Intersectionality and multimodality: Tackling vulnerability in open and distance learning

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Abstract
This theoretical study employs reflective analysis on social vulnerability in open and distance learning (ODL). It focuses on contemporary analytical perspectives that may help reinstate ODL's programmatic aim to provide flexible and accessible learning to those less powerful to demand equity in formal education. Considering the recent pandemic experience, the paper highlights the importance of including vulnerable groups of learners to expand the analytical and methodological trajectory of the field. Based on extensive literature review and discussion, it argues that: a) intersectionality, as it has emerged from the racialized experiences of minority ethnic women in the United States to become a dynamic critical theory, is an appropriate analytical tool to understand and map out varying forms of sociocultural exclusion in open and distance education; and b) multimodal instruction is the optimum form of addressing the multiliteracies of heterogeneous learning populations towards building a more inclusive ODL in the digital era.

Keywords
Open and distance learning (ODL), vulnerability, intersectionality, multimodality, multiliteracies

1. Introduction: A recalibration of distance learning focus
Distance learning, an educational model that dates back to the 18th century (Harting & Erthal, 2005) and which seemed to be losing its initial dynamic potential in the late twentieth century, has recently regained considerable ground due to two forceful factors: the rapid digitization of social and educational activity that we have witnessed in the last two decades (characterized by different speeds and local manifestations, depending on the cultural and geographical context), which has disjoined physical presence from learning practices and, secondly, the abrupt transition to online instruction induced by the covid-19 pandemic which occurred in early 2020.

This development has ignited a variety of theoretical discussions and empirical implementations which focus on the pedagogical and technological components of distance learning. However interesting, these approaches have focused heavily on the acquisition of necessary devices and digital skills, leaving notably behind the underlying philosophical and

political premises of open education and distance learning, and most particularly its commitment to provide flexible educational opportunities to groups of learners systemically excluded from conventional western-style formal education. But open and distance education is not synonymous to online learning. Open and distance education focuses on open access to education and training with an ultimate goal to free learners from the constraints of time and place, and to offer flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. There are numerous forms that distance instruction can take (videoconferencing, video classes, synchronous and/or asynchronous instruction, LMS, MOOCs), as well as blended models which combine the aforementioned means; therefore, the identifying characteristic of open and Distance Learning does not lie with the technological media or with the digital configuration of learning environments. Its fundamental feature is, and ought to be, a paradigmatic commitment to addressing the demands of those in greater need, whose educational requirements are least addressed by conventional education at any given historical and cultural context (Peter & Deiman, 2013).

The established term Open and Distance Learning (ODL), which encompasses formal as well as informal education, reflects both the fact that all or most of the teaching is conducted by someone who is away from the learner, and that the learning design embeds various components of openness and flexibility, whether in terms of access, curriculum or other elements of structure. This paper argues that if conventional education is, due to recent socioeconomic reconfigurations, gradually integrating distance learning techniques and methodologies, then ODL-related research should look for fresh analytical perspectives that sustain a philosophy of openness in praxis and not focus merely on the elaboration of tools for learning from a distance. Otherwise, there is a significant risk of tending to the needs of those already literate and privileged enough to participate in digitally mediated educational environments. In order to do so, ODL may require an epistemological opening up to improbable allies, such as feminist critique and sociolinguistics, and borrow analytical lenses that have not been considered in the past mainly due to disciplinary intrenchment.

A recent survey by the European Commission (Cedefop, 2020, p. 4) offers recommendations for the alleviation of social exclusion, including facilitating access to digital devices and internet connection; translating guidelines into different languages spoken by ethnic minorities and refugees, as well as hearing impaired students; providing individualized support and distance mentoring; developing learners' digital skills; and supporting VET (vocational education and training) staff/personnel through online training modules on digital skills and e-learning pedagogies and by providing them with free digital devices. Despite the acute emphasis on digital skills and a discourse of training that focuses on the technical infrastructure and skills acquisition, an interesting and significant observation of this survey is that "the current crisis has shown that there is no digital inclusion without social inclusion. Marginalized and vulnerable learners are less likely to be involved in distance learning procedures; disconnecting for a longer period may lead them to drop out from their VET programme" (Cedefop, 2020, p.

4), given that "the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 …is felt hardest by the most vulnerable learners" (Cedefop, 2020, p. 6). As Otto Peters, a pioneer scholar of distance education reminds us (2010):

> Distance learning is not just campus-based learning with the help of particular technical media. It is an entirely different approach, with different students, objectives, methods, media, strategies, and above all different goals in educational policy. Distance education is sui generis in the sense that it is programmatically stratified towards certain emancipatory social and pedagogical values such as its special humanitarian goal – the education of the neglected and underserved, among them minority people; the extension of university education to adults and persons with vocational and family obligations, to the goal of realizing lifelong learning, to a university which is open to all people who are able to study and are offered a "second chance" for enjoying and profiting from higher education; the unparalleled opportunities for scientific continuing education so badly needed in our age of constant technological, societal and cultural change; its contribution to university reform which must be modernized, among others.

Willingness to address this 'modernization' has two distinctive strands: on the one hand, the need for a multifactor analytic orientation in order to understand, process and analyze the issue of inclusion in ODL, especially in a historical moment when massive and diverse groups of learners are incorporated in ODL curricula. On the other hand, the cultivation of hands-on solutions is urgently needed if we are to adequately tackle the multifaceted effects of vulnerability that millions of learners' experience. In an attempt to reinstate the 'open' to open and distance learning, this paper's ambition lies in opening up the methodological and conceptual toolbox of the field, through a timely and fruitful interdisciplinary discussion. I will argue that the concept of vulnerability, that is an attribute related to the ability to respond to situations of risk or constraints (Cunha et al., cited in Marques et al, 2020, p. 177), provides a lens through which we may try to re-think the foundational principles of open, distance and flexible education. As far as the analytical aspect is concerned, I propose the feminist concept of intersectionality, which has sprung as a theoretical and analytical stance from feminist struggle in the late twentieth century and views oppression in terms of overlapping social identities. With regard to the future solutions that ODL could embrace in developing, implementing and evaluating formal and informal distance learning modules, I focus on the concept of multiliteracies and on the need for provision of multimodal learning environments designed to acknowledge and address them.

2. The concept of vulnerability and student support

Open and distance education has diachronically played a pivotal role in processes of inclusion of stigmatized or excluded groups. As early as the late nineteenth century, in the aftermath of the industrial revolution, ODL offered the possibility of completion or continuation of studies to persons who did not reside in metropolitan settings or were deprived of the financial and social requirements necessary to access educational institutions. In reviewing the history of distance learning, Harting and Erthal observe that "new and flashy technology is not the enticement for most distance educators; rather, they are motivated by the desire to provide education to

those who were previously denied it" (2005, p. 38). This paradigmatic attention to the carriers of social educational exclusion appears to re-emerge in recent approaches, with the use of different terminologies, which encompass the discourses on diversity, human rights and critical pedagogy that dominate the social sciences and humanities in recent decades. Indeed, the concept of vulnerability has largely replaced that of social exclusion in the literature about open and distance learning. Studies on corporeal vulnerability in educational settings (Vlieghe, 2010), on students' mental health in distance learning environments (Aditya, 2021), and especially in higher education (Jackson, 2018), demonstrate what Brunila and Rossi (2018) describe as an emerging "ethos of vulnerability" that dominates education, having replaced an earlier discourse around identity politics. What is more, with the massive proliferation of distance education modules due to the recent pandemic, a vivid discussion emerged on the challenges but also the potential benefits of horizontally applying open and distance education in order to address the special characteristics of vulnerable populations. During the pandemic the issue of vulnerability has gained traction in academic and public discussions, having largely replaced the older discourse on social exclusion. Pedagogies of emergency (Piceci & Cancellara, 2020) and a concern about the enlargement of the digital gap in vocational education and training (Cedefop, 202o) push us to rethink, through the concept of vulnerability, the large umbrella of open and distance learning and to specify the culturally and socially imposed obstacles that numerous groups of learners' encounter.

Vulnerability is a multidimensional construct that is "embedded in complex social relations and processes" (Hilhorst & Bankoff, 2006, p. 5). It positions individuals in relation to each other within broader systems of social disadvantage, in terms of overcrowding, poor health, difficulties with community safety and unemployment, but also resilience, adaptability and coping with stressors -most notably in the case of 'vulnerable youth' (Te Riele & Gorur, 2015). Among the most vulnerable categories of the general population, we may trace in relevant literature elderly persons, immigrants, adults with special needs, NEET persons (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), dropouts and, in many countries, considerable portions of the rural population in remote areas. As far as students are concerned, the overarching definition of a vulnerable student is a young person who requires extra support with their education. It is a broad term which encompasses several types of individuals, such as students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), students with mental or physical health issues, young people with behavioural difficulties or emotional disturbance, or students who are in difficult circumstances which have led to them needing extra assistance. Vulnerable students also include students who are in foster care, involved in the juvenile justice system, recent immigrants, or homeless. A noteworthy observation is that those already at risk – persons from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, migrants and from ethnic minorities, learners with disabilities and special education needs – often find themselves out of school before an emergency situation arises.

According to recent studies, vulnerable groups of students, and specifically young people who may be living in disadvantaged contexts or chronic health conditions, have been the first "collateral damages" of the compulsory transition to distance learning at the level of formal education in Europe and in many countries around the world (Drane, Vernon & O'Shea, 2021). Mandatory distance learning has already been shown to increase the likelihood of dropout for vulnerable students, especially those already at risk before the pandemic (Cedefop, 2020), whereas educators have also been reported to be struggling with online courses. What is more, psychological distress such as anxiety and depression has considerably increased during the COVID-19 disruption. "As students lost school connectedness due to being physically distanced from school, or having to maintain a social distance from teachers and peers, there was a sense that adults and/or peers in their school were no longer concerned about them as an individual or concerned about their learning" (Drane, Vernon & O'Shea, 2021).

Whereas distance learning has been shown to be a realistic response on the fight against social isolation and social vulnerability, especially in regard to higher education students, it is important to highlight the numerous requirements in terms of student's access to, and familiarization with, information and communication technologies. As Marques et al. (2020) observe, the cultivation of a perception of diversity, accessibility and the principles of inclusion are essential for the demands of students in situations of social vulnerability to be met in an equitable way. In this task, culturally sensitive teachers occupy a central position, due to their active role in detecting social vulnerability. Students engaged in complex family situations (e.g., young children, elderly or handicapped relatives), students with no compatible or up-to-date equipment or students under threat can be identified by the teacher, therefore the teacher's "new" role involves, among other things, preventing complex situations from deteriorating (Marques et al., 2020, p. 179).

However, the concept of vulnerability can also be a double sword, further marginalizing the very people it is supposed to be supporting. It is important to be aware that individuals may be categorized as 'vulnerable' for a short or longer period of time, while others, due to their conditions or disabilities, may require extra support on a more permanent basis. The concept itself implies an inherently disempowered position, and often a permanent state, from which little or no agency can be exercised. Nevertheless, in the contexts of refugee education or natural disasters, another concept arises vis-à-vis vulnerability, namely resilience (Frankenberg et al., 2013). For example, on the level of designing policies and interventions, there is a growing dilemma between approaches of vulnerability and approaches that promulgate agency as the central concept from which to address the educational opportunities of young refugees (Gateley, 2015). The agency discourse is also supported by voices from the academia, which argue that a position of vulnerability is a potentially privileged stance from which to perform resistance and pursue social change (Green, Stewart & Wolodko, 2018). The issue of agency becomes all the more relevant as the digitization of education progresses. The increasing collection, use and possible sharing of students' digital data not only promise to

increase the effectiveness of student learning, but also increase their vulnerability (Prinsloo & Slade 2015). It is therefore essential that student-centered approaches to learning analytics be already in place, so that students' agency is valued and optimized.

Urges for support of most vulnerable students insist that it is not the technological know-how which increases student participation and support; rather, it is the out-of-the-box thinking of educators and parents who struggle to identify the problems and assist children and youth to not give up, reminding them that they are important and what they are learning is important even if it is not acknowledged -and tested- as such in conventional education's logic (Ferlazzo, 2020). Support initiatives attempt to cover both the digital skills of students but also to train educators to take on different roles. It is true that many countries "are training teachers, trainers, coaches and mentors to develop teaching and training material; to acquire knowledge on effective e-learning methodologies; and to carry out virtual evaluation. Some platforms offer demonstrations and online training to users. Information and guidance about organising distance learning is made available for teachers, trainers, learners, enterprises and parents in many EU countries including how to support learners at risk" (Cedefop 2020, p. 15). However, these efforts are not enough to effectively address the multifaceted factors and exclusions that 'vulnerable' students are up against. As the previous discussion demonstrates, from an analytical and methodological point of view, it is essential to look for alternative analytical and descriptive instruments to understand and tackle the issue of exclusion in open and distance learning.

3. Intersectionality as an interrogating lens for ODL pedagogies

As vulnerability is often structurally produced and maintained, in order to comprehend its complex repercussions, we require analytical tools that address invisible and networked factors of identity. One such concept is intersectionality. Else-Quest and Hyde (2016) summarize three assumptions underlying most definitions of intersectionality. The first is a recognition that people are characterized simultaneously by their membership in multiple social categories (e.g., gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, and others) and by awareness that these categories are intertwined, so that the experience of one social category is linked to membership in others. The second assumption purports that is that a dynamic related to power and power interrelations is embedded within each socially constructed category. This calls attention to power as an essential component of intersectional analyses. The third assumption is that all social categories have individual and contextual facets which link them intrinsically to personal identities, as well as to wider institutional processes, practices and structural systems.

Introduced by legal advocate and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality is rooted in the racialized experiences of minority women in the United States and gave emphasis to understanding multiple forms of subordination that comprise interlocking oppressions. It

offers a critical framework as well as an analytic language for examining interconnections and interdependencies between social categories and systems. The concept of intersectional locations emerged from the racialized experiences of minority ethnic women in the United States, and as such, it has evolved into a strand of critical theory that conceptualizes knowledge as situated, contextual, relational, and reflective of political and economic power.

This complex mindset is particularly useful since it inherently recognizes the intricate and often invisible workings of power in the very structure of social institutions (such as education) and calls attention to the subtle exclusions they generate. Tending to open and distance learning's commitment of providing emancipatory education to those who were previously denied it, intersectionality is useful because it acknowledges that power relations play a fundamental role in the construction of thought, experience, and knowledge. Intersectionality has played a pivotal role in the decolinization of education, especially in regard to race and gender (Mirza, 2014), whereas disability research has brought to light the multidimensionality of dis/abled experience (Hernández-Saca, Gutmann & Cannon, 2018). Functioning as an interrogation lens, intersectionality has been identified as "a conceptual aspiration and research imperative" (Tefera, Powers & Fischman, 2018) in higher education environments (Harris & Patton, 2019). As a way of understanding and organizing new knowledge, intersectionality may be best conceived as a critical theory (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016), with entwined personal and structural implications for theory and practice.

In her illuminating work, Carastathis (2014) demonstrates how intersectionality has become the predominant way of conceptualizing the relation between systems of oppression which construct our multiple identities and our social locations in hierarchies of power and privilege. She identifies four main analytic benefits which are imputed to intersectionality as a research methodology or theoretical framework: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity. As she notes, "in contrast to unitary or additive approaches to theorizing oppression, which privilege a foundational category and either ignore or merely 'add' others to it, intersectionality insists that multiple, co-constituting analytic categories are operative and equally salient in constructing institutionalized practices and lived experiences" (Carastathis, 2014, p. 307). The concurrent emphasis on the structural as well as personal repercussions of oppression indicates an analytical potential available to ODL, to address the multiple barriers that co-constitute oppression and exclusion and also to grasp the complex dimensions of vulnerability that many individuals experience.

As online learning is increasingly engulfed in formal institutional learning, intersectionality becomes more useful and relevant for researchers and for practitioners because it enhances analytical sophistication and offers theoretical explanations of the ways in which heterogeneous members of specific groups might experience the educational context differently depending on their ethnicity, sexual orientation, and/or class and other social locations. Sensitivity to such differences enhances insight into issues of social justice and inequality in organizations and other institutions, thus maximizing the chance of social change

(Crenshaw, 1989). In theorizing intersectionality, Clarke and McCall discuss the framework's potential to offer "different explanations of the same facts" (2013, p. 351). They advocate that even projects that do not set out to be intersectional can benefit from applying an intersectional frame as a theoretical resource to craft "inclusive normative solutions to problems of social inequality" (Clarke & McCall, 2013, p. 361).

In the growing discourse about intersectionality in education the component of gender is often superseded in view of other 'trendier' facets of social exclusion. My argument here does only not seek to reinstate the importance of gender in the continually pressing situation of girls' and young women' education in contexts of potentially great vulnerability, such as the one of refugee transition (Rezaian, Daskalaki & Apostolidou, 2020), where intersectional analysis has also been indicated to be useful (Compton-Lilly et al., 2017). Rather, it is a wider proposition that methodological and analytical outsets come with specific presuppositions which inform the observation as well as the implementation of phenomena relevant to education.

In spite of the fact the critical accounts on intersectionality (Carastathis, 2016) do not directly address education —or open and distance learning— there are numerous interesting strands that point to the direction of its fruitful application in ODL. Namely, the issue of literacy intersectionality (Hinchman & Alvermann, 2018), especially in the discussion about digital literacies (Pandya, Hansuvadha & Pagdilao, 2018), indicates that there is considerable common ground to be found between the two.

As a concept that has rightfully "travelled into various disciplines, empirical sites, and ideological terrains" (Carastathis, 2014, p. 311) in recent years, intersectionality appears to have a rich potential to contribute towards the regeneration of ODL's analytical and methodological repertoire. In this respect, if analytically adopted in OLD to unravel the ramifications of the concept of vulnerability, multimodal literacy may be employed as a key methodological concept for exploring of a fresh approach towards open and distance learning's future aims.

4. **Acknowledging multiples literacies through multimodality**

The last segment of the problematics raised in this paper relates to the practical, empirical and hands-on approach to learning in ODL settings. Acknowledging the complex workings of oppression and social exclusion, we recognize the varying literacies with which persons enter educational environments and the strict hierarchy of value attributed to them by standard educational systems. Cornelius Castoriadis' vision of education as geared towards autonomy and not just professional skills (2007, p. 202) strongly criticizes the division of labour into intellectual and manual work, working towards a direction which subverts constructions of literacy and intelligence that privilege logical-mathematical and abstract thinking as tokens of a higher intellect.

A practical manifestation of this approach may be traced in the gradual acknowledgement of various literacies in recent years. As literacy practices depart from the mere reading and writing paradigm of the 19th and 20th century, a discussion about literacies (in plural) emerges, one

which greatly expands our understanding of useful and necessary skills in the digital era (Kalantzis et al., 2016). As Kalantzis et al. (2010) explain, the term 'Multiliteracies' refers to two major aspects of language use nowadays. The first is the variability of generating meaning in different cultural, social or domain-specific contexts, while the second arises in part from the characteristics of the new information and communications media. Meaning is made in ways that are increasingly multimodal—in which written-linguistic modes of meaning interface with oral, visual, audio, gestural, tactile and spatial patterns of meaning. This results in a demand to expand the range of literacy pedagogy so that it does not unduly privilege alphabetical representations, but brings into the classroom multimodal representations, particularly those typical of digital media. This makes literacy pedagogy all the more engaging for its manifest connections with today's communications milieu. What is more, this approach to literacy provides a powerful foundation for a pedagogy of synaesthesia, or mode switching. This inclusive orientation of literacy, which encompasses audiovisual material and artefacts, also holds the potential of destabilizing established geopolitical power dynamics and allow oppressed groups to differently voice their positions, within and outside education (Cope & Kalantzis, 2016). The same group of researchers have been promoting the idea of a pedagogy of multiliteracies for the new era (Kalantzis, Cope & Cloonan, 2010). With regard to technologically-supported educational environments like contemporary ODL., the utilization of these literacies needs to be supported by culturally-appropriate methodologies (Fay & Hill, 2003).

As multimodal literacies play a de facto role in online environments (Bourelle et al., 2016), and considering the acknowledged need to include informal practices in distance education (Winterwood, 2010) this tendency has become a new imperative. The inclusion of kinetic, kinesthetic, multilingual and emotionally diverse students in all levels of education highlights multiliteracy and also coincides with contemporary neurobiological approaches to the complexity of human intelligence and its interrelated and multiple facets (i.e., linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic and personal) (Gardner, 2011). What is more, multimodality and intersectionality have already been coupled together to exhibit the situated, distributed and multimodal ways in which oral, signed and written language varieties, other symbolic systems and broader dimensions of human interactions are used in everyday life in a range of institutional settings (Bagga-Gupta, 2012).

It is not coincidental that recent research work in distance learning strongly advocates the incorporation of multimodality as a central component in e-learning (Du Toit, 2020; Hampel & Hauck, 2006), especially in discussing the ethical implications of distance learning for vulnerable or 'non-traditional' learners (Sankey & Hill, 2009), which circles the discussion back to the philosophical and ethical foundations of open and distance learning.

5. Conclusion

In discussing the principal differences between distance education and face-to-face education, Peters (2010) argues that the former requires new learning and teaching behaviours, which support active, autonomous learning and critical reflection and he stresses that this calls for careful planning on the part of educators, as they have to construct the artefacts to perform the required teaching functions, provide a stable presence and evaluate students' work-in-process constantly. Creating such supportive and reflective environments is no small task when working with vulnerable learners. As he notes "above all [teachers] must – let me repeat this for the sake of redundancy - develop a habit of reflecting on this special way of teaching they are engaged in. You will agree that this cannot be done if you are not fully aware of the decisive differences between distance education and face-to-face classroom education. The worst thing which can happen is judging distance education by applying criteria of face-to-face education. And, as you know, exactly this is done so often". This distinctive ideological and practical challenge requires continuous research contextualization and documentation, which demands a vision of equity coupled with strenuous methodological and analytical commitment, agility and, often, improvisation.

Easy fixes have proven to be insufficient in addressing the multifaceted global problems that became widely discussed after the 2020 pandemic, which include aggravation of the digital, as well as the social, divide. Long standing issues of inequality and exclusion re-emerged forcefully on the frontline of education as well as in relevant theoretical discussions. In view of the complex and massively generalized problems that ODL faces today, the tools to understand, analyze and address social exclusion demand fresh perspectives and a serious commitment to interdisciplinary theorizing and action. The perspectives of intersectionality and multimodality in distance learning may be fruitfully adopted to address contemporary challenges, including the proliferation of vulnerable learners across the globe and the need to expand the barriers of standard digital literacy. This discussion has attempted to offer a brief critical reflection on the role of open and distance education in a radically different era of gradual de-institutionalization of learning, arguing that a genuinely interdisciplinary rationale is the best shot ODL has if it is to remain a distinctively anthropocentric, critical and emancipatory pedagogical pursuit for vulnerable (and less vulnerable) students and teachers alike.

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