Dispatch

Communicating Access, Accessing Communication

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In January 2019, the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University co-hosted the *Cripping the Arts Symposium*, which brought together artists, activists, and academics from across Canada to share in discussions and performances directed at surfacing dialogue and debate critical to the development of disability, Deaf, and mad arts. Along with co-curating the Symposium Program, our School designed and put into action the accessibility plan for these events. This access plan built on established accessibility practices, such as partnering with a Deaf-led organization to assemble a skilled ASL interpreter team, as well as emerging access practices, such as working with a graphic recorder who responded to keynotes and panel discussions through live drawings. As is our practice (Ignagni et al., 2019), we approached the design of this plan through an iterative and co-designed process, acknowledging that we can never know access completely, nor enact it perfectly and without friction.

   Disability artist and curator Carmen Papalia (2018) articulates his approach to access through what he calls an "open access" framework. Open access, Papalia writes, approaches access as "an assemblage co-designed by people who will be in the room, who might be in the room, who have been in the room, and who we hope will feel invited to come into the room" (para. 1). Adopting Papalia's call to take up access through a co-designed practice, we created an Access Guide through which we communicated our plan. We distributed this guide to participants ahead of the Symposium in the hopes

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that it would establish expectations and allow participants to plan accordingly. In doing so, the Access Guide aimed to eliminate the guesswork and labour of checking and planning for accessibility requirements that so many disabled people take on prior to attending an event or cultural experience. We wanted to signal that we anticipated and desired all participants, particularly those who are often excluded from events because of intersecting systemic, structural, and attitudinal barriers. The final version of the Access Guide was given out with the Program for the Symposium.[1]

In this short paper, we critically reflect on our shared work of creating the Access Guide for the *Cripping the Arts Symposium*. We begin our dispatch by sketching the process through which we created the access plan and "access documents" for this event, which include the Access Guide and the Symposium Program. In this section, we highlight how we attempted to centre disability experiences and ideas about how to enhance access. Following this, we critically reflect on how the access documents were taken up by participants, drawing attention to the dynamics and modes of engagement that this plan both disrupted and consolidated. In the final section of this dispatch, we think through the dissonance that occurred between our intentions for these documents, and the kind of participation they mobilized. Here, we consider the necessary and also fraught process of communicating access along with Tanya Titchkosky's (2011) assertion that when we take up access as a political issue, "we gain the possibility of learning something new about the culture from which [disability and access] spring and to which these issues return for rejoinder" (p. 18). In this final reflection, we also think with Elwood Jimmy's (2020) meditation on the relationship between how accessibility and decoloniality are expressed in institutions where "we very seldom question what this accessibility gives access to" (para. 1).

Developing the Access Guide Documents

When we were developing our access plan and, correspondingly, the Access Guide, we recalled critical feedback we had received after the first iteration of the Symposium in 2016 from members of Sol Express, a local theatre group made up of people labelled or who identify as developmentally disabled (Sol Express, n.d.). While participating in the first Symposium, members of Sol Express found that, although they were familiar with many of the ideas that were discussed, they were unfamiliar with some of the discipline-specific and cultural-specific words that were attached to those ideas. In order to better access the conversations that were had at the 2016 Symposium, members of Sol Express met as a group after each day to look

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[1] *Cripping the Arts in Canada Access Guide*. (2019).
https://www.harbourfrontcentre.com/images/festivals/2019/cripping/CTA%20Access%20Guide.pdf

up and discuss the meanings of the unfamiliar words they encountered. After this Symposium, Cheryl Zinyk, a director at Sol Express, suggested on behalf of the company that it would be helpful to have a glossary of terms written in plain language to help them become acquainted with relevant new words and ways of communicating in advance of the event. This suggestion referenced the plain language glossary that Ignagni, Collins, and other researchers had provided in advance of *Making Space for Intimate Citizenship*,[2] a previous community research event in which Sol Express were involved as co-researchers.

The cross-disability, intersectional, and intersectoral interests of Symposium participants, along with Sol Express's important recommendations to elaborate our access practices, gave us occasion to develop accessible ways of communicating. Autistic disability studies scholar Elizabeth (Ibby) Grace (2013) speaks to the importance of accessible communication within projects of disability rights and justice when she writes, "[plain language] is needed to allow the widest variety of people with disabilities to participate in conversations about themselves" (para 1). Our response to Sol Express led us to work with our partners at *Creative User Projects* and *Bodies in Translation* to first develop a glossary of terms using plain language and pictorial exchange communication systems (PECS).[3] Then we workshopped this document, finalized the words it would include, and gathered feedback on plain language definitions with members of Sol Express. We decided to write the entire Program, produced by Creative Users, using plain language, PECS (pictorial exchange communication system), and photographs. Ultimately the glossary became an entry point to reflexivity about what and how to communicate within the Symposium as a whole.

Second, within the process of creating these documents, we carefully explained terms and practices that might be unfamiliar to people for whom attending a Symposium was a new experience. For example, we described what a panel was and how to ask questions afterwards. Additionally, we explained what was meant when someone asked what your pronouns are. We also specified that there would be a buffet lunch that would be free and available to everyone at the Symposium. Again, these were not necessarily new practices to members of Sol Express or developmentally disabled and neurodivergent communities more broadly, but by providing descriptions in

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[2] *Making Space for Intimate Citizenship*, a SSHRC-funded research project, was led by Esther Ignagni and Ann Fudge-Schormans (Ignagni et al., 2016; see https://makingspaceforintimatecitizenship.wordpress.com/home/). This research project has a dictionary of terms written in plain language by Kim Collins.

[3] *Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life*, a SSHRC-funded research project, along with Creative Users Projects and Ryerson's School of Disability Studies, supported the development of this glossary of terms. We thank Tracy Tidgwell, Lindsay Fisher, and Kayle Besse for their work on this glossary. See https://creativeusers.net/; https://bodiesintranslation.ca

advance, we were attempting to ensure that everyone had access to the same information regardless of their familiarity with symposia and other academic events.

Our approach to developing the access documents for this Symposium was rooted in our understanding of access as a political project (Hamraie, 2017; Ignagni et al., 2019; Titchkosky, 2011). Through its development, the Program – which held the Access Guide, the plain language document, and which was itself an access document – became a textual technology born from the active exclusion and subjugation of disabled, mad, D/deaf, and other oppressed people that occurred during previous knowledge mobilization events, including the first *Cripping the Arts Symposium*. The Program was also shaped by our reading of and reflections on how academic and research spaces are inhospitable to those who are not the desired normative student, scholar, or in this case, Symposium participant (Ahmed, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). The Program was a deliberate attempt to disrupt normative presumptions about the lived experience and knowledge base of our Symposium participants, and centre the experiences of D/deaf, mad, and disabled people (Johnson & McRuer, 2014) within them. Such disruptions are often part of carrying out research and research mobilization work that engages community members through a disability, or "crip" politics. The Program was designed using an anti-assimilationist politic (Hamraie, 2017) that attempts to acknowledge and resist academic ableism, and the intersectional eugenic afterlife of the education system (Dolmage, 2017; Hartman, 2019). Put differently, we created this Program to centre disability, and more particularly, to centre different ways of communicating, exchanging, delivering, and receiving knowledge within spaces (symposia) that traditionally expect and desire normative ways of exchanging knowledge. In doing so, this Program became an occasion to rethink research-oriented spaces and practices (Fritsch, 2019).

Missed Intentions

We hoped the accessibility features of the *Cripping the Arts* Program could invite a negotiation with the event that would enable a wider audience to situate themselves in relation to the Symposium and other participants. And of course, we could identify moments when the Program appeared to fulfill its intentions. For instance, one Symposium participant reviewed the Program pages regularly, perusing its text and images to identify and "place" other panelists and artists, a practice Ignagni and Collins also witnessed in the *Making Space for Intimate Citizenship* event. At *Making Space*, labelled participants leveraged the glossary and access instructions throughout the proceedings. For instance, local self-advocates used the photos and biographies to open conversations with international visitors, particularly those from People Speak Up UK, crafting relationships that were sustained

for some time via social media. Within the *Making Space* meetings, participants materially engaged the glossary, holding up PECS to reference the dimensions of love, belonging, and labour that constitute intimate citizenship.

However, when we compare our experience at *Making Space* with *Cripping the Arts*, we struggle to come up with similar examples of how the Program was used as it was intended. Each of us was preoccupied with the many instrumental tasks of mobilizing the Symposium itself, so likely missed these moments. In our interactions with Symposium participants, we did witness the Program in use by academics and established artists. Also, non-developmentally disabled Symposium participants emailed to tell us how useful they found the Program. One of us was directly credited with creating a "gorgeous," "helpful," and "important" document, one that was "actually helpful to everyone." In the months following the Symposium, one of our copy editors asked if she could send the Program to her sister who was completing her doctorate in special education at a British University and her sister passed on the document to her supervisor. The praise and eager uptake of the Program was always reflexive, acknowledging its intentions to widen the parameters of meaningful participation for all. We were struck that these comments almost exclusively came from participants who, like us, were already familiar with academic events and comfortable within these spaces and with their processes. These comments signaled that the Program inadvertently reinstated the normative (nondisabled) user as the "intended user" (Ahmed, 2019). The documents were intended for the developmentally disabled and neurodivergent community who motivated and co-created them, widening who should be anticipated and welcomed at the Symposium. Instead, the "usefulness" (Ahmed, 2019) of the Program was attributed to its being "better for everyone." While heartened that others appreciated the Program, we realize that we did not fully anticipate how it could be used to reinforce ableist structures.

We noted that developmentally disabled attendees' participation also seemed dictated by key gatekeepers, such as non-disabled service workers and family members. For instance, developmental service users arrived for a single presentation in which a supervising worker was involved. At the close of the session, the developmental service users would leave en masse with their worker. This unexpectedly reflected the well-documented systemic relations of dependency and protection that can circumscribe developmentally disabled people's movements and participation in everyday life (Erevelles, 2002; Goodley & Runswick-Cole, 2016; Martino & Schormans, 2018). In a more mundane register, those who left the Symposium after one session may simply not have found the program of interest. The Program was created with the assumption that all attendees were able to get to the Symposium and stay long enough to feel its hospitality - but that simply may not have materialized for some.

We now recognize that after our initial, pre-Symposium consultations with Sol Express, we could have done more to follow up with and solicit feedback from all disabled attendees about if and how they found the Program to be useful. Feedback would have given us more stories and information about how the Program was used in unexpected and subversive ways. We do imagine that members of Sol Express might have been able to feel their agency in shaping the Symposium as they manipulated the material output of their contribution in the Program itself. We also hope that the members of Joe, Jack et John, a predominantly francophone organization with a membership that paralleled Sol Express, found the time and space to explore the images and PECS through their many hours of attendance over the Symposium event.

The embrace of this Program was not surprising; we, as organizers, certainly found that using the Program made it easier for us, as disabled academics, to navigate and participate in the event. But in this promise of seamless access, did the Program smooth over the disruption that disability makes? As Bess Williamson (2019) notes in her history of accessible design, practices and products directed to redress disability exclusion can inadvertently become a "silent contributor" to normative, privilege culture (p. 150). Following Williamson, the request and proposal from Sol Express for better access became a device by which to make a better Program for all. Moreover, as the praise from academics and artists indicate, Sol Express's ideas for how their and others from their community could have their access needs met were mobilized in a way that created a more effective knowledge exchange within the normative academic disability community. But this raises questions about whether centreing Sol Express's access needs actually disrupted neoliberal processes (Williamson, 2019). As we will explore in our next section, upon reflection it seems to us that this Program signaled a commitment towards different ways of being (Jimmy, 2020) that was not followed through with structural and practical changes to how we came together and exchanged ideas in the Symposium.

Reflection

Access documents, such as our Program, and the Access Guide and glossary therein, serve as a commitment to accountability, one that is responsive to the diverse requirements and engagements of "communities of concern" (Bulmer, 2019). At a minimum, once access documents are released and made public, they become statements of accountability that communicate and oblige us to carry through on the access commitments we make. They express a commitment to creating spaces of equitable participation, and practical possibility. In the case of this example, the Program committed to changing the practices of the Symposium itself in order to mitigate the disjuncture

disabled and Deaf people often experience in academic contexts (Smith, 1999).

Throughout his reflection on "acces(sen)sibility," Jimmy (2020, para. 4) points to the failings of trying to create social change, particularly within institutions, by mobilizing projects such as decoloniality and accessibility. Speaking specifically to decolonizing and indigenizing work, Jimmy suggests that such projects "often address methodological and epistemological issues (i.e., ways of doing and knowing) without really tackling ontological issues (i.e., related to habits of being), where the issue of separability lies" (para. 4). As the access documents expressed a commitment to "know and do differently," considering Jimmy's words in relation to our project causes us to consider how well we followed through on this promise; perhaps we could have committed to "be differently" by attending to "what access gives us access to" within the Symposium itself (para.1).

Or could it be that the Symposium's access documents carried their inherent paradox? In "What's the Use? On the Uses of Use," Sara Ahmed (2019) advances the argument that instructions for use are generally made when the correct use of an object or process is impossible, as may have been the case here. Our access documents expressed a commitment to create access for a non-academic audience to an academic event without following through on our commitment to "be differently" (Jimmy, 2020) within the Symposium. In doing so, these documents worked as a form of "use instruction" and, by extension, indicated who could reside within the category of culture-maker, and who had the capacity to have a culture (Ahmed, 2019). However, the generous and hospitable intentions of the Program were not fully realized as it became a normalizing tool, most usefully taken up by those of us who enter these academic spaces with ease. As Ahmed elaborates, we can make things function in ways that are estranged from their form. With repeated use, things take on the character of their users, like a chair or a shoe occupied by a specific owner. The object molds to the intentions, needs, and uses of those who use it most, losing its plasticity, flexibility, and hospitality to other users. Having become easy and comfortable to some, the object becomes less so to those for whom it may have been initially intended. The Program, in its glossy, appealing, and rigorous form, was used in many anticipated and unexpected ways: a guide to decipher and decode the Symposium's discourse, to communicate the organizers' analysis of access, to facilitate introductions and connections between Symposium attendees, and to critically intervene in the elite relations that often pervade cultural and academic spaces. It was, however, also used as a research project output, a form of knowledge mobilization that satisfied the requirements of the funder, a cultural form in its own right praised for its innovation, and a pedagogical tool. It is in these latter, less disruptive uses that we may have found our greatest comfort.

The access documents for the *Cripping the Arts Symposium* were created through a desire to enact an access plan that centralized disability experiences

and ideas for access practices.   Reflecting on the use of these access documents throughout this dispatch has caused us to wonder how the "usefulness" of these documents might have changed had we also committed to changing ways of being within the Symposium (Jimmy, 2020). Conversely, we wonder how these documents were rendered "useful" given that the ontological possibilities for the Symposium did not change in a way that centered neuro-divergent experiences (Ahmed, 2019; Jimmy, 2020). Jimmy writes:

> Acces(sen)sibility is not a performative self-congratulatory exercise, it should not become currency in economies of virtue, and it does not happen overnight. It demands that we interrupt the satisfaction we have with the securities and the rewards in the dominant system, so we can clear the way to engage with and relate to what is unknown and unknowable" (2020, para. 4).

And so, we will take from this learning as we build access in the future, attempting to "fail better" next time (Beckett, 1983).

Acknowledgements

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