

Chapter 2

Access and Citizenship for Those With Disabilities: Digitally Enabled Education and AI as a Bridge to Innovative Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the transformative potential of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) in bridging the gap between learner needs and innovative inclusion for individuals with disabilities. This provides a comprehensive analysis of how such advancements contribute to access and citizenship by examining socio-historical contexts, current practices, and future implications. Neither disability nor advanced technologies exist in a vacuum. Powerful historical, social, and economic forces have shaped the development of both. In understanding the inter-relationship, it is critical to engage with a range of associated issues. Over the past two centuries, disability has been at the forefront of technological innovation and adaptation. Digital emancipation provides digital technologies that empower individuals with disabilities by providing new opportunities for learning, communication, and participation. Digital tools and platforms offer unprecedented levels of accessibility and flexibility.

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1. THEMATIC INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

This thematic introduction examines the historical exclusion and marginalization experienced by individuals with disabilities. It provides a detailed account of how these histories have shaped contemporary understanding of access, revealing the multifaceted nature of inclusion. By examining the impact of exclusion on various populations, the stage is set for understanding trajectories of inclusion and such progress as has been made in recent years. This background underpins discussion on how digital technologies and AI are poised to further enhance access and citizenship.

Histories of Exclusion and Marginalization

The long and complex histories of exclusion and marginalization faced by individuals with disabilities form the thematic basis of this chapter. Historically, societies have often relegated people with disabilities to the margins, reflecting broader societal attitudes and prejudices (Mackelprang & Salsgiver, 1996; Braddock & Parish, 2001; Lester & O'Reilly, 2021). While perspectives on human rights and individual dignity have had a profound influence on movements for redress and inclusion regarding ethnic difference, gender, sexual orientation, religious belief, and cultural difference, they have not been as prominent in the discourse regarding disability until recent years (Degener, 2016; Quinn & Degener, 2002; Kayness & French, 2008; Stein & Stein, 2022). Partly this is explained by the extraordinary levels of fear, ignorance, and medicalization which attended consideration of disability, a “place apart” in the pantheon of human exclusion (Lieffers, 2024; Stiker, 2019). However, it has also been due to deep levels of institutionalization, charity, quasi-religious appropriation, and the parallel models of care and dependence which arose from these contexts (Oliver, 1996; Amponsah, 2013; Marini, et al, 2023; Smart, 2019). Such mindsets made the central policy drive of rehabilitative endeavor (if it even existed) center around normalization or mainstreaming rather than adapting the external environment to the needs, expectations, and rights of those labelled as different.

In many societies, disabilities were often perceived through a lens of pity or fear rather than understanding (Breen, et al, 2024; Smart, 2019). Individuals with disabilities were sometimes deemed incapable or less valuable, leading to systemic discrimination (Breen & Forwell, 2023). Institutions such as asylums, which were designed to isolate and control rather than support and integrate, became symbols of this exclusionary approach (Burns, 2018; Houston, 2020). In many cases, marginalization was compounded by inadequate or non-existent legal protections and societal supports (Bartlett & Wright, 1999; Kaliski, 2017; Malathouni, 2020; Rotoli, et al., 2023).

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