

OPEN AND DISTANCE HIGHER EDUCATION AND RIGHTS OF THE DIFFABLE

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a qualitative research of diffable in the relation with open and distance education. A summary of in-depth interviews with 5 diffable is presented. It is expected that these interviews will help us gain better understanding of diffable people. Linking the diffabled to distance education, we will see that they are potential students of open and distance higher education institutions.

Keywords: diffable, distance education, independent

Open and distance education is a form of education that opens opportunities for all levels of society without restriction to pursue their education. Through open and distance education, all individuals who are part of the citizenship can gain access a higher education

Citizen basic rights are provided for by Law No. 39/1999 on Human Rights with articles 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 guaranteeing the rights of each Indonesian to personal development, access to education, intellectual advancement and improved quality of life, all of which are protected by the state. However, implementation of the law still denies the existence of people with different abilities. The human rights act should not be looked upon simply as a legal matter; it should rather be considered a process for becoming a citizen, diffabled included, with embedded connotation of public participation and accountability.

Since *diffables*, with their physical limitations, are still part of the overall concept of citizenship with political praxis, active involvement of people with different abilities is a certainty. According to Janoski (1998), there are 4 types of citizen's rights: (1) legal rights; (2) political rights; (3) social rights; and (4) participation rights. Janoski's model regards the right to education as a social right that gives every citizen to obtain the most basic skills. Social rights are basic rights that are naturally embedded in any individual.

Although 'diffable' has been in use for quite a long time to call a disabled person, many still think of it as an unfamiliar term. Diffable not only serves as a euphemism but also a process of 'becoming' a citizen who has their basic rights and is not marginalized.

This writing is about experiences of *diffable* people in pursuing higher education and challenges they are facing and dealing with. Challenges in question include inappropriate educational facilities/premises where courses are administered and perceptions of the public, and policies made by tertiary education institutions not providing any proper learning opportunities in universities/colleges. What adult *diffables* have gone through in their term of university-level study can be used as feedback for discussion involving all elements related to the organization of diffable-wise education. Their hope for proper higher education should be included in the new concepts of diffable-wise education in order to encourage social sensitivity.

This is a casuistic or qualitative research with a population of diffables studying at higher-level educational institutions. A casuistic research, it is characterized by the selection of samples that specifically serves its particular purpose (Poerwandari, 1998). In-depth interviews were held to obtain all required data. There were 5 diffable interviewees: 3 physically handicapped, 1 deaf-mute and 1 visually impaired. Their experiences represent a successful story of diffable individuals pursuing their study as well as a sad account of how they were struggling during the pursuit. Upon request, the identities of 3 respondents were not published and therefore pseudonyms were used for identification. Most of the respondents were over 30 and some were married. All went to special preliminary schools but attended regular secondary (junior and senior high) and tertiary education institutions. One is currently working for the management of a foundation and the others work as notary public, lecturer, designer and advertising practitioner. The interviews were either conducted face-to-face or by phone.

Personal concept of *diffable* people

Interview results show that independence and willingness to empower themselves are assets *diffables* should possess in leading successful lives. *Independent* was the key word that crossed researcher's mind when making conversation with all diffable persons. For the diffabled, limitations and different abilities account for a personal concept that guarantees greater level of independence. Society no longer considers diffables as disabled, powerless, incapable and dependent individuals. It is the independent nature that controls their physical and emotional limitations and ensures that they can carry out activities within a world that still denies the perception that diffables can do things by their own.

People with different abilities are in fact searching for instruments of feasibility which those of their group can make use of. Self-organizing and voicing their interests in social organizations (Broto, 2005), for instance through the Association of Indonesian Handicapped People or *Persatuan Penyandang Cacat Indonesia (PPCI)* are proofs that they have no intention of relying on the state. Tangible results can be found today: several malls have been equipped with special parking facilities, toilets and telephone systems. Gambir railway station has even staircase railings with Braille patterns giving information to blind people. Unfortunately, these facilities have never been properly introduced to employees and the general public. Lack of information often led to incorrect and improper use of these specially-constructed and installed facilities. What the government should construct is the identification of caring and cooperation among fellow community members.

Representing diffable individuals in the parliament (group delegates) has also been in place, giving diffables a political praxis opportunity to demand proper implementation of Human Rights Law articles. Diffables should be allowed to exercise their political rights beyond voting in elections: they should also be given the right to be elected as public officials (of both legislative and executive branches of government), something that Janoski referred to as personal right. Representation in the parliament, for instance, means recognized identity as citizens and fulfilled interests. An impression still exists that the state has no strong commitment to provide stakeholders with information and opportunities for taking part in discourses on education that is diffable-friendly. When looking for a space in a mall's parking lot, Santi learned that officers in charge did not respond well to the 'wheelchair' label on her car windshield.

Research respondents said that the state, who was supposed to pay great attention to limitations of the handicapped, was obviously marginalizing those with different abilities. Ani had this experience when applying for a diploma program in a state university in Jakarta – she was denied

enrolment right from the start. Out of disappointment, she went to a private university where, unexpectedly, she had a lot of support and enjoyed many facilities. She was given the same disappointing treatment when applying for a job at a state-owned bank. She failed to get the job after she had passed the entrance test and despite the fact that her academic qualifications were perfectly suited for a career in the banking sector.

Ratih (50) mentioned that while diffable people are minorities, even worse, minorities of many kinds, they constitute citizens who manage to empower themselves. What she is trying to say is that diffables have limitations; however, they have also strengths – one of which is independence. Diffables' reliance on the state is extremely insignificant – there are very few public infrastructures/facilities accessible by people with limited abilities. The government has no 'appropriate instruments/standards' which diffables are entitled to although the availability of special facilities to the minority group is crucial to the development of their independence.

Independence makes way for the will to empower: they will come up with the following strategies – having control; having a say and being listened to; being recognized and respected as equal citizens and human beings with contribution to make (Janoski, 1998).

Strategies for independence and self-empowerment are part of a long process diffables have to endure. Awareness of their own limitations encourages them to do something and be independent. This is not a spontaneous process, as Ani, one of the research respondents, said. The process of her becoming an independent individual started when she was denied the state university enrolment and job application. Ratih, Ani and Ade came to a conclusion that people in general still have no respect for their limitations and see diffables as people with 'defects'. This leads to a question of who should be held responsible for altering such perception.

Ani sees that different people perceive the diffabled differently. Educated members of the society can now accept that diffables have limitations and different abilities; however, people of lower classes still make fun of diffables and look at them negatively. Such unfavorable perceptions of common people is closely related to the diffables being independent persons as a result of deliberate destructions of many special infrastructures/facilities for handicapped people. Ani illustrated that Gambir once had a special telephone set. When one day the set was out of service Telkom technicians doing the repair moved its position up so that it was in line with other regular phones.

There were relatively fewer problems facing respondents during their university study; they were even offered support in times of need. Ade (37), who wanted to be a fashion designer, was a regular model female student, and graduated as the overall best. Most of the respondents took a diploma program because of its length of study and the opportunity to find a job faster.

They expect that there will be a number of state universities providing facilities required for smooth teaching and learning processes for diffable students and giving them equal opportunities to take all courses on offer. It was told that students with different abilities (physical constraints) find it very hard to take biology classes because special laboratories will be needed.

Open and Distance Universities as alternative

The self-dependence characteristic of diffable students represents both their capital and strength for reducing to a minimum challenges in the teaching-learning processes, and is in fact the major element of success in their pursuit of higher education, particularly in any open and distance tertiary education body. Distance education experts underline that self-directed learning is the key to successful study at an open and distance education modes. Independence in learning makes a student an autonomous individual. Independence and the will to empower oneself can be put under

individual capacity building category, and in psychology it covers the meanings of self-determination, self-autonomy and self-directed learning. The use of this concept is to complementarily describe the same sense of independence (Darmayanti, 1994, 2002). Darmayanti further explains that self-determination has the meaning of 'the will' as in 'the will refers to control over one's of behavior', while self-autonomy signifies the students' possession of basic rights and the fact that they are not a marginalized element of the society.

Interviews with the respondents show that diffables' independence and their will are responsible for establishing the self-directed learning characteristic that distance education will form over the period of study. Open and distance learning (ODL) system is a part of education that can help diffable people upgrade their personal competence and quality of life. Open and distance education can be an alternative for citizens with limitations with respect to various aspects of life – political, social, economic and cultural – as well as physical constraints of the diffable people.

ODL expands learning opportunity and provides alternative education accessible for the citizens irrespective of geographical, physical, social and economic constraints as well as work and family and other constraints. Online learning programs should be designed to meet the needs and expectations of these citizens. Open and distance learning (ODL) with self-directed learning mode gradually becomes a mainstream in the field of education and functions as a possible and effective alternative in promoting cross-nation human capacity building, because of its reputation of high quality and accessibility. Therefore, it is the responsibility of every ODL institution to redefine its roles and strategies in promoting cross-nation human capacity building (Suparman, Zuhairi & Toha, 2003)

For the last 25 years, UT has been given the mandate to educate people without any underlying problems of time and location. The state university carries out the mandate under one of its objectives, i.e. running a diverse range of quality higher education through an open and distance learning system that can be easily accessed as well as through provision of learning support services that suit students' requirements. The objective is in synergy with the changing paradigm of today's world of education. Accessibility and equal rights to have education, along with the development of ICT, make possible more personal and affordable learning. The above-mentioned characteristics of open and distance tertiary education give diffable people the opportunity to improve their intellectual competence.

The multi-use of ICT serves as an alternative mode of learning, e.g. a laboratory required for a course on biology or chemistry may be substituted with a dry-lab, which is a mix of computer technologies integrating various media: text, graphic, animation, audio and video. It generates media for simulating tests or experiments generally taking place in a laboratory.

CONCLUSION

The will to empower oneself, self-dependence and demand for identity recognition are part of a process of becoming a citizen. However, for diffable people to fulfill their basic rights to properly grow and improve, to develop and take advantage of science and technology as well as arts and culture, based on human values for their personal wellbeing, a breakthrough in higher education technology is necessary. The distance learning system with its available infrastructures and facilities should be applied for the achievement of learning processes for diffables, adopting their characteristic of independence, in synergy with the concept of self-directed learning of open and distance education offered by Universitas Terbuka.

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