

Intersectional relationships between coping with virtual learning spaces,  
dyslexia and English as a second language during the COVID-19 pandemic:  
A case study on six female London based higher education learners of  
West African heritage

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the gap in intersectionality discourse by exploring how the move towards online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK served as an agent of discord resulting in disparities in technology accessibility and support provision. Six West African working-class mothers with a diagnosis of dyslexia in higher education, living in London were recruited for the study using the convenience sampling method. Due to the COVID-19 crisis and restrictions with face-to-face contact, all semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely. The four themes identified, highlighted findings around online learning spaces, dyslexia support, ableist constructions, motherhood and home schooling.

**Key words:** intersectionality, COVID-19, dyslexia, online learning, marginalisation

Questions of intersectional identities, identity politics, disability activism and disciplined scholarship are all complicated by the hybridity of the borderlands – a place of contradiction and ambiguity, plagued with a cognitive impairment ....  
(Consensa, 2010).

Intersectionality theory has been broadly explored across different disciplines especially in the area of disability where narratives investigating lived experiences which draw on the relationships between various identity markers, interactions with societal perceptions, social constructs and discriminatory practices have opened up interesting discourse. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pivotal point for discussion, this paper aims to explore the impact intersections of disability, motherhood, cultural background and accessibility of technology had on the learning experiences of adults in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. In so doing it takes on a narrow focus and uses an intersectional approach to address how intersectional markers are played out in the marginalised experiences of these learners. While the paper draws out the uniqueness of individual participant experiences it focuses more on how these experiences are interwoven in the fabric of intersection and therefore pays attention to the homogenous narrative of the intersectional experiences of the participants rather than singling out and

debating individual participant social, economic or cultural backgrounds. This paper therefore specifically intends to address a gap in intersectionality discourse by exploring how the move towards online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK for some served as an agent of discord which resulted in widening disparities in technology accessibility and support provision. It is hoped that the paper opens up a portal for innovative discussion amongst professionals around best practices for creating an online learning culture that is inclusive of all learners irrespective of background, disability or learning difference.

## **Methods**

Using participant narratives detailing experiences of learning and support provision during the pandemic, the authors intend to use this paper as a medium to spur broad conversations around the intersectionality as it relates to how issues around accessibility of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic presented as an instrument of unintentional segregation and marginalisation for a very small and specific minority. The specific identity markers that this paper concerns itself with are West African working-class mothers in higher education living in London who are second language speakers and have a diagnosis of dyslexia. The convenience sampling method was used to recruit the six participants aged who engaged in the study. The age of the participants ranged between 30 and 55. All participants were mothers of young children aged between 5 and 15 years. The participants were all on full-time programmes in institutions of higher learning and worked part-time in the healthcare industry. Due to COVID-19 and restrictions with face to face contact, all semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via telephone. Participants were made aware of the nature of inquiry of the study. For the purpose of confidentiality, personal identity markers have not been used. Technicalities around confidentiality, anonymity and consent were addressed prior to interviews taking place. Data was analysed using thematic analysis.

As only a very small sample size of six higher education students were used for the study, this paper does not seek to make any broad claims or generalisations rather the intention here is to add to discourse on a topical issue – COVID-19, and the impact it has had on many aspects of student life and day to day living and the resultant impositions

that have manifested due to the changes and adjustments needed in order to fit in with the ‘new normal’.

### **Findings and discussion**

Four core themes were identified from qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews from six participants. In summary, the themes which are addressed in the following subsections below highlight issues with online learning from a neurodiverse perspective, applicability of dyslexia to online teaching methods, support for dyslexic learners, female students and learning spaces, home schooling and the home as a chaotic space and ableist constructions of online learning.

#### **An intersectional neurodiverse perspective on the use of online learning platforms for learning as a restrictive learning space**

Successfully preparing all learners with the skills and capacities for 21st century citizenship— global awareness, creativity, collaborative problem-solving, self-directed learning—is no small order, and many educational leaders are finding that the traditional forms of education that have evolved through the end of the last century are simply inadequate for achieving these goals. At the same time, while our outer world was transforming, considerable advances have been made in the learning sciences, forcing educators to reconsider how they approach learning, instruction, and the environments created to foster these. Finally, dramatic advances in educational technology have inspired powerful new ways for learners to engage with all kinds of content and activities in their own self-direct learning experiences. The juxtaposition of these three events creates a very interesting challenge and opportunity—a space to reconsider, re-imagine, and re-invent learning environments able to prepare and excel each individual for effective life-long learning.

Preparing students for productivity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a robust task that requires educators to apply new methods of teaching that go beyond traditional teaching methods that prevailed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which in today’s world is deemed insufficient to cope with the current global trends. Educators are therefore faced with the task of keeping up with recent transformations in the education sector and in doing so they find themselves

transforming how teaching and learning is delivered in order for learners to be able to fit in and compete in the transforming world. These new methods of learning have created exciting ways learning is approached. However, these new methods of learning bring with them new challenges both pleasant and unpleasant, and as such create room for debate on how best technology can be used as a tool in the classroom without being seen as yet another agent of marginalisation for students with disabilities. A meta-analysis of 69 studies suggested that students with disabilities performed significantly poorer than non-disabled students participating in the same online/distance education delivery (Larwin and Erickson, 2016).

An emerging theme from the study was technology as a restrictive platform for learners with dyslexia. Participants expressed the difficulties they experienced with the efficacy of technology. Some of the issues highlighted centred around the lack of face-to-face support from lecturers which the participants felt worked better in terms of achievement and participation given participants' limited written and spoken language proficiency. Similarly in a study conducted by Shuetze and Slowey (2002) on student parents with dyslexia it was reported that a fifth of student parents cited a lack of confidence (often due to a lack of earlier educational experiences) and many felt they needed more tutoring support as a result. Shuetze and Slowey's finding is consistent with this present study where participants reported their preferred option for learning and support was face-to-face which unfortunately higher institutions were not able to provide during the COVID-19 lockdown. Participants reported preferring face to face interaction with their colleagues and face to face feedback from lecturers as they were able to ask follow-up questions when further explanation was needed. They believed technology did not afford the support they needed to thrive in their studies:

“It's not for me and it wasn't as effective as sitting together. It's not my learning style; I need to be in a school environment...Zoom wasn't as effective as sitting together and looking at research together. Online learning wasn't good for me, it didn't work for me...lack of physical face to face placed me at a disadvantage.”

It is difficult to view challenges presented in learning as occurring as singular struggles because the nature of learning is complex and not one dimensional and therefore will produce multi-dimensional trajectories. Thinking broadly about how technology and its use in pedagogy can expand or restrict opportunities to thrive in a learning environment is therefore of the essence. A participant reported:

“Face to face is better because it feels more personal. It’s better to be in the same room with someone human than talking through a computer screen. It also feels more individual. It just does not seem as comfortable and because of that I forget to ask questions unless I have written them down beforehand.”

Online learning as a form of pedagogical delivering is not a new approach and has over time gradually gathered momentum across various tertiary institutions with some cases of successful implementation among institutions that are better equipped for this pedagogical approach. Innovations in technology have brought about modifications in the way pedagogy delivered in higher institutions especially with regards to online learning, which is presently an important area of development that is continuing to be a popular choice of pedagogical delivery especially in recent times. Being recognised as an effective pedagogical method and tool, online learning is broadly integrated into various types of teaching and learning strategies in higher education. The question however remains; how well can online learning alone be used as a sufficient pedagogical tool? A study by Woodfine et al. (2008) suggests that the most successful institutions use online learning in conjunction with face to face in order to support the needs of those learners with learning disabilities which was a teaching opinion not available during the national lockdown. This study however revealed disparities in online learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. The lack of preparation time lecturers and learners alike had to adjust to online learning platforms has been highlighted as detrimental to the progress and learning experiences of the participants of the study and raises questions around online learning culture and marginalised practices. The importance of preparation time for both lecturers and learners, especially for those with literacy issues was emphasised in a study on dyslexic learners in Higher Education by Price (2006).

According to research conducted by Fallon et al. (2020) 55% of learners with additional needs failed to complete their work during lockdown. They posit this may have been due to a variety of factors including the learning design or the support structures that were not in place. Online sessions for most respondents of the study tended to follow the traditional learning design of power point led sessions accompanied by short individual tasks, abundant use of audio-visual material and formative assessment by question and answer, to reproduce the conventional format of lessons the learners would have been accustomed to experience. It has been argued, however, by Habib et al. (2014) and Larwin (2016) that this was not a particularly effective way of using technology as it tends to

reproduce the problems that teacher centred pedagogy creates in the classroom for learners with writing difficulties and that for online learning to be effective it requires a much more imaginative approach. Normally some of the respondents would take notes in class and record the sessions to supplement their notes and if they needed further clarification they would speak to their lecturers afterwards. Respondents suggested that to some extent they could ‘control’ the pace of their learning by asking questions or by asking their lecturer to slow down or to recap. According to Quinn et al. (2020) this is central to effective engagement for learners with dyslexia. Some of the respondents felt ‘excluded’ in many of the sessions, and suggested that the ‘limited ‘opportunities for interaction in the sessions created barriers to their learning and made it difficult for them to become fully engaged in the classes.

“My teacher did her best but I’m not good with learning from [online] lectures. I can’t keep up with taking notes and there was not much chance to ask questions on Teams unless you can type really quickly or accurately. I learn by doing really and like collaborating with other people and learning by discussion.”

Some researchers have highlighted the problems that the text-based nature of online learning can pose for learners with literacy issues (Carmichael et al., 2018). A learner who experiences difficulty with speed of processing may require more time than other participants. Hesitancy in reading may make it necessary to read a message many times before it can be understood, so delaying response times, and causing the learner to fall behind schedule, putting their contributions out of sequence with the lesson. This is supported by research from Habib et al. (2014) who argue the main problem that learners with dyslexia are confronted with when using chat-based tools is not being able to keep up with the speed of communication especially in the areas of writing and reading. This was also evidenced by some of the respondents who struggled with processing speed in relation to writing and reading in sessions that took place online during the COVID-19 lockdown:

“When we get asked to read something in class I get a bit panicky because it takes me so long to read it and the teacher starts to ask questions before I’ve finished.”

According to Woodfine et al. (2014) messages with multiple spelling mistakes may make contributions hard to comprehend, thus making communication with tutors and other learners difficult. Consequently, contributions by a learner with dyslexia may lose

credibility, and therefore be ignored or even rejected. This can develop into a fear of contribution online:

“Sometimes we get asked to post questions on-line during the class but I don’t do it because I’m afraid that I will spell it wrongly which is embarrassing.”

### **Lack of support for respondents’ dyslexia**

According to Larwin (2016) any collaborative approaches that depend on text-based synchronous activities present problems to students who find it hard to express themselves in writing and that have difficulties with reading, and who have problems with short-term memory. All these disadvantages are experienced by students with dyslexia, creating a clear risk of their being marginalised, demotivated and disappointed. All respondents mentioned problems with organising their learning which were exacerbated by a variety of tensions both related to their learning disabilities and to intersectional pressures. Whilst at their institutions they were used to receiving hard copies of handouts, lecturer notes and power points printed on different coloured paper. These were normally provided before the sessions and they would annotate these during their lectures. During the lockdown they were sent these electronically but some struggled to deal with the differences in format. This is supported by the data from the study by Habib et al. (2014) which suggests that many of the online platforms used for the courses taken by their informants tended to display an overload of irrelevant information, rendering it difficult for dyslexic users to access the information concerning them.

A respondent voiced:

“Sometimes I got confused about what to download from my inbox because there was so much in there. Other times I forget to download them and so when I got online to the lecture I couldn’t follow it.”

Students were also accustomed to receiving clear formative feedback on their written assignment drafts in order to make the changes. Shuetze and Slowey (2002) reported that a fifth of student parents cited a lack of confidence (often due to a lack of earlier educational experiences) and many felt they needed more feedback and support as a result. According to Woodfine et al. (2008) learners with dyslexia might suffer from embarrassment, a sense of shame, and even guilt when interacting with other learners in

a synchronous environment. Their participation in this type of learning activity seems to contribute to an already established pattern of low self-esteem and low confidence in their ability to learn, which may ultimately cause withdrawal. Their preferred option was face to face feedback which our respondents' higher institutions were not able to provide during the lockdown.

“I don't think that I got enough feedback from my lecturer about my assignment because there was [sic] big gaps between me emailing drafts and getting them back. And then if I didn't understand a comment I would have to email her and wait for a reply. It took ages. It was much quicker when I was in the office with her and she could answer questions on the spot...It also feels less personal online and it makes me feel more like a student.”

### **Motherhood, home-schooling and chaotic learning spaces: a view through intersectional lenses**

According to a study by Hong Meng Tai et al. (2017) female students reported that Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) provided a “safe” learning environment in their institutions allowing them to take more time, let down their guard and ask questions. Many of the respondents attested to the importance of peer support in their learning whilst at college and how the lockdown impacted negatively upon this:

“I also miss the classroom banter and the little bits of chat in between learning which breaks things up a bit. And I miss the help we give each other during the lessons like looking at each other's notes and explaining what you have missed to each other. ...You don't feel that you can ask questions in a Teams session because it slows everything down.”

The social construct of motherhood creates ideologies around expectations of motherhood and how a mother should function even in perilous and tasking circumstances. The various levels of parenting engagement identified were as follows mother, teacher and learner. Deconstructions of parenting practices and ideas of ‘efficient mothering’ using an intersectional approach revealed three sub themes - the home as a chaotic space, feelings of inadequacy and chaotic working.

“Home schooling was also hard work because I have three children all of different ages. I had to create special timetables for Mummy's school for each one of



them. I was lucky though that my eldest did some of the teaching and also helped me with proof reading my assignments.”

Interviews revealed similarities in how expectations of motherhood impacted the participants’ ability to actively engage in their learning. Many studies have highlighted the barriers and challenges faced by women with child caring responsibilities (Leppel, 2002). Their situation has tended to be problematised, identifying the conflict between the role of carer and the role of student, with the two identities at odds with each other (McGivney, 1999).

“During the lockdown you often had to juggle from being a student to a teacher to a parent in the same day.”

Some of the major factors flagged up in the study were issues with home schooling their children and the restricted shared spaces for learning. There were marked differences in the way participants were able to engage in their studies post COVID-19. Participants described online learning as difficult and chaotic. Some participants voiced they felt as though their positions as ‘mother’ were being compromised and as such struggled to perform effectively on various levels of expected engagement in the home environment.

“The challenges I experienced was the time to teach the children, moving from one child to the other that was the challenge I had and also I had to do my work [studies] and I had to go to work as well.”

“My main challenge was children being off school. At the beginning of the COVID-19 thing you had to home-school them...it was difficult having them home and having to work and there wasn’t much childcare, everybody was taking precaution so it was difficult being a key worker...”

Sweet and Moen (2007) showed that women unanimously expressed a positive impact of studying on personal satisfaction but also expressed ambivalence, viewing it as an inevitable dilemma in balancing their various roles. Research by Smith (2019) suggested that student mothers also experience high levels of guilt. Participants reported that the conflicting responsibilities between study, work, and motherhood create guilty feelings as well as stress and exhaustion. Research by Ricco et al. (2009) suggests, however, that not all mothers as students experience higher institutions and family microsystems as simply involving competing sets of demands on available resources such as time and technology. Although it can pose as a conflict as in the case of some of our respondents, it can also

be the case that sharing of the student role between mother and child can promote a more integrative and positive relationship between the systems.

Some of the respondents were active users of the study facilities of their respective higher institutions and would spend time between classes working on their assignments in workshop situations with their peers. Study in their home environments was much more problematic for them as they had to combine being a student with being a parent at the same time.

“Because I live in a flat the children felt isolated because they couldn’t go downstairs because of the COVID-19; they were stuck in the flat for three months. Keeping the children active at home and as a student I was not able to read when the children were home that was my main challenge. I was not able to read as I should or do research because my children were at home and it did not feel like being in school [university].”

“I share a room with my youngest child and we both share a desktop PC there. I can only work in the bedroom so it can get a bit noisy when she wants to watch TV there or talk to her mates on the phone. It’s hard to concentrate on my work then. There’s also been times when we have classes at the same time and have to fight over who gets the PC.”

“It’s also a bit more difficult to concentrate at home because even when I try to do Zoom in the kitchen some of my children are always coming in and out.”

Some studies about student mothers emphasise the importance of leaving the family microsystem physically in order to ‘fit into’ or adopt their alterative roles in the college microsystem as a student (Lyonette et al. 2015; Smith, 2019). This was not an option for the respondents during the lockdown and hence some struggled to be a student at home. Some admitted that working at home was also difficult because of the inability to go out of the house and into their institutions of higher learning. They felt the pressure to complete domestic household duties and to fall into the role of housewife.

“I try to write lists of things I need to do each day but I rarely manage to complete them because other things get in the way such as doing housework, cooking etc and I haven’t got to be anywhere specific. I think that I can always put things off until tomorrow but then I start thinking about the deadlines and I get stressed out.”

“The coursework, the word limit, being at home with the kids and no time to go to the library, study like night time when they’ve gone to bed then I’m able to do my work but even at that when I wake up in the morning I’m tired because I wouldn’t have had enough sleep.”

### **Disablement and ableist constructions of proficiency in the use of online learning platforms**

Social inequality, social justice and struggle are deep seated subjects which manifest in how social exclusion and privilege is explored in multifaceted dimensions of oppressive practices (Romero, 2017). Dyslexia being a hidden disability poses challenges for higher institutions (Riddell and Weedon, 2006) as some lecturers are not skilled in applying universal approaches to teaching that will help in how pedagogy is received irrespective of one’s difference or whether or not these differences have been disclosed. This is supported by many studies about dyslexic learners in higher education (Price, 2006; Price and Gale, 2006; Madriaga, 2007) which relate stories from respondents about not having had the help they require within the educational system, which suggests that some mainstream educators may not have in-depth knowledge about the educational needs of dyslexic students. Some of these adjustments put in place for dyslexic students include extra time or support for assessments and exams (Pino and Mortari, 2014), one to one study skills support and assistive technology. In voicing their lack of reasonable adjustments made in online learning a participant reported:

“I’m meant to have a scribe and reader during exams or someone to read through my work for me. If they’ve given me any coursework they will send coursework details to me before that [beforehand].”

Because measures relating to reasonable adjustments are sometimes put in place as an afterthought there is often a lack of robust consideration given to intersectional and integral planning and visioning in institutions of higher learning operations (Miles, Nishida and Forber-Pratt, 2017). As a result, disempowerment resulting from limitations in accessibility to online learning led to limited participation among respondents in comparison to how they would engage normally with face-to-face learning on campus. Participants highlighted how important it was for them to be able to approach their lecturers for face-to-face support which was their preferred method of learning.

“The lecturer will make it a priority for me to speak to them ...she breaks down the coursework for me and tells me what to do.”

Research by Peters (1993), Smith and Ferguson (2002) amongst others suggests that online teaching can be most alienating for female learners who have English as an additional language because it can involve levels of social and communal dislocation. Johnson and Change (2014) emphasise how it is important for female learners who have English as an additional language to engage in academic and social development in order to cultivate a cultural and linguistic community in class.

This was evident in some of the responses from the interviewees:

“I’ve missed out by not learning with people face to face and talking to them in my own language and I don’t think that this has been helpful for me trying to do these resubmissions.”

Anxiety and self-esteem are recurrent themes in the literature on dyslexic students’ experience in higher education (Price, 2006; Price and Gale, 2006; Madriaga, 2007). A number of sources, including Carroll and Iles (2006) and Riddick (2010), report higher levels of anxiety among dyslexic students than among their non-dyslexic peers, both in terms of academic work and in social settings. The frequent occurrence of low self-esteem among dyslexic students is also an issue, especially because low self-esteem is often connected with low academic achievement (Banks and Woolfson, 2008). The lack of face-to-face interaction impacted on some of them emotionally making them feel isolated fatalistic and frustrated at times:

“I could never really connect with my assignments during lockdown which was giving me day after day a writer’s block because I felt so lonely.”

“I used to wake up in the morning sometimes and think what’s the point of carrying on with this course as I could die from the virus tomorrow and all my qualifications would be nothing.”

“When you are not going in, all you’ve got is the four walls to communicate with. Online classrooms are not the same thing I think It’s made learning a lot more of lonely experience, I guess?”

Learners have the right to enjoy equal levels of participation whatever the chosen medium of teaching and instruction, however this is not often the experience of

marginalised groups. Although it is desirable for barriers to be identified and removed so as to enable wide participation and varied opportunities for learning, oppressive practices do not allow for such. The construct of ableism intersects with oppressive systems that serve to disempower students; institutions therefore need to be held accountable for ableist assumptions and restrictive practices that infringe on students' ability to access platforms for learning. Complex intersectional perspectives on how social, economic and cultural demographics shape how pedagogy is received (Tefera, Powers and Fischman, 2018) evidence the need to disengage with middle class ideals of who a student is and take on a more diverse view on complex system of inequality. This approach lends itself well to addressing issues around the intricacies of integrating learning diversity and associated difficulties resulting from the sudden move to online pedagogy which has now (very suddenly) become the 'new normal' approach to teaching and learning post the COVID-19 lockdown in the UK. Hankivsky (2014) considers three approaches to analysing how difference pertains to individuals and learning. The first approach is the unitary approach where only one categorisation of difference is considered when analysing a 'problem'. The second approach is described as the multiple approach which looks at how multiple factors of difference can be added together in the bid to understand and explain a problem. This approach does not utilise an analytical approach to viewing how relationships between factors can help explain problems unlike the third approach, the intersectional approach, which takes into consideration how the relationship between factors of difference and the processes that feature within all intersect to form multiple identities and experiences where privilege and oppression exist on a socio-structural level.

#### **4. Conclusion**

We have found that much research about online learning has tended to play down intersectional barriers or assumed that one equality area alone will provide an explanation for an experience of inequality. We have also tried to focus on the distinct lived experiences of our respondents and the interaction between different elements of identity which is a central aim of intersectionality, as different combinations can lead to different lived experiences of individuals. As this paper has demonstrated, intersectionality, as a theory or lens, challenges the instrumental view of online learning in higher education. As a knowledge project, intersectionality advocates a distinctly non-traditional epistemology

for generating complex bodies of knowledge, and an expressly political project – promoting social justice and the transformation of the institutional order for historically and multiple marginalised students and teachers.

While intersectionality challenges the dominant instrumental view of higher education, our paper concludes that there is considerable work to be done to actively address the workings of intersecting systems of inequity in online learning impacting on the participation and outcomes of students. There are many unexplored aspects of the workings of intersectional (dis)advantage regarding technology in the higher education context. For example, we suggest that issues of access to technology deserve much more attention than has hitherto been given. It could also be argued that the central question that is not sufficiently addressed in current online policies and pedagogies is how to better engage and prepare students and citizens for the challenges of a “posthumanist” future. An intersectionist stake can be seen as broader social stake that should include education as a site where crucial dispositions of identity and models of oppression are contested shaped and fed. The significant question is how, specifically, technology, education, and race class and gender might better intersect as we evolve into the ‘new normal’?

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