**Improvisational Accessibility and Romanticism**

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In this essay, I explore the connections between accessibility and Romanticism to discuss how we can help the disabled students in our courses achieve well-being, something that is often difficult for them to attain in institutions of higher learning (Francis et al). As one psychological study puts it, *well-being* is not necessarily about health or autonomy or quality of life; rather, it is an equilibrium that one finds between the fluctuating forces of *challenges* and *resources* (Dodge et. al 230). When one's challenges overwhelm one's resources, well-being–the central component of this equation–dips, rendering it elusive. The authors of said study use a see-saw analogy to illustrate a dynamic relationship:

In essence, stable well-being is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see- saw dips, along with their well-being, and vice-versa. (230)

This definition of well-being takes into account *resources*–or what we might think of as *accessibility* or *access*–that we extend to students. Well-being is therefore the product of a shifting, inverse association, one which we have some degree of control over in our classrooms. This is not to say that our influence in this regard is infinite, but we can play a significant role in cultivating student well-being by opening up space in our classrooms for accessibility. We regularly offer students challenges, which are necessary for their intellectual growth, but do we provide them with the resources to help them maintain their well-being? The answer to this question, I think, has to do with a pedagogical disposition that we can cultivate over time.

Ultimately, it is our ethical responsibility to educate ourselves about access to eradicate the barriers that we unwittingly reproduce. The Romanticism classroom is an ideal space in which we can work toward this objective because the authors we teach are often oriented in uncannily similar ways to access in the disability studies tradition. Accessibility and well-being are, in fact, at the core of some strains of Romantic thought. In the coming paragraphs, I consider how we can foster an approach to accessibility that is improvisational and inclusive and which aligns with those aspects of Romanticism in which disability is a foundation for personal and community transformation.

I will begin, however, by discussing how accessibility helps me, a deaf academic. In a profession that demands constant vocal exchange–in conference panels, meetings, and classrooms–my hearing profile poses challenges. I've been hearing impaired in the moderately severe range for some time now, but D/deaf studies has given me a framework for thinking about my deafness as “a distinct way of being in the world, one that opens up perceptions, perspectives, and insights that are less common to the majority of hearing persons” (Bauman and Murray xv). This powerful paradigm shift has given me new ways of understanding my deafness. Still, despite the convincing philosophical underpinnings of “Deaf Gain,” the oral landscape of academia drains me. Trying to keep up with the spoken words of colleagues and students often leaves me exhausted.

In my daily run-ins with the challenging demands of verbal communication, I have learned to express my access needs to friends and strangers alike. It is in these exchanges that I experience what I think of as *improvisational accessibility*. In characterizing accessibility as *improvisational*, I mean that access often occurs “spontaneously, without preparation, or on the spur of the moment” (*OED Online*). Access often happens when people make “do with what is available” in response to varying circumstances (*OED Online*). Improvisation is usually necessary when interacting with disabled people like me. Disabled bodyminds invoke extraordinary circumstances because we are not accounted for in the organization of social spaces and institutions.[[1]](#footnote-2)

In my case, improvisational accessibility occurs after I've presented a paper at a conference and the panel chair repeats a question I can’t hear during the Q&A, or when colleagues readily comply with my request to use speech-to-text transcription apps on our phones if we are in a loud setting. These may seem like small tokens, but they enable me to participate in conversations that would otherwise be inaccessible. In turn, my well-being is enhanced as I access the resources necessary to meet the challenge of vocal exchange. In my experience, the well-being of disabled people–our access to resources to meet the challenges of an ableist world–is to some degree reliant on an improvisational mindset in others.

As in these personal examples, in which colleagues interact with me in unanticipated ways, improvisational accessibility in the Romanticism classroom denotes an openness to the unexpected as we find ways to make “do with what is available” to us at any given moment. In this political moment of austerity, we might not always have the resources that we need. We can, however, become sensitized to the access needs of our students, and we can improvise to grant them access if we develop a flexible orientation in our teaching habits.

Such improvisational principles are evident in Wordsworth’s conception of inspired poetry. In his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads (1802),” William Wordsworth writes,

For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: but though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached, were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man, who being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings; and, as by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other we discover what is really important to men, so, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects, till at length, if we be originally possessed of much sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced. (598)

Wordsworth regards good poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” But the act of writing such poetry does not just happen suddenly; rather, it is the product of years of studied reflection. Through feeling that is “modified and directed by…thoughts” with “repetition and continuance,” poets develop “habits of mind” that yield the creation of poems that *seem* spontaneous. Like the creation of excellent poetry, teaching accessibly is a craft to be studied and developed. As in Wordsworth’s preface, to teach accessibly, we must develop “habits of mind” that allow for improvisation. As we gain more experience in attending to the access needs of our students, we build this mindset, and over time we learn to skillfully stray from our lesson plans and expand our curriculum to make room for all students.

When we deviate from planned time to account for all of the bodyminds in the room, we *crip* the classroom; that is, we confront the ableism that is embedded in our collective consciousness and pedagogical habits to build more inclusive communities with students. Indeed, finding ways to build “crip time” into our classrooms is critical for accommodating disabled students, as Margaret Price has argued. Price argues that we break from the traditional classroom, which she thinks of as a “kairotic space.” In using “kairotic,” Price invokes the classical cognate *kairos* which translates to “the opportune or appropriate time.” As kairotic spaces, classrooms “tend to be run under strict time constraints” (63). A kairotic space is one in which “knowledge is produced and power is exchanged” (60). Crucially, as Price argues, this time-sensitive approach to pedagogy excludes students with mental disabilities, among others.[[2]](#footnote-3) To resist kairos, we should be mindful of how we organize the syllabus, how we grade participation and attendance, and how we give feedback (64). Price also encourages us to learn Universal Design principles so that we can offer multiple pathways into the content we teach. [[3]](#footnote-4) All of this requires that we find “ways to move” around the classroom, and, I would add, to improvise as we interact with students and progress through the semester (58). These are no small tasks, but as Price shows, access is an objective to work toward rather than a destination to which one arrives. As we learn to establish crip time through pedagogical improvisation, we mediate kairotic space for disabled students to create more accessibility in the classroom.

Access never looks quite the same from class to class because contexts change according to the students that compose our classrooms. This highly individualized approach to access is one that also resonates with the phenomenological character of Romanticism. Tanya Titchkosky conceives of access as an embodied experience in which *wonder* plays a key role. “Access,” Titchkosky argues, “is an interpretive relation between bodies” (3). Such an approach to access requires us to be aware of the other individuals with whom we share a particular space. It requires active communication and sensitive interpretation. Titchkosky urges us to conceive of access as “collective action or exploration” (12). The “politics of wonder” that we should work toward is composed in part of “a wondering about that which organizes bodies and social spaces and their worlds of meaning” (15). Wonder is also, of course, a Romantic conceit. Samuel Taylor Coleridge conceives of wonder as central to philosophical inquiry: “In wonder all philosophy began: in wonder it ends…But the first wonder is the offspring of ignorance; the last is the Parent of Adoration” (qtd in Scott 229). According to Coleridge, childlike wonder is a catalyst to philosophical reflection, which in turn enables us to reach a “higher form of the emotion” and to access truths that produce a new kind of wonder based on rational principles.[[4]](#footnote-5) To build the wonder of accessibility into our classrooms, we should engage in dialogue, reflect collectively, and develop multiple entry points for students to access the content we teach. This pedagogical process is at the heart of Romantic epistemologies.

Moreover, access is a labor of justice and a starting point for the building of community. In their Disability Visibility Project, Sandy Ho, Mia Mingus, and Alice Wong conceive of access “as not only about logistics, but about deepening our shared humanity and dignity, growing access intimacy with each other and an opportunity to create more justice and love in our world.” Elsewhere, Mingus reminds us that access should be “collective and interdependent.” Access should not be a burden that disabled people alone carry, but ideally is a principle that is shaped among a collective. This looks different in every classroom and has much to do with who we are as instructors.

For example, I tell my students that I’m deaf on the first day of class, and I let them know what I need from them in terms of communication clarity. I also tell them that I will reciprocate to accommodate them in whatever way they might need (whether they’ve been to Disability Services or not). I think of access as a kind of pact that is strengthened through dialogue. Similarly, Travis Chi Wing Lau approaches access through a “pedagogy of vulnerability,” or an openness with students about his own particular embodiment as a queer, disabled scholar of color. Lau’s candor becomes a starting point to create an environment in which students “think and write from their bodyminds, not as liabilities but as assets.” Such openness and vulnerability, for Lau, establishes “a spirit of interdependence” that yields learning as “collective endeavor” where instructor “becomes participant” rather than leader. Indeed, access can enhance the well-being of disabled students as they seek full participation in social and educational venues not built for them. We can create such environments by beginning a dialogue with students on the first day of class about our own access needs and/or by expressing a willingness to meet theirs.

Lau’s horizontally-organized classroom is in line with the reformist vision of Romantic movements in which widespread calls for the elimination of political and economic hierarchies that upheld an unjust status quo proliferated. Mary Wollstonecraft argued for the education of women, and Olaudah Equiano and Mary Prince narrated their personal histories of enslavement to advocate for the abolition of slavery and emancipation of enslaved Africans. As we teach about the literary and historical contexts to our students, we might remember that accessibility aligns with the reform and inclusion principles that we can find scattered throughout the Romantic period.

Reform and inclusion are a collective endeavor. With their advocating for a shift in academic circles from coterie culture to the collective, the Bigger Six’s manifesto is instructive here: “To revise the Romantic–and Romanticist–coterie, it is necessary to reform ourselves into a collective, to make Romanticism inclusive in a way that brings people in from the margins of what has typically been an Anglo-American field.” They go on to write, “We imagine an open network of scholars who, rather than sitting in a circle facing each other, stand shoulder-to-shoulder facing the world.” As we find ways to expand the canon in our classes and scholarship, we can also find ways to build new publics. The collective mentality offers a welcome shift in how we build scholarly communities, but it is also one that can inform how we approach pedagogy. What happens when we see ourselves on a more equal footing with students, as Lau does? What happens when we position ourselves by their side “facing the world” as we examine the afterlives of Romantic texts, as the Bigger Six Collective advocates? What happens when we understand disability and its steadfast companion, improvisational accessibility, to be central to Romantic epistemologies?

Emily B. Stanback’s book, *The Wordsworth-Coleridge Circle and the Aesthetics of Disability*,addresses these very questions. Stanback explores many of the pedagogical aims I have discussed in her centering of “non-normative bodies” in the creation of the poetry, aesthetics, and culture of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s circle. As Stanback examines the aesthetic dimensions of disabled bodyminds coming into contact with the world, she shows how vital disability is to understand notions of “subjectivity and intersubjectivity, pleasure and pain, and sympathy and pity; debates about humanity and the human community, modes of knowing, feeling and belief” (49). In her reading of Wordsworth’s poetry and letters, for example, she argues that there is a marked intentionality on his part to cultivate “ethical inquiry and sympathetic growth” in his readers that, far from being condescending, actually “unsettles normative notions of pathologized human differences” (230). In another chapter on Charles Lamb, Stanback illustrates how Lamb theorizes physical and mental difference from his own particular embodiment, as well as that of his mentally disabled sister, to “celebrate–rather than pathologize­­–the peculiar” (276). Lamb’s pivot away from pathologizing non-normative bodyminds at a time when medicalization was emergent offers a model for how we can teach Romantic content in our classrooms. Lamb and Wordsworth reveal a capacious understanding of what disabled bodyminds can do for community well-being. What Stanback illuminates is that Romantic disability was a starting point for the building of community, and this lesson can inform our pedagogy. As in the model espoused by the Bigger Six collective, Stanback shows that disability is not a peculiar mode through which to conceive of Romantic authors, but a method for reading and interpreting, a foundation upon which to build collectives.

To be mindful, sensitive, and improvisational in our approach to accessibility is to democratize our pedagogy and to enable more students to grasp the content of our classes. Improvisational accessibility challenges our tendency to look to institutional forms of legitimacy, such as what we might get from medical notes or paperwork from Disability Services, and reframes access as an ongoing, interactive process. Access should be an open conversation between students and instructor. It is a labor of justice in which crip time and wonder figure centrally.

Of course, there is only so much we can do as instructors. Our power is not limitless. We need to be cognizant of our boundaries so that we can maintain our own sense of well-being. And to be sure, our well-being and the well-being of students inevitably shift according to factors like class size, geographical location, teaching load, and the kind of teaching job(s) we have (i.e. are we adjuncting? Are we just beginning our teaching careers as graduate teaching assistants? Are we up for tenure and finishing a book? Do we have a visiting assistant professorship? Are we doing loads of departmental or professional service?). All the same, I think that if we find ways to build relationships with students in our classrooms through open dialogue, and if we can be aware of their needs­–even by bringing the topic of access up on the first day of class and then again at intervals throughout the semester–we can find ways to make our content delivery more accessible. And if we can cultivate accessibility, then we can help disabled students to have more resources at their disposal to meet the challenges that they face. This, in the end, can play a part in enhancing disabled students’ well-being in our classrooms. And it can bring the very audience meant to be served by Romanticism, the collective: students with whom we might sit “shoulder to shoulder to face the world.”

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1. In using the term *bodymind*, I am indebted to Margaret Price’s and Sami Schalk's use of the term. Schalk writes, “the term *bodymind* insists on the inextricability of mind and body and highlights how processes within our being impact one another in such a way that the notion of a physical versus mental process is difficult, if not impossible to clearly discern in most cases” (5). *Bodymind* contests Cartesian dualism and, for the purposes of this essay, allows for a broad conception of student engagement in the classroom. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For Price, mental disability refers not only what typically gets characterized as “mental illness” but also as encompassing neurodiversity and other kinds of bodymind experiences that reveal a spectrum of cognitive processes (60). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. There are various resources on Universal design for learning (UDL) principles in the classroom, but one might begin with Meyer et. al, *Universal Design for Learning: Theory and Practice*. For disability studies perspectives on UDL, see Dolmage, "Universal Design: Places to Start" and Hamraie, "Designing Collective Access: A Feminist Disability Theory of Universal Design." [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See Matthew Scott, “‘A manner beyond courtesy’: Two Concepts of Wonder in Coleridge and Shelley,” 229-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)