

Community Literacy Journal

Volume 17
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Access as Community
Literacy*

Article 2

Fall 2022

Guest Editors' Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Hubrig, Ada and Cedillo, Christina V. (2022) "Guest Editors' Introduction," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 2.

DOI: 10.25148/CLJ.17.1.010642

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol17/iss1/2>

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Guest Editors' Introduction

Access as Community Literacy: A Call for Intersectionality,
Reciprocity, and Collective Responsibility

Ada Hubrig and Christina V. Cedillo

Abstract

In this guest editors' introduction to *Community Literacy Journal's* special issue on access, the guest editors call for greater attention to access work as community literacy, pushing for the field to tend to issues of intersectionality, reciprocity, and collective access in community literacy work. This introduction previews the work of the special issue's contributors and puts their work in conversation with ongoing work in critical disability studies, disability activism, and disability justice.

Keywords

access, disability, disability justice, labor

Our embodied experiences as multiply marginalized disabled people have left us apprehensive about matters of access: Systemic inequalities often render access a seeming bonus measure that one must fight for at great personal cost. The sheer amount of physical and emotional labor involved in securing accommodations or even some measure of consideration means that many vulnerable people go without the care or resources they need, worn out by the constant struggle (see Konrad's concept of "Access Fatigue"). These inequalities are often reproduced in community literacy contexts, especially when overshadowed by university and college agendas (see Kannan et. al). Currently, we bear witness as institutions within (and outside of) academia proclaim the arrival of "post-COVID" times and rush a return to "normal." Their performative inspirational gestures attempt to hide the privileging of profit and protocol over human safety, but they don't do so very well.

This deliberate erasure of harmful conditions proves nothing new to members of marginalized communities, against whose bodyminds normalcy is established. We know that long before the arrival of the pandemic, many people's physical and mental wellbeing were threatened by the existing inequities associated with the normal that these institutions want so urgently to re-establish. For those of us who are marginalized, COVID intensified how the lack of access and support accelerates the physical dangers always already present in our lives. For many others, previously unaccustomed to having to constantly negotiate for their own access needs, the pandemic lay bare the failure of institutions to address real human needs.

However, the pandemic also exposed (we hope) how systemic inequities work by isolating targeted persons, framing the struggle for access as an individual exhausting process rather than a process that should bring people together to enact change. Hence, “Access is Love,” write disability activists Mia Mingus, Alice Wong, and Sandy Ho, “. . . a collective responsibility instead of a sole responsibility placed on a few individuals” (DVP). Like Mingus, Wong, and Ho, we believe that love entails appreciating one another’s diverse needs and the different forms of access that they necessitate while still prioritizing those most in need. Love means practicing a communal solidarity across difference that does not erase people’s complex and relative positionalities as we work side by side. As disability rhetorics teacher/researchers, we (Ada and Christina) argue that this goal demands our recognition of access as an issue that informs but transcends disability. Without ignoring or erasing the many important and ongoing critical conversations among disability activists and scholars, what we mean is, ensuring access is EVERYONE’s responsibility, not just the charge of disabled people who are frequently tired and burnt out from working toward access on our own.

In response to the institutional push to put the labor of access on individuals, in this issue we focus on *access* as a concept that centers intersectionality, collective responsibility, and community to challenge oppressive logics. As Ada has argued, this kind of mutual “reciprocity rejects models of university community-engagement that suggests the university as a benevolent, morally superior institution serving the community and bestowing its intellectual gift” (“We Move Together” 149). Here, we hold space for critical conversations that aim to decenter traditional loci of power, those institutions that simultaneously cause harm and claim authority to rectify said harm, to intentionally highlight the power and potential of community-based access work.

Access as Political, Access as the Start

As the work of disability justice collectives like Sins Invalid illustrates, access isn’t neutral, and politics of access are fraught with oppressive power dynamics that reflect the political agendas of the institutions that offer access to some and deny it to others. As designer, researcher, and disability justice organizer Aimi Hamraie has argued through their critical history of the Universal Design Movement, who experiences access (and barriers to access) is a product of mutually enacted epistemology, politics, and how these are applied to the built environment (18). In other words, access reflects the politics, values, and ways of knowing held by the institutions granting and foreclosing access. Because their dominant frameworks for deciphering people’s access needs typically center privileged bodyminds, these institutions can then ignore the needs of multiply marginalized people while claiming that they are doing the work. Furthermore, they orient public attention towards certain expressions of need and access work, and away from others in social, cultural, and material ways, meaning that people’s needs are ignored if they do not align with mainstream impressions of what that looks like (see Schalk 6, Pickens 95).

For those doing community literacy work adjacent to university or collegiate power structures, access—and lack of access—frequently replicate the same white su-

premacist, cisheteropatriarchal, ableist normativities of institutions: access is granted unevenly around race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, social class, disability, and other positionalities. Questions of access lay these power dynamics bare: who has access to community literacy? Who has access to university credentialing and resources and why? How do universities demand access to marginalized communities while denying access to people from those same communities? How do community literacy programs create access for marginalized people?

At the same time, we understand access is not the end goal. We echo late disability justice activist Stacey Milbern, “But Access is only the first step in movement building. People talk about access as the outcome, not the process, as if having spaces be accessible is enough to get us all free” (qtd. in Piepzna-Samarasinha, 129). While we understand access has material consequences for many people, we also understand that granting access on an individualized basis itself is not a panacea to rectify the deeply ingrained inequalities and interlocking systems of oppression that blocked access in the first place. Lack of access is a systemic problem linked to the logics of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy. As Piepzna-Samarasinha argues, the dismissal of the needs and lives of disabled—and especially multiply marginalized disabled people—is the direct result of colonization and enslavement that violently categorized many bodies as undeserving of access and care and dignity (130).

Compounding these problems is the issue of labor and how access work is disproportionately assigned to and expected of marginalized people. Already fatigued individuals are expected to not only advocate for themselves but for others, too often without the physical and financial support granted to debilitating institutions themselves. Even when we take on that labor willingly and lovingly, it can still be taxing. In “On ‘Crip Doulas,’ Invisible Labor, and Surviving Academia while Disabled,” Ada addresses this problem in relation to disability and disabled care work. They write, “While I enjoy doing this work, it is *work*.” Such care work can include helping others as they come to claim their disability, begin to navigate the altogether complex processes of seeking accommodations, and struggle against the sociopolitical and material erasure of disability and disabled people. It also means being mindful regarding how much labor we expect from others and ourselves. However, as Ada also notes, “Attending to these dynamics is central to interrogating how—even within disability spaces—white supremacist, heteropatriarchal crap still gets centered.” As Christina, Ersula J. Ore, and Kimberly Gail Wieser argue in “Diversity is not an End Game: BI-POC Futures in the Academy,” even supposed safe spaces can re-/traumatize those targeted by racism. Therefore, doing the work of access necessarily requires that we attend to “the myriad ways that BIPOC are [already] forced to experience duress, navigate threatening spaces, and leverage precious resources” in order to survive. Engaging race without disability or disability without race proves harmful to the lives and interests of multiply marginalized people and reinscribes the social centrality of privileged bodyminds. Thus, unless we engage access intersectionality, our attempts to build communities of care can still lead to demands for extra labor from those who are most vulnerable. If so, they replicate the very oppressions that target multiply marginalized people primarily but ultimately harm us all.

Accessibility should be centered in the creation and maintaining of intersectional and interdependent praxes with careful attention to *who* is being asked to shoulder the labor of access, or else we actively practice exclusion. We believe that centering accessibility as an intersectional issue will extend ongoing conversations in community literacy studies, such as conversations around labor, ethics, and reciprocity (Miller et. al.; Shah), around the centering of whiteness and white supremacy (Garcia; Jackson and Whitehorse DeLaune; Kynard), and what Carmen Kynard has referred to as “*the work*” of community literacy studies. Although the word “accessibility” is closely associated with disability, our special issue of *Community Literacy Journal* seeks to examine the interactive forces that enable or preclude access.

Access in Community Literacy Studies

Access isn’t the end goal, but it is an important start. As disabled oracle Alice Wong argues, “We all have the capacity to create access for one another. And while things still feel bleak, I have hope for the future, because we all have the potential to learn and grow if we close the distance together” (306). Wong asks us to think more critically about who are excluded from the spaces we inhabit and what we can do to create access for those excluded. In this special issue of *Community Literacy Journal*, we center work on access, collectively imagining how community literacy practitioners might “close the distance” and center accessibility, as well as offer critical insight into the tensions inherent in access work.

In the first article in this special issue, Ruth Osorio offers a vision of critical access literacies. In “Documenting Barriers, Transforming Academic Cultures: A Study of the Critical Access Literacies of the CCCC Accessibility Guides,” Osorio traces the history of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCCs) Accessibility Guides, centering the labor and wisdom of multiply-marginalized disabled scholars. Osorio highlights “how critical access literacies can be practiced to dismantle ableist structures while building a world for disability liberation,” a project that takes up anti-ableist praxis to reimagine institutions—and hold them accountable.

Offering insight into another form of access in community literacy work, Brynn Fitzsimmons takes up media coverage of the Kansas City Homeless Union through decarceral and disability justice frameworks. In “Storying Access: Citizen Journalism, Disability Justice, and the KC Homeless Union,” they task community literacy practitioners with more thoughtfully engaging intersectionality and interrogating how community literacy practitioners are still “practicing complicity with white supremacist, settler colonial, carceral logics,” examining how the way stories are told about homelessness can create pathways or blocks to access.

Tyler Martinez expands notions of access in food literacy. In Martinez’s “Everything You Need to Eat: Food, Access, and Community,” Martinez calls for more thorough exploration of food access, and the roles and ethical obligations communities and institutions in sponsoring food literacy, critiquing the “disciplinary colorblindness” asking for a more intersectional, interdisciplinary approach to food literacy.

Taking up digital literacy access, Sweta Baniya offers her insights into access through her community literacy efforts in Nepal. “Rethinking Access: Recognizing Privileges and Positionalities in building community literacy,” Sweta Baniya engages access—and barriers to access—through her involvement with Nepalese community literacy programs. Baniya focuses on access to digital literacy and its many ramifications for the lived experiences of the Nepalese people, reminding us, “Digital literacy and access are a collective responsibility.”

In “Reinventing a Cultural Practice of Interdependence to Counter the Transnational Impacts of Disabling Discourses,” Elenore Long traces how a group of Nuer, Dinka, and Arab women theorize *thanduk* as a community literacy practice, and how *thanduk* functions as an anticolonialist practice that enables access: “In *thanduk*, they are each theorizing this individual experience with people who are experiencing different individual experiences navigating the same systems.” In taking up *thanduk* as a community literacy practice alongside the women engaging in these practices, Long asks us to consider how access has been limited and curtailed and to ask, “how could things be otherwise?”

Concluding the articles of the special issue on access is a symposium that inverts the question of access, critically examining the tensions that arise when it’s institutions seeking access. Their work reminds us that sometimes barriers are important and necessary, especially when we are considering how institutions demand access to marginalized communities. In the symposium, “To Community with Care: Enacting Positive Barriers to Access as Good Relations,” symposium contributors offer insights across positionalities to center the needs of communities and relationships and argue for the importance of maintaining barriers even as institutions demand access to these communities—often in exploitative ways.

In each section of this symposium, authors expand on the ethics of access between marginalized communities and institutional demands/expectations. Cana Uluak Itchuaqiyaq, in their symposium section “No, I won’t introduce you to my mama: Boundary spanners, access, and accountability to Indigenous communities,” Itchuaqiyaq offers insight into institutional demands for access to her Iñupiat community: “Let’s unpack what asking me to make introductions in my community means. What I’m really being asked to do is use my personal relationships that I’ve spent a lifetime building and rebuilding for their academic research needs. [. . .] That’s some bullshit,” pushing academics to be more accountable to communities as the central focus of community engaged work. In “Cultivating Soil, Cultivating Self,” Lauren E. Cagle pushes us to think about how—as a university professor—is a *defacto* gatekeeper to institutional resources: “I am often in a position to offer academia’s resources to those I am in relation with, including those academia may not have invited in,” asking community literacy practitioners with institutional ties to more ethically consider how we leverage those resources. In Rachel Bloom-Pojar’s “Co-creating stories of *confianza*,” Bloom-Pojar interrogates how white academics often objectify Latinx communities and commodify Latinx stories, offering through her own community literacy experiences thoughts on access and ethics. In “From Access to Refusal: Re-making University-Community Collaboration,” Caroline Gottschalk Druschke shares

insight into her experiences in community literacy work, offering a framework for “remaking university-community collaboration in ways that support good relations—relations that support community-driven efforts, relations that refuse the expectations of the university, relations that nourish those involved—and make space inside of and despite exploitative university structures for collaboration and refusal.” Taken together, the Symposium challenges community literacy practitioners with institutional ties to more critically examine our complicity in exploitative, patriarchal, and white supremacist institutional practices.

Coda: Creating Collective Access, Fostering Community

Disability justice recognizes that “to live and create change, we must work in connection both with ourselves and with one another” (Kafai 173). We reject the institutional models that grant access to the privileged and withhold it from the marginalized—recognizing these are the very processes and systems by which privileges and marginalizations are created in the first place (Cedillo “What Does it Mean”; Hubrig “Liberation”). We are grateful to the contributors of this special issue who ask us to more deeply consider issues of access in community literacy work, as well as *Community Literacy Journal* editors Veronica House and Paul Feigenbaum and their editorial team for inviting us to center issues of access in this special issue. Learning from the work of disability justice organizers, we know that community, while imperfect, is the only way forward.

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