design framework suggests a shift from "designing for" to "designing with" (<https://inclusive.microsoft.design/>), which aligns with the "Nothing About Us Without Us" mantra of the disability rights movement. In the context of the MOOC, this would mean having disabled learners test the prototypes and provide feedback on the accessibility of the R coding environment itself, which is often a barrier in STEM education.

Atkinson, S. P..
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

DECOLONISING ACCESS

Ubuntu, Co-Creation, and Epistemic Justice

To truly address the "troubles" of online learning, the epistemological foundations of OFDL must be broadened. The dominance of Western, individualistic models of education often clashes with the communal values of learners in the Global South. Patience Kelebogile Mudau's article in this issue, '*Co-Creating Open Educational Resources in the Global South: Lessons Learned from Lecturer and Student Collaboration*', on the co-creation of OER using the African philosophy of Ubuntu, provides a transformative framework for rethinking accessibility as a communal rather than individual imperative (Mudau, 2025).

Ubuntu, often translated as "I am because we are," emphasises interconnectedness, compassion, and communal responsibility. In the context of disability and accessibility, Ubuntu offers a radical alternative to the Western "rights-based" model. In the West, accessibility is often framed as an individual right—the right of *this* student to *this* accommodation (e.g., extra time, a note-taker). While important, this model can be isolating and adversarial. It places the burden on the individual to enforce their rights against the institution. Ubuntu, conversely, frames access as a collective responsibility. If one member of the community cannot participate, the community itself is diminished (Lorenzo & Sefotho, 2025). Access becomes a shared duty of care. Mudau's conceptual framework integrates "co-creation, student agency, decolonisation, and open education underpinned by the African philosophical lens of ubuntu". This suggests that accessibility is not just about formatting; it is about *who* creates the knowledge and *whose* knowledge is valued.

The "Three Cs" of Co-Creation

Mudau proposes three pillars for this work: Construction, Contextualisation, and Collaboration.

1. **Construction:** Students are not passive recipients of "accessible" content; they are active constructors of knowledge. By involving students in creating OER, the resulting materials are inherently more accessible because they reflect learners' own language, context, and reality.

2. **Contextualisation:** The study found that students adapted content to reflect "African educational realities," countering the "one-size-fits-all" approach of many Global North OERs. Contextualisation is a form of cognitive accessibility. A resource that uses alien cultural metaphors is cognitively inaccessible, even if it is technically screen-reader friendly.
3. **Collaboration:** The process of co-creation disrupted the traditional power hierarchy. Lecturers and students worked as partners. This creates a "safe space" where students can disclose their needs and advocate for their learning preferences without fear of penalty.

Atkinson, S. P..
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

Epistemic Justice and the Global South

This approach promotes "epistemic justice", the idea that diverse ways of knowing must be respected (Kamanzi et al., 2025). Academic ableism often manifests as epistemic injustice, where the knowledge derived from the lived experience of disability is dismissed as "anecdotal" or "subjective." By centring student voices through Ubuntu, the academy validates these lived experiences as sources of expertise. Furthermore, the integration of Ubuntu challenges the "coloniality of ability." Western education often valorises independence and autonomy as the markers of success. An Ubuntu-based pedagogy values interdependence and mutual support. For a student with a disability who relies on care networks or assistive technology, the Western ideal of the "independent scholar" can be alienating. Ubuntu validates its reliance on others not as a weakness, but as a fundamental human truth.

CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE STORYTELLING

The psychological and emotional dimensions of accessibility are explored in Gearing's article, *'How Do Culturally Responsive Storytelling Methodologies Engage and Challenge All Vulnerable Adult Learners?'*, on culturally responsive storytelling (Gearing, 2025a). For "vulnerable adult learners", those marginalised by race, sexuality, disability, or trauma, the learning environment is often a site of threat. Accessibility, in this context, means psychological safety.

Gearing demonstrates that traditional academic tasks (like resume writing) can be alienating for students who feel excluded from the dominant economy or culture. However, by leveraging "pop culture icons" (such as Eminem or Elton John) as avatars of their own struggles, students were able to articulate their "subordinate identities". This methodology aligns with the "north-east teaching" metaphor advocated by Russell Bishop (Bishop, 2023), which emphasises the creation of family-like contexts of support. For accessibility, this is crucial. A student is unlikely to disclose a learning disability or a mental health crisis in a sterile, transactional classroom. They will only do so in a space where vulnerability is met with validation.

Talanoa: The Dialogue of Noa and Tala

Gearing draws connections to the Pacific methodology of *Talanoa*. *Talanoa* is a form of dialogue that is "subjective, primarily oral and collaborative," and resistant to rigid institutional control. It involves *Tala* (talking/telling) and *Noa* (zero/void/without concealment). In a *Talanoa* session, the hierarchy between researcher/teacher and participant/student dissolves (Baice et al., 2021). This

creates the "safe space" necessary for the "hidden transcripts" of vulnerable learners to emerge. For OFDL providers, integrating *Talanoa*-like spaces, synchronous sessions devoted to open dialogue rather than content delivery, or unstructured discussion forums, can be a vital accessibility mechanism for students from oral traditions or those who find formal academic writing exclusionary. Unlike the rigid turn-taking of a formal seminar, *Talanoa* allows for silence, for emotion, and for digression. This is "crip time" in action, allowing the conversation to unfold at the pace of the participants rather than the clock.

Atkinson, S. P..
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

Auto-ethnography: Writing the Body into the Text

The use of auto-ethnography allows students to "write themselves" into the curriculum (Ellis et al., 2011). Gearing's example of a student using Elton John's life to explore his own suicidality and LGBTQIA+ identity illustrates how curriculum can become a tool for survival. Academic ableism often demands that students "leave their bodies at the door" (or the login screen) and perform as disembodied intellects. Auto-ethnography refuses this separation. It allows the student to theorise from their embodied reality—pain, trauma, joy, and difference included. This is "accessible critical digital pedagogy" in action: it makes space for the non-normative body-mind to exist and thrive within the academic text.

GenAI and the Future

As OFDL grapples with these historical and methodological challenges, a new disruptor has arrived: Generative AI (GenAI). Gearing notes the emerging challenge of GenAI in the context of critical thinking and evaluative judgment. GenAI presents a paradox for accessibility. On the one hand, it offers powerful assistive capabilities. It can summarise complex texts for neurodivergent learners, generate alternative formats (e.g., text-to-speech and image descriptions), and help students with executive dysfunction organise their thoughts. It serves as a "cognitive orthotic." On the other hand, it poses a threat to the "human" element of teaching. If feedback is automated, the "empathy" found to be so crucial in the MOOC study is lost. If content is generated by algorithms trained on ableist datasets, academic ableism is reproduced at scale. Furthermore, the "hallucination" effect creates an epistemic hazard for students who struggle with information literacy.

Gearing advocates for a "two-lane approach" to assessment in the age of AI.

- **Lane One:** Assessment of learning (AI-secure). This might involve oral assessments or in-class work (reminiscent of *Talanoa*), ensuring that the student's authentic voice is heard.
- **Lane Two:** Assessment for/as learning (AI-integrated). This involves using AI as a tool and critically evaluating its outputs.

From an accessibility perspective, Lane One must be carefully designed to avoid disadvantaging students with anxiety or processing speed differences. Lane Two offers an opportunity to teach "critical AI literacy"—helping students understand the biases of the machine, including its ableist biases. Not everyone agrees that the two-lane approach is an appropriate pragmatic solution, contending that to some extent it is a licence to cheat, however partial (Curtis, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Atkinson, S. P..
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

From Compliance to Justice: A Manifesto for OFDL

As this editorial has sought to illustrate, the challenges of ableism and accessibility in OFDL are not technical problems that can be solved with a software patch. They are pedagogical, ethical, and political problems. The "New Normal" cannot simply be a digitised version of the old exclusion.

The evidence suggests four key pillars for a reimagined OFDL:

1. **Compliance is Insufficient:** Meeting WCAG standards is the floor, not the ceiling. True accessibility requires interrogating the ableist structures of the curriculum itself. We must move from "retrofitting" accommodations to "universal designing" for justice.
2. **Access is Relational:** It is built through relationships—between faculty and students (Franklin College), within communities of practice (Ubuntu), and through shared stories (Talanoa). Technology should facilitate these relationships, not replace them.
3. **Design must be Participatory:** We cannot design *for* vulnerable learners; we must design *with* them. Co-creation and Design Thinking (with critical modifications) are essential methodologies. "Nothing About Us Without Us" must be operationalised in course design.
4. **Culture is Infrastructure:** A culturally responsive environment is an accessible environment. Ignoring culture creates barriers as real as a broken hyperlink. Contextualisation is an accessibility feature.

Recommendations for the Field

I propose the following agenda for our community:

- **For Instructional Designers:** Adopt "personas" of disability and difference at the *start* of the design process. Use Design Thinking to empathise with the "edge cases." Audit your courses not just for technical accessibility, but for "academic ableism" in policies and tone.
- **For Faculty:** Embrace OER not just to save money, but to hack the curriculum. Rewrite the texts that exclude your students. Invite them to co-write with you using methodologies like narrative inquiry and autoethnography.
- **For Administrators:** Recognise that care is labour. Fund the time it takes for faculty to engage in *Talanoa* (or whichever culturally appropriate form) to mentor, and to create accessible materials. Stop retrofitting; start rebuilding. Recognise OER work and accessibility work in tenure and promotion review.
- **For Researchers:** Centre the voices of disabled and vulnerable learners. Move beyond quantitative measures of "retention" to qualitative inquiries into "belonging" and "epistemic justice."

The "troubles" of online learning identified by Jones, Shanouda, and Binhammer in the book review that opens this issue are not just obstacles; they are invitations. They are invitations to stop pretending that the old normal was

working and to build a digital future that is radically inclusive, deeply human, and unashamedly interdependent.

Atkinson, S. P..
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

REFERENCES

- Arantes do Amaral, J. A., Meister, I. P., Faria, A. D. S., Mancini, F., Lima, V. S., & Gamez, L. (2025). Integrating Design Thinking and Problem-Based Learning in MOOCs. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 29(2), 40-49. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v%2029i2.729>
- Baice, T., Lealaiauloto, B., Meiklejohn-Whiu, S., Fonua, S. M., Allen, J. M., Matapo, J., Iosefo, F., & Fa'avae, D. (2021). Responding to the call: Talanoa, va-vā, early career network and enabling academic pathways at a university in New Zealand. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(1), 75–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1852187>
- Bishop, R. (2023). Teaching to the north-east: Relationship-based learning in practice. In *Global Perspectives and New Challenges in Culturally Responsive Pedagogies*. Routledge.
- Bracken, S., & Novak, K. (Eds). (2019). *Transforming higher education through Universal Design for Learning: An international perspective*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Culver, K., Kezar, A., & Koren, E. R. (2025). Faculty, Academic Careers, and Environments (FACE) Framework: A Guide to Faculty Work for Research, Practice, and Policy. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 0(0), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2466421>
- Curtis, G. J. (2025). The two-lane road to hell is paved with good intentions: Why an all-or-none approach to generative AI, integrity, and assessment is insupportable. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 0(0), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2025.2476516>
- Dolmage, J. T. (2017). *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*. University of Michigan Press. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/166/oa_monograph/book/57058
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36(4 (138)), 273–290.
- Gearing, N. (2025a). How Do Culturally Responsive Storytelling Methodologies Engage and Challenge All Vulnerable Adult Learners? *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 29(2). 87-108. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v%2029i2.699>
- Gearing, N. (2025b). Troubles Online: Ableism and Access in Higher Education. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 29(2). 15-21. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v%2029i2.743>
- 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>

Kamanzi, A. F., lipumbu, N., Namabira, J., & Mendonca, H. N. (2025). Navigating Non-Linear Education-to-Work Trajectories: Integration of Ubuntu to Enhance the Readiness Programs. *Social Sciences*, 14(7), 408. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14070408>

Atkinson, S. P..
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

Lepore, T., Hlusko, L. J., Armstrong, L., Frank, T., Tseng, Z. J., Schmitt, C. A., Rizk, O., & M. Baranger, A. (2025). The Tangible Benefits of Disability and Accessibility Awareness in Evolutionary Biology College Courses Centered in Universal Design for Learning (UDL). *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 24(3), ar34. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.24-12-0295>

Lorenzo, T., & Sefotho, M. M. (2025). An Ubuntu approach to disability and inclusive development for women with disabilities. *African Journal of Disability*, 14, 1600. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v14i0.1600>

Marcos, H. (2025). Tech Won't Save Us: Climate Crisis, Techno-Optimism, and International Law. *Law, Technology and Humans*, 7(1), 22–46. <https://doi.org/10.5204/lthj.3816>

Mudau, P. K. (2025). Co-Creating Open Educational Resources in the Global South: Lessons Learned from Lecturer and Student Collaboration. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 29(2). 70-86. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v%2029i2.703>

Thapaliya, A., & Mahoney, J. M. (2025). Perceptions of OER in Higher Education: A Liberal Arts College Perspective. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 29(2). 22-39. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v%2029i2.741>

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges contributions made by the authors to this issue and is particularly for the earnestness with which final production was challenging.

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).

Ethics Statement

No ethical statement was warranted

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no competing interests.

Corresponding author



Simon Paul Atkinson, JOFDL, New Zealand
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0110-6101>

Author Biography

Dr Simon Paul Atkinson PFHEA is an educational consultant and Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He has over 30 years of experience supporting institutions worldwide in their capacity building around new learning support and delivery forms. He has held leadership roles in New Zealand and the United Kingdom including as Manager of Learning Design at Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (2018-2022), Associate Dean of Learning and Teaching at BPP University (2011-18), Academic Developer at the LSE (2010-11), Director of Learning and Teaching at Massey University's College of Education (2008-2010), Head of the Centre for Learning Development at University of Hull (2003-2008) and as an academic developer with the Institute for Educational Technology at the Open University (2001-2003). Simon holds a PhD in Adult Education in Museum Studies from Leicester University (2019). He is the current Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning. His scholarship is shared at sijen.com

Atkinson, S. P..
JOFDL
10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735

Please cite as:

Atkinson, S. P. (2025). Reimagining Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning in the Age of Academic Ableism. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 29(ii). 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v29i2.735>

Copyright

Articles published in the Journal of Open, Flexible, and Distance Learning (JOFDL) are available under Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) Authors retain copyright in their work and grant JOFDL right of first publication under CC BY

The Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning is the official publication of the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand whose generous support enables the journal to remain Diamond Open Access and not to charge any fees to authors.

