The Particular and the Universal. Reflections on Knowledge Production, Human Diversity and Human Rights in Universal Design

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Abstract. This article discusses universal design as a concept and strategy in light of human diversity. Inspired by the German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt, plurality is understood as a condition of humanity. From this recognition of human diversity, the term 'universal' is analysed, focusing on the ambivalences inherent in the concept. I argue that universal design, as a human rights concept, must respond to human plurality and avoid the ableist risk of excluding persons and groups of people, when implementing universal design strategies. Interdisciplinary knowledge, education and skills are important for the practice of universal design. According to Article 4 of the Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD), new research is needed to apply universal design strategies in different contexts. I then focus on disabling barriers in education and research. I conclude by arguing for developing a culture of access and embedding universal design strategies in disability research recognising the socio-cultural aspects and human plurality.

1. The dynamics of the singular and the universal

The Canadian musician Buffy Saint Marie wrote the song *The Universal Soldier*, which was released in 1964. The song draws attention to the universality of all soldiers regardless of their individual characteristics and the country and regime for which they fight. The term 'universal' draws the attention away from the particularity of the individual to the general characteristics of a soldier.

Similarly, the term 'universal', as used in universal design, shifts attention from the specific characteristics of human beings to a general vision of design for all human beings. Does the use of the term 'universal' also hide the specificity of disability as a human condition?

What is a characteristic feature of humanity? I will argue that diversity is one, perhaps *the* most prominent feature characterising humanity. We are all different in particular ways. According to the German American political philosopher Hannah Arendt, plurality is a condition of human life [1]. The political response to this diversity has traditionally been to create hierarchies, where, for instance, men were more valued than women, and abled persons more valued than persons with disability. The democratic

political response to diversity, however, must be political equality based on the recognition of equal status.

2. Ambivalences in the term 'universal'

Universal design is both a praxis and a concept, it is a technical specification and as such based on the idea that what works in one place in one situation will work everywhere for all people. This is the logic of 'best practice'. But universal design cannot be reduced to a mere technical concept or best practice; it is also, and perhaps above all, a human rights concept. I will focus here on the conceptual aspects of universal design (UD). The term 'universal' is a general concept referring to the general population or an unspecified 'all people'. The concept has been criticised from postcolonial perspectives for neglecting the concrete differences between people. This critique is also relevant in a universal design context. To date, few scholars in disability research have engaged in universal design research. Perhaps what can be interpreted as a gap between disability studies and universal design lies in the ambivalences related to the term 'universal'?

Through its inclusion in the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), Article 2 on definitions [2]. Universal design is included in the human rights treaties. As a human rights concept, the human dimension of the concept is emphasised. Design is always contextual, specific, and concrete, addressing human needs in a situation and context.

As a human rights concept, universal design is conceptually and ethically rooted in the lives and circumstances of people with disabilities. The aim of the concept is optimistically to improve the living conditions of people with disabilities by changing the premises for designing a socio-material world for all human beings.

3. Recognising the individual dimension

While writing this essay, I fell and broke my left ankle. The accident happened in a public space and was related to interior architecture. I was standing at the counter in an old-fashioned pub, asking where the toilet was. Underneath the counter was an iron list for patrons to rest their feet on. I didn't see it, and since I do not have much senses in my feet, I didn't notice that my left foot was on the inside of this iron list, between the wall of the counter and the list. So, my left foot was in a locked position, without me noticing it. When I turned around and my whole body was facing the direction I was headed, my foot could not move. My body twisted from the ankle and up, and I fell to the floor. After this fall, when I was helped to my home and then to the emergency room two days later, I got a cast on my foot and was sent home with crutches. My whole body and soul felt extremely vulnerable. When I looked at the x-ray image, I could see a broken leg in my ankle, the broken fibula. I felt vulnerable and out of sync with my body.

This is the embodied experience that the universal is meant to meet. Not the general person but the situated person. This is the ethical dimension of universal design. Because universal design is about usability, the human dimension is inherent in the concept. It is the individual person who is the target of universal design.

The individual dimension of universal design represents the particular as opposed to the universal. In my research and teaching I have focused on disability and gender when studying barriers to equal status and access to participation. Women's bodies are for

example vulnerable in public space [3]. There are both similarities and differences regarding these social identities and embodied human characteristics. In architecture and planning, both gender and disability perspectives are important. Public space was the domain of men and the private space the domain of women, children and disabled people. One iconic material element illustrating access for people with disabilities is the ramped kerb providing level access for wheelchair users. The first ramped kerb cuts in Norway described by the road authorities dates back to 1971. When arguing for the design of the zebra crossings, both women wheeling prams and wheelchair users were interviewed [4].

A gender and disability perspective relates to the micro context, respecting the equal dignity of all citizens, and to the overall political context where human dignity is recognised as a fundamental democratic value. In other writings, I have proposed a stratified approach to implementing universal design in different contexts [5][6]. This stratified approach can be described as a micro-, meso-, and macro-level approach, where the individual and particular is represented at the micro level. My focus here is on the micro and macro levels.

At the micro level, equal access is perhaps the best concept, the individual person experiences access, barriers and often friction. I use the term 'friction' to describe the person-environment interaction where there are some barriers and some difficulties, but these are manageable. A person can negotiate with the socio-material environment and improve access by changing the conditions for example by having personal service or more than one technical solution available. This can be a place where universal design and individual accommodation merge, supporting equal access for individuals with different accommodation needs.

The macro dimension can be described as the human rights framing of universal design and the embedding of the strategy in a disability perspective as represented in the CRPD. Countries party to the convention are responsible for facilitating research on universal design of products, environments, services, and programmes, and to educate professionals on the rights of persons with disabilities. If universal design is implemented without this human rights framing, there is a risk that the result will be a minimum standard.

4. Ableism and universal design

"Ableism" can be defined as a societal, structural system that marginalises disabled people [7]. According to Fiona Kumari Campbell [8], ableism is not simply a matter of neglect or negative attitudes towards disabled people; it is an unrealistic path to perfection and a deeply ingrained way of thinking about bodies. It feeds the idea that disability is negative and undesirable. Ableism is then a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is cast as a diminished state of being human [9].

I have been reflecting upon the extent to which universal design strategies can counteract ableist tendencies and attitudes. One of my concerns is that an emphasis on the technical aspect of universal design can lead to an implementation of the standard or specification that results in limited accessibility. On the other hand, a more holistic interpretation of universal design, based on the recognition of human diversity, can provide room and space for the equal participation of persons with disabilities. Recognising the existence of ableism should encourage universal design proponents to

explicitly embed the strategy in disability as a human condition and in disability research. There is a need to establish an epistemological, political and ethical connection that merges universal design with disability. As adopted in the CRPD, the human rights framing of the strategy is a strong indication that these perspectives are interrelated.

5. Access to education and research

I will now move on to discuss the implementation of universal design and individual accommodation in the context of education and research. These are important arenas, and they are intimately linked together. In modern democracies, education is understood as a common good [10]. Education provides access to research and research on topics relevant universal design is both interdisciplinary and dependent upon participatory approaches, including the participation of people with disability and disability rights organisations in research. Education and higher education are also contexts with specific barriers that are meant to exclude those who are not recognised as fit for education and those who do not pass their exams [11]. There is therefore limited interest in individual accommodation in higher education and students in primary and secondary education, if categorised as students with special needs, often do not receive individual accommodation as learners [12].

Interdisciplinary knowledge, education and skills are important for the practice of universal design. According to Article 4 of the CRPD, new research is needed to apply universal design strategies in different contexts. States that are party to the convention are responsible for initiating research on universal design as defined in the convention. People with disabilities are crucial to the development of new knowledge and research. One problem, however, is the barriers in education, and even ableism in higher education and in education in general. What research and how can sound and relevant interdisciplinary knowledge be produced? I will argue that participatory approaches are fundamental, therefore, access to education and knowledge production is crucial. Primary, secondary and higher education are all important, recognising that it takes many years to educate people and academics. Education is also crucial for access to the exercise of one's rights, such as the right to political participation and freedom of speech.

After having taught universal design in higher education for more than a decade, I recognise that it is both a pedagogical and didactical challenge. The concept is technical, practical, instrumental, humanistic and visionary. It is a contradiction in terms, representative and utopian, and does not exist in the real world. I doubt that anyone can point to something or some place and insist that it is universally designed. Design and socio-spatial planning are full of dilemmas, compromises, and difficult priorities. Design is as good as it gets in that particular place with the specific constrains that exist.

For the last four years I have been teaching a 10 ECTS course on universal design and democratic socio-spatial planning in the Master programme in Citizenship and Cooperation. The students come from the Master programme, and some are external students who only take this course. It has been an interesting experience as a professor and teacher. The course is interdisciplinary and engages students from health professions, planning professions and pedagogy. The content is described in terms of topics linked to disability studies. These are the history of disability, bioethics, public health, and human rights. The students come from an interdisciplinary context and often work in practical settings, such as local administrations. What has struck me as a professor is that the students often come with a simplistic understanding of what universal design is all about.

The complexity and the ethical and practical dilemmas are often surprising. The experience indicates a need for more research and teaching, both in different disciplines and with an interdisciplinary approach.

6. A culture for access

The reason why it is important to take universal design seriously in research and education is that it is all about human access to resources and democratic participation. Still, 10 years after Norway's ratification of the CRPD, disability-based discrimination is seldom acknowledged as discrimination. A general, political misrecognition of people with disabilities as equal citizens is still evident in 2023.

As a theologian, I have used the theological concept that all human beings are created in the image of God, "imago Dei", to develop an understanding of what I have called a radical equality. Being created in the image of God means that we are all equal as different human beings. The Human Rights Convention refers to all human beings as "born equal", which is the same idea without the theological framing of creation. This is not described as an empirical fact, but rather as a value base for human rights conventions.

This means that instead of political hierarchies in which men are more valued than women and able-bodied persons are more valued than people with disabilities, humans are equal in terms of their inherent dignity. Through these human rights conventions, dignity is a practical and political concept [13]. Article 1 of the CRPD states that the purpose of the Convention is to "promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity." I will now go into more detail about what this means and implies. I will do so using the phrase "a culture of access". A culture of access is based on renewing laws, policy and practice that consolidate the structure supporting anti-discrimination and equal participation.

Today, when the rights to access and equal status are neglected for people with disabilities, there is little or no cost to those who neglect or discriminate. The Norwegian disability researcher and professor Jan Grue has shown in both his research and autobiographies how little is at stake in not implementing laws in this area [14]. Reparation and compensation, both historical and contemporary, are seldom discussed and acknowledged. The most important factor when striving towards a culture of access is recognition of the individual experience, condition and situation, recognition of the individual as an equal citizen.

As I finish writing this essay, my ankle is getting better. The socio-cultural dimensions of my disability lead me to a more segregated lifestyle, partly because of the winter conditions in Norway, with ice and snow. However, after weeks in a fibreglass cast, I have been using crutches in public spaces and at work and have experienced the *sound of disability* in crutches tapping on the floor and the rattling when they fall on the floor, which happens often. People look at me and I feel as vulnerable as when the fracture was new, and I was immobile and clumsy when I went out. I also experience the importance of learning disability in a practical way, including learning to be stared at. As a person with invisible disabilities, I now, with this very visible impairment, recognise, as Garland-Thomson argues, that I am developing competence in being seen as disabled [15].

Building a culture of access starts with recognising vulnerability as a human condition, and that vulnerability comes in many forms. A radical understanding of human

equality is all about building worlds for human plurality. This depends on interdisciplinary knowledge and research, skills and competences. The first article of the CRPD uses the term respecting the *inherent dignity* of persons with disability. Universal design as a concept and human rights strategy reminds us all that such respect has both attitudinal and socio-material aspects

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