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## Access as Praxis: Navigating Spaces of Community Literacy in Graduate School

*Millie Hizer*

### *Abstract*

In this article, I reflect on my lived experiences as a disabled graduate student navigating spaces of community literacy. This essay utilizes storytelling as an entry point for understanding the barriers graduate students often-times face while accessing community literacy projects. Extending Ada Huhbrig's theorization of *disability justice informed community literacy*, I propose an "access as praxis" approach to community literacy projects that listens to the access needs of graduate students looking to form meaningful relationships with community partners.

**Keywords:** accessibility, disability justice, graduate school, lived experience, praxis

I left the virtual conference space at the 2021 Conference on Community writing with a renewed vigor for community literacy studies. After attending multiple panels, round tables, and deep think tanks that provided a glimpse into the power of community literacy initiatives, I once again found myself eagerly wanting to embody the role of a community engaged scholar.

However, doing this type of meaningful work has at times seemed beyond my grasp. As a disabled, neurodivergent scholar, my body-mind is easily overwhelmed—I must carefully decide how to distribute my labor. Even though I want to be more involved in community engaged work, I know that my success in academia depends on my ability to fit the narrow confines of a neoliberal university system. Within this system, I'm an expendable, disabled graduate student whose labor is situated "against a backdrop of ableist structures" ("On Crip Doulas"). Working within a system that fails to prioritize socially conscious work in the service of productivity and capitalist ventures has meant that my commitment to social justice initiatives has fallen by the wayside.

In this essay, I will work alongside scholarship that values storytelling and life writing as valuable research methodologies. I agree with Christina Cedillo's formulation of life writing as "a method for re-presenting events and experiences from the viewpoints of oppressed people in order to challenge narratives composed from the standpoint of the privileged perspective" ("What does it Mean to Move?"). While my own perspective is admittedly limited, I will utilize my lived experiences as a framework for *beginning* to understand how both graduate student labor conditions and a lack of institutional support can serve as significant barriers for disabled graduate

students looking to engage in community literacy projects. Ultimately, I will suggest what I call an “access as praxis” approach towards community literacy. Extending Ada Hubrig’s orientation to the field in “‘We Move Together:’ Reckoning With Disability Justice in Community Literacy Studies,” an access as praxis approach begins by looking at community literacy studies through a Disability Justice lens. Invoking Sins Invalid’s principle of *collective access*, an access as praxis methodology means exploring “ways of doing things that go beyond able-bodied and neurotypical norms” (13). It brings visibility to the barriers preventing disabled graduate students from meaningfully engaging in community engaged work.

### *Barriers Towards Access*

The *work* of community literacy (see Kynard, 2019) is oftentimes contingent on unpredictable circumstances; this is a risk many graduate students on strict graduation timelines cannot afford to take. In a 2017 report detailing Graduate Student Instructor Labor Conditions in Writing Programs, 71.6% of graduate student instructors (GSIs) interviewed admitted that their student stipends failed to cover their living expenses. Ultimately, the report concludes that “The labor conditions of GSIs are woefully inadequate” (Osorio et al.). It is no wonder that participating in unpaid community literacy work isn’t feasible for many graduate students.

Furthermore, community literacy work can at times be overlooked as a valuable cite for scholarly knowledge production. For instance, in a 2014 case study detailing a graduate level community literacy seminar, the authors express concern that the field “remains at the fringes of the academy,” which discourages graduate students from participating in community engaged projects (Bowen et al.). While graduate programs have begun to recognize the value of community partnerships over recent decades, more attention needs to be paid to the accessibility of those partnerships.

This sentiment highlights the difficulty many graduate students face when attempting to do community engaged work. This is further complicated when disability becomes a factor. A recent report from The National Institute on Disability indicates that “Working-age adults with disabilities are twice as likely as those without disabilities to have incomes under the poverty threshold” (Goodman et al. 2). This is the grim reality so many disabled graduate students face. For graduate students working for near poverty wages, any additional labor must be carefully negotiated. Therefore, engaging in community engaged scholarship that may or may not be valued by graduate departments and hiring committees can be especially inaccessible for disabled scholars. In an increasingly competitive academic market, it is no secret that one must be strategic in choosing opportunities. So, when certain types of scholarship are privileged over others, it means that many graduate students must carefully navigate these intricacies in order to be successful in their careers, even if it means foregoing their passions for more traditionally “practical” work.

Disabled graduate students must also always consider the fact that their health could decline at any moment. With COVID-19 as a pivotal concern, disabled graduate students are at an even greater risk when participating in community partnerships

that typically occur in-person. In turn, it is crucial to acknowledge that disabled graduate students need more institutional support—not only to engage in community literacy projects, but to live. More specifically, the field needs to interrogate why in-person engagement is oftentimes prioritized and how graduate programs can more fully support students interested in remote community literacy work. For multiply marginalized scholars, “COVID intensified how the lack of access and support accelerates the physical dangers always already present in our lives” (Hubrig and Cedillo 1). Without access to the supports and protections afforded by more stable employment, engaging in community literacy work can be a risk many graduate students cannot afford to take.

An access as praxis approach begins to address these barriers by placing accessibility at the forefront of community literacy studies. This means seeing the field through a lens of Disability Justice. As Ada Hubrig continues in “We Move Together,” a “disability justice informed community literacy” looks “to create new partnerships that might dismantle the power structures that threaten disabled people and other marginalized communities” (150). However, in order to do so, these relationships need to be accessible for all involved. For Hubrig and Cedillo, in “Access as Community Literacy,” “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” (4). Put simply, the labor of access should be a collective enterprise—one that is not solely shouldered by the disabled community or graduate students themselves.

### *My Story*

I began my graduate school journey with community literacy engagement in the Spring of 2019 when I took a service-learning course. After completing the required training, I began working as an English Language tutor at the Volunteers in Tutoring Adult Learners (VITAL) program in my community. Essentially, VITAL is a tutoring program run through the Bloomington, Indiana, public library that aims to improve the literacy skills of adult learners in our community. Here, there are options to tutor learners in basic literacy skills, English as a Second Language (ESL), and computer literacy skills. When I was paired with my tutee, an ESL student whose primary goal was to improve her English literacy skills, I immediately told her that I was tutoring at VITAL as part of a service-learning course at my university. At first, I wasn’t sure how long I’d be able to work with the program but wanted to continue as long as I could. However, once my tutee decided to leave Bloomington, it was difficult to find the motivation to continue with the program.

As someone diagnosed with both obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), I tend to overcommit to projects while simultaneously obsessing over doing those projects “perfectly”—as if there is such a thing. So, it’s no wonder that my second year of graduate school I found myself taking a full course-load while working a demanding part-time job, teaching first-year writing, and working as a literacy tutor. Put simply, I had overextended myself

and my health began to suffer. Therefore, when my assigned tutee moved away from Bloomington, my commitment to the program dwindled.

Then, the pandemic hit, and the library closed for months. For multiple reasons, I felt lost. I was in a much better place health-wise but didn't feel comfortable tutoring in-person at VITAL. So, I began looking for remote opportunities for community engaged work. Throughout the pandemic, I learned that remote work is more accessible for my neurodivergent mind. At home, I can take medication without judgment; I can process complex information with my emotional support animal by my side. I can easily access a restroom if I feel sick; I can feel safe from trauma-related triggers. To put it another way, this type of environment allows me to thrive.

However, I recognize that I come from a privileged position. While the fear of unexpected, exorbitant disability-related medical bills is always at the forefront of my mind, I have a supportive family and partner. I'm a white, cisgender woman working in academia. Even so, I still live with the constant fear that I will find myself hospitalized again and unable to work. So, I've worked multiple side-jobs throughout graduate school to prepare for the worst-case scenario, even though it wasn't always necessary—motivated by my obsessive-compulsive fears that something *could* happen. For disabled graduate students without a similar support system, this type of outside work can become even more of a necessity, leaving little room for community engaged work.

Of course, working with community partners isn't always an easy task. The ever-changing, tactical nature of such projects can make them incredibly time-consuming and unpredictable energy expenditures (Mathieu 28). As my fellow colleague at Indiana University notes, "The risks involved with balancing academic requirements while also maintaining ethically responsible relationships with community partners can be seen as a burden not all graduate students can afford to bear" (McCool 141). Unfortunately, disabled graduate students from multiply marginalized communities are at a greater risk of not being able to maintain sustainable relationships with community partners; if our health suffers, so too can our commitments.

Indeed, there is a certain level of irony in publishing about community literacy work; community engaged researchers are consistently engaged in reciprocal relationships with their community partners. In doing this type of work, I've begun to find a way to merge my own personal and scholarly commitments. However, I'm still searching—I know that I want to become more involved in disability advocacy and community literacy initiatives, but it can be difficult to know where to begin outside of a structured classroom context. Will I be able to find more remote opportunities? Will these opportunities be accessible and flexible? These questions are constantly at the forefront of my mind. I want to do more, but I'm still deciphering what that looks like and how I can still prioritize my own health and wellbeing in the process.

### *Implementing an Access as Praxis Approach*

While there are no easy solutions to the inaccessibility of community literacy work for graduate student instructors, I'd like to propose a potential way forward, which

I will call “access as praxis.” Taking inspiration from Cushman’s thoughts regarding “The Access in Praxis” I argue that an access as praxis approach can begin to make community literacy projects more accessible for graduate students from multiply marginalized communities (18). For a myriad of reasons, community literacy initiatives that are only accessible to able-bodied, cisgender, heteronormative activists can isolate community partners. Since the pandemic began, digital literacy programs have become even more prolific; such programs could provide disabled graduate students with a more accessible, digital an entry point into the field of community literacy studies. However, the goal is not to limit who can and should engage in community literacy initiatives; rather, it is to acknowledge that community literacy studies needs to be accessible to a variety of bodyminds.

I would therefore like to provide two, short suggestions the field of community literacy studies can take to promote graduate students’ access to the field:

### **1. Support Community Engaged Partnerships in Digital Spaces**

Graduate programs that support remote, accessible engagement with community partners will give more disabled and multiply marginalized graduate students the opportunity to engage in community literacy work. If universities continue to support graduate student access needs post-pandemic, especially in terms of allocating funds for assistive technology and access to remote engagement platforms such as Zoom, more disabled graduate students will be able to forge lasting connections with their community partners. For instance, project-based service-learning courses could introduce graduate students to community partnerships that take place in digital spaces. Graduate programs that support remote, accessible engagement with community partners will give more disabled and multiply marginalized graduate students the opportunity to engage in community literacy work that can be more readily sustained.

### **2. Provide Collective Support for Graduate Students Navigating Community Literacy**

The labor of accessibility is oftentimes placed on disabled individuals themselves. This labor corresponds to Anika Konrad’s concept of “Access Fatigue” in which “seeking access necessitates that disabled people constantly toggle between self-invention and self-preservation” (180). Within spaces of community literacy, graduate students are typically tasked with finding their own community partnerships that may or may not be able to accommodate their access needs. An access as praxis approach would implement a more robust support system for graduate students looking to engage in community partnerships. This could include the collaborative creation of a structured database listing the different modalities offered for specific community part-

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nerships and additional departmental funding for digital tools that support remote community engagement.

### *Moving Forward*

An access as praxis approach is far from perfect. It also requires change to occur at an institutional level, especially in terms of valuing remote engagement. In truth, I still have more questions than answers. While this piece primarily focuses on graduate student access, it is only a small component of what it means to access community literacy. As Cana Itchuaqiyaq et al. explain, “The concept of access risks misuse; it is all too easy to use the value of ‘access’ to justify injustices, if access is treated as a universal and unexamined good” (95). To put it another way, accessing spaces of community literacy does not beget a one size fits all approach.

Undoubtedly, there are some community partners who might prefer in-person engagement. An access as *praxis* approach recognizes that the needs of community partners can vary drastically. This approach is not meant to alienate graduate students or community partners who find in-person engagement more accessible; rather, it is to cultivate a dialogue about what constitutes access. One answer could be to encourage graduate students to discuss issues of access with community partners from the start. If a community partner is unable to participate in a project remotely, but would like to, it could be productive to discuss what barrier—such as a lack of infrastructure or technology—are preventing them from doing so. Even so, this isn’t a perfect solution. As Hubrig and Cedillo further, “For those doing community literacy work adjacent to university or collegiate power structures—access and lack of access—frequently replicate the same white supremacist, cisheteropatriarchal, ableist normativies of institutions” (2-3). This begs the question: How can the field increase access for both graduate students and community partners against a backdrop of inequitable power structures?

With these considerations in mind, I again want to once acknowledge that I come from a privileged position. While the fear of unexpected, exorbitant disability-related medical bills is always at the forefront of my mind, I have a supportive family and partner. I’m a white, cisgender woman working in academia. So, I know that my story cannot fully account for the barriers graduate students face in doing community literacy work. Writing this type of essay also involves navigating some contentious waters. In centering my own story alongside larger considerations of graduate student access, I know that there are pivotal voices that will inevitably be missing from this piece. Namely, this piece has focused on the barriers graduate students face rather than explicitly focusing on community partners themselves. I want to emphasize that this is merely one aspect of accessibility; I do not intend to position graduate students as benevolent saviors rescuing community literacy partners. This would simply reproduce the “colonizing ideology” scholars such as Cushman warn against (11). Instead, this essay simply interrogates one facet of accessibility impacting the complex web of literacy partnerships.

Moving forward, I call for the field of Community Literacy Studies to continue to center accessibility. With the recent publication of *CLJ*'s issue on "Accessing Community Literacies," issues of disability justice, combatting systemic ableism, and promoting a more equitable field that values a multiplicity of bodyminds have been brought to the center of our field. Even so, we can do more. I agree with Hubrig and Cedillo's assertion in their introduction to the special issue—*access* can, and should be seen as "a concept that centers intersectionality, collective responsibility, and community to challenge oppressive logics" (2). Implementing an access as praxis approach is simply one way in which our field can continue to move forward to value and center multiply marginalized voices.

## Notes

1. See the Adult Community Learning Services (ACLS) program associated with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as an example.

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Millie Hizer is a PhD Candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at Indiana University Bloomington where she teaches courses in first-year writing, public speaking, and professional writing. She has published her writing in *enculturation: a journal of rhetoric, writing, and culture*, *The Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*, and *Spark: A4C4 Equality Journal*. Her work has also been featured on Rhetoric and Writing Studies podcasts such as *Tell me More!* and *Pedagogue*. As a scholar-activist committed to principles of Disability Justice, Millie centers disability storytelling in both her research and pedagogy.