



Intra Personal Communication and Information Communication Technologies as Allies to Persons with Disability: Traversing the Continuum to Overcome Learning Challenges

Dr. Niti Chopra

Associate Professor, Faculty of Journalism and Communication, The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara, India

ABSTRACT

This Paper discusses how two very contrasting but significant aspects of Communication, namely, Intra Personal Communication, and Information Communication Technologies can act as allies and be supportive to persons with disabilities. Intra Personal Communication being with oneself is very important as it is intrinsic, and if cultivated in a robust way, helps create a calm and steady internal self ambience. This, in turn, fortifies the strength required by persons with disabilities to cope with the challenges of daily living. Juxtaposed at the other end of the continuum are the Information Communication Technologies with their functions and applications, which in an "external" but indispensable way are necessary to be used too by persons with disabilities. Both these aspects are conceptualised as a continuum to be traversed, and this Paper touches upon some important dimensions, especially "learning", which comes within its ambit.

KEYWORDS : Intra Personal Communication, Information Communication Technologies, Disability, Self Image, Self Esteem, Continuum

Backdrop:-

- *Self Image and Self Esteem-Concept and Definition:*

Self Image is how you see yourself in relation to others. This may be how you see yourself physically or it may be more about the idea you have of yourself which could also be called Self Concept. It is very important as it affects your Self Esteem and Confidence. If you have poor self opinion, your self esteem will be poor. How exactly are they different? Self Esteem focuses on how you feel about yourself. Image is to do with how people perceive you and this will affect how they relate to you. It will affect your relationships either positively or negatively. You may believe how you see yourself is how others see you. This may not be true. Your belief is shaped by your unique thoughts, and you may have a distorted view. You may see yourself in a positive or negative way and both could be biased. You may have a negative view of yourself and if so you are probably highly critical of yourself. Self Esteem has been related both to socio-economic status and to various aspects of health and health related behaviour, as has a related construct, Self Efficacy. Self Efficacy refers to an individual's sense of competence or ability in general or in particular domains. [1]

- *Education for Development of Self Image and Self Esteem:*

Certain landmark changes, resolutions, reports, and provisions in the recent past with regard to the education and rehabilitation of disabled people have more or less emphasised the need and importance of integrated education and mainstreaming as an effective approach for providing a natural environment for socialisation through interaction with sighted peers, reducing the cost on the special education system, providing opportunities for self fulfillment, providing learning experiences, in least restrictive environment, bringing the differently abled persons into the educational and economic mainstream, utilising the existing educational infrastructure, and achieving the target of universalisation of education. An underlying assumption in providing integrated education to the differently abled persons is that it would enhance their social and emotional well being, including enhancement of self concept and self esteem which remains an important goal in education.

However, despite the above mentioned stated benefits of integrated, updated, and technologically supported education, research findings in this regard are contradictory and inconclusive. While some researchers in the field of education and rehabilitation of disabled persons have demonstrated the integrated or mainstreamed educational provisions to be socially, emotionally, and academically beneficial to the disabled persons, there are some researches which have shown no significant difference.[2]

The Scenario in India:-

- *The Mandated Provisions:*

According to Census 2011, there are 2.68 crore persons with disabilities in India, who constitute 2.21% of the total population. However, estimates vary across sources and in reality this figure could be much higher. Accessibility is the key to inclusion and equal access for people with disabilities. An accessible barrier-free environment is the first step towards fulfilling the right of people with disabilities to participate in all areas of community life. Accessibility for people with disabilities was recognised as a right in India with the passage of The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act in 1995, which mandated barrier-free access in all public places and transportation systems. India is also a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article 9 of UNCRPD casts an obligation on all the signatory governments to take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communication technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. [3(i)]

- *Vision for Enhancing Access:*

The Government envisions to have an inclusive society in which equal opportunities and access is provided for the growth and development of persons with disabilities to lead productive, safe, and dignified lives. In furtherance of this vision, the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has launched the Accessible India Campaign (Sugamya Bharat Abhiyan), as a nationwide flagship campaign for achieving universal accessibility for persons with disabilities and to create an enabling and barrier free environment, with a focus on three verticals: Built Environment, Public Transportation, and Information and Communication Technologies. In view of the above, objectives and targets have been envisioned under the campaign, where-in accessibility audits were conducted and efforts towards enhancing the proportion of accessible ports, railway stations, public transport, usable public documents and websites that meet the international accessibility standards. Also, enhancing the pool of sign language interpreters, as well as the daily captioning and sign language interpretation of public television news programmes is undertaken with missionary zeal. Apart from the targets specific to three verticals, the Campaign is also in the process of developing a web portal along with a mobile application for creating a crowd sourcing platform to comprehensively obtain information about inaccessible places, processing information for approving proposals and channelising Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) resources for creating of accessible spaces. An Accessibility Index is also underway which is envisioned to serve as a tool to assess the extent to which the processes and systems of an organisation are aligned to

ensure independent dignified and positive dealing with employees and clients with disabilities.[3(ii)]

Disability and New Technologies:-

- *Importance of Inclusive Design and Accessibility Aspects*

Jaeger (2012) notes, "For persons with disabilities, unless technological design and implementation meaningfully focus on inclusion, the internet may become a new means of increased marginalisation in society". He further points out 'disabled' are the only minority group that people may join over the course of their life. Only fifteen percent of people with disabilities are born with them. All people should be seen as only temporarily able-bodied. The global proportion of people with disabilities in the population is rising due to both age and environmental factors (Vincente and Lopez, 2010). Inclusive design that facilitates access for people with disabilities helps everyone. Making eLearning accessible should be a priority. The rate of online learning in higher education is rising. Roberts, Crittenden and Crittenden (2011) found that many of the persons with disabilities who chose to study fully online chose not to disclose their identity and disability. While this is one of the benefits afforded of studying online, they also found that these persons did not request accommodations to help with access to course material that was presented in an inaccessible format. Persons with disabilities can become invisible online. This means that more care and thought needs to be put into employing universal design practice in developing online learning material. Guglielma (2010) cautions that eLearning courses need to address both technical and pedagogical aspects of accessibility and inclusion. [4(i)]

- *Challenges of the Digital Environment*

Many of the technologies that are used as parts of online learning platforms have their origins in systems to promote the inclusion of persons with disabilities. The social model of disability argues that disability is located in social practice rather than an individual body. A person may have a particular impairment, but it is the impact of decisions made by societies that causes it to be a disability. Broadly speaking, accessibility in relation to e-learning (e.g. virtual learning environments, digital repositories, multimedia, web portals, and discussion boards) is understood as ensuring that the learners are not prevented from accessing technologies or content and experience offered on grounds of their disability. As Seale (2013) observed, non-disabled persons are viewed in the context of what they can do with technology, whereas persons with disability are viewed in terms of what they cannot do. Further Guglielma (2010) says "disabled persons can access the e-learning platform, but not the contents, resources, activities, collaboration, and interaction tools". This problem, in part, as Keller (2010) acknowledges, stems from challenges to making study material accessible due to growth in complexity of digital media in recent years. And though, traditional learning platforms as well as the newer social media options have the scope to retrofit accessibility in order to accommodate differently abled persons, assistive technologies themselves, as well as the material they could access was often unreliable and inconsistent. How these questions and features of disclosure, accessibility, and flexibility will play out, when looking at the broader environment of the digital campus, is still being determined. [4(ii)]

Mandate to Confidence Building:-

- *Power of the Mind*

The mind is very powerful. It has power to help materialise whatever it is that you may wish for. So, it is important to always think positive, keep a positive attitude, and create a positive aura all around. This is indeed important for all, but more so for persons challenged with being differently abled, for the positivity will build a strong base for high Self Image and Self Esteem which in turn will stand strong throughout the life. If the disability is understood, and if the belief that nature has fully reinforced ones abilities in some other way is accepted, then you can turn out to be an extraordinary person, perhaps, better off than the normal people around you. It is the conditioning of the mind that creates your world. So, problems are the creation of the mind. Especially the young people challenged by disability should not compare oneself with others, nor give the charge of their lives in the hands of just anyone. Happiness is not simply "absence of problems",

but a carefully recognised state of being, which springs from within. Cultivate the mind such that you can give yourself the mandate towards a meaningful, self-articulated life!

- *Intra Personal Communication for Self Mediation*

To attain the power of positive thinking and maneuvering life towards being creative and productive - it is the *communication with oneself* that counts the most. This, known as Intra Personal Communication is more effective than any other in telling or auto-suggesting to oneself, about the path and the spirit with which to keep going. Also, education and information allows for widening of the thinking horizons and enhances the sense of independence. Add to these, the skills with the use of technology, and thus a balance of all these qualities will give tremendous strength to forge one way through the trials of life. In the 1980's, a leading expert in the field of education and assistive technologies for blind students stated, "Technology is one of the blind person's most powerful allies in overcoming the detrimental impact of blindness". And so is true for persons with other physical challenges. Technology is a boon, and must be utilised to its full potential. To keep the surge of this impulse flowing, one should talk to oneself every day. Tell yourself that you accept the disability as a gift of being able to see and do things in many different ways than others, and being blessed for it.

Conclusion:-

- *Enabling a Positive Social Environment*

Man is a social being and his or her sense of identity is often dependent on the manner in which it is perceived by others. Human beings adapt and live based on constant feedback from family, friends, and the extended community. Feedback allows for the control and organisation of actions and relationships to others and provides checks, either approval or apprehension on behaviour. The delivery of feedback is crucial and can have an important effect on ones sense of identity, Self Image (Concept) and Self Esteem (Efficacy). And hence, for individuals who may have a visual or any other physical impairment, it becomes imperative for people around them and in the society at large to cultivate sensitivity, and initiate and sustain action that would provide well for them to survive in a positive and enabling societal environment. Moreover, engaging with these learners in innovative counseling situations, helps them to understand and clarify with trusted professionals and counselors the notions and doubts they may have related to their studies and career choices, as well as issues centered on expressions of friendship and love, and further about sexuality, marriage, and adulthood.

- *More Opportunities, Less Barriers*

To create more opportunities and reduce barriers is clearly the least that ought to be done for persons with disabilities. Deep personal faith and strength of their own from within, and the vast number of available customised technologies make for an interesting juxtaposition of covert vis-a-vis overt manifestation. But the amalgamate that results from traversing this continuum makes the process of learning, for the persons with disability, an endurable, meaningful, as well as interesting one. Moreover, there needs to be more acceptance of disability as a social, rather than as a purely medical phenomenon, and greater public support for the removal of barriers and for an end to discrimination and exclusion of people with disabilities. The newest and most heralded technologies could also be made more enabling and consistent in sustaining the support and giving positive results. Also, the internet (network) and new media provide many opportunities for social interaction and options for work and leisure. Access to digital communications technologies can increase the sense of independence and self-determination for people with disabilities, allowing them, as it were, to take advantage of online support without leaving their homes. Ultimately, the endeavour is to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal chances to learn and grow, and enjoy all the vital life experiences, as well as have the opportunities to participate and contribute fully in mainstream living and community affairs, without having to face any obstacles as consequences of their disability.

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