DESIGNING A MORE ACCESSIBLE FUTURE: LEARNING FROM COVID-19

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Living through a pandemic has changed our lives irrevocably. We face stressors related to social exclusion, lack of necessary infrastructure, and access to schooling. Social gatherings require thoughtful planning. Boarding a bus, train, or airplane involves navigating new procedures. Eating indoors at a favorite restaurant is, in most cases, not an option. These barriers are not new to members of the disability community. Most buildings, modes of transportation, and educational and healthcare systems reflect the needs of the non-disabled. As disability activist Imani Barbarin (2020) explains, "Ableds got a mere taste of what life with a disability is like for 4 months because of [coronavirus] and are desperate to 'return to normal.' But tell me again how disabled people just complain that we can't go out and access the things we want." (July 1).

According to the World Health Organization (2011), over 15% of the world's population is disabled[1]; in the United States, that number is closer to 25% (Centers for Disease Control, 2019). From the advent of the U.S. Disability Rights movement in the 1960s, individuals with disabilities have advocated for equal access. It was not until 1990 that passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) provided institutional accountability. However, thirty years later, disabled individuals continue to encounter problems related to disability discrimination and enforcement of ADA regulations (Burcaw, 2020). As of March 2020, disabled individuals were still fighting for institutional accessibility. By the end of that month, telework, telehealth, and teleconferencing—all issues the disability community has advocated for—became possible. Why? Because they directly affected those who are non-disabled.

An immediate response to the needs of non-disabled people is rooted in *ableism*, the systemic oppression of and discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Those who perpetuate ableism, either intentionally or unintentionally, believe that life *without* a disability is better than life with a disability (Hehir, 2007). In sum, "ableism looks like calling disabled people 'inspiring' for navigating a system that is designed for their exclusion, while doing nothing to hold the system accountable" (Tueller, 2020, July 2). Given that the pandemic has facilitated certain forms of accessibility, we can learn from this moment in time and design a more accessible future.

Incorporate Universal Design for Learning

Recent moves toward online platforms were motivated by the demands of people without disabilities. To be anti-ableist, we need to maintain structures that enhance inclusion; telework, telehealth, and teleconferencing should not be temporary, pandemic-related fixes. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) provides a solution. UDL is a proactive approach that involves anticipating educational, physical, and social/emotional barriers before they arise. One example of UDL is the use of closed captioning. Although online connectivity has increased access for some individuals with disabilities, issues remain. Zoom, a commonly used platform, is not fully accessible to individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing unless the captioning feature is activated. When a meeting includes live closed captioning, it proactively addresses the needs of all users and, in turn, creates an inclusive environment. And when in-person functions resume, it is equally important to use UDL as a lens to examine any physical or environmental barriers that would limit or prevent full participation.

Seek Out the Experts

During the pandemic, many people have turned to social media to facilitate personal connection. Since the perspectives of disabled individuals are frequently left out of mainstream conversations, social media provides a platform for disability community and consensus-building. Twitter and Instagram offer access to numerous disability experts; that is, those with lived experience. Disability rights pioneers and activists have a strong social media presence and address the ways that ableism affects their day-to-day lives.

One such example of coalition-building is the *Crip Camp: Official Virtual Experience 2020*. Every week throughout the summer, the Crip Camp Impact Campaign has hosted a "virtual camp experience" where speakers and activists are invited to reflect on the 2020 documentary, *Crip Camp*. During these sessions, they discuss a range of topics, such as "Disability Community Culture and Identity" and "The History of Disabled Black Activism," and they speak about disability as a minoritized, intersectional identity. In recent months, many disability activists have discussed the intersection of race and disability by problematizing the ways that #disablitytoowhite and highlighting the experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) disabled

individuals. They create generative spaces that dispel assumptions and raise disability awareness. In order to address ableism, we need to learn from these experts, share their stories, and educate others.

Final Thoughts

By no means am I suggesting that accessibility issues have been solved during the pandemic. If anything, this period of time has highlighted how ubiquitous and harmful ableism is. Instead, I aim to bring to light many of the ways that we, collectively, can come together to address attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers to inclusion and learn from the experiences of disability experts. Moving forward, advocates and allies alike must address language and practices that situate disability as a deficit and speak out when individuals with disabilities are being marginalized.

Consider following: @disability_visability; @habengirma; @crutches_and_spice; @shaneburcaw; @DEAFinitelydope; @carson_tueller; @nina_tame; @sophjbutler; and @cripcampfilm

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[1] Borrowing from Gabel et al. (2016), I use the term "disabled" to reflect the ways that individuals are disabled by barriers to their full inclusion in society, and I draw on both person-first and identity-first language to reflect different identity preferences within the disability community.

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Report accessibility issues and request help