

Open Access Pedagogy: A Manifesto

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For all the discourse around Open (Digital) Pedagogy, the conversation still remains relatively straightforward: open materials and teaching are invariably a utilitarian good for students, instructors, librarians, curriculum committees, developers.

It's important to complicate this narrative: openness is in many forms doing important work to center teaching and learning as legitimate academic labor, but there looms a danger for faculty and students for whom visibility is a threat.

Building on work by Carmen Kynard, Jay Dolmage, Cody Jackson, Christina V. Cedillo, and Margaret Price, I pose a politicization of open access that centers the cultural spheres that impact the lived experiences of people doing the teaching and learning. How does a mandatory open-access site impact an undocumented student, a student with educational trauma, PTSD, a student learning English – in both expansive and restrictive ways?

Additionally, financial accessibility is a hugely important aspect of access pedagogy. The influx of open educational resources at CUNY is an important move towards centering discussions of class in open digital pedagogy. For CUNY students, textbook costs are known barriers to academic success, and the widespread discourse about zero-textbook cost (ZTC) courses and implementing more open content into curricula reflect an important move towards expanding frameworks of “access” beyond mere ADA compliance and into inclusive practices that understand accessibility as intersectional praxis, taking into account not only chronic illness and disability, but also socioeconomic class, both of which are heavily impacted by race and ethnicity, immigration status, etc. Consideration of how rising costs to students impact their academic performance is of central importance to developing an open access pedagogy framework. I'll provide a few building blocks for adopting access pedagogy later in this piece.

Rhetoric scholar Margaret Price proposes an adoption of “ethical subjectivity” over the traditionally-valued “reasonable” academic subjectivity in open digital pedagogy (41). The use of multimodal techniques – image, video, audio, etc. – enable neuroatypical rhetorical practices to thrive, but this demands a reconsideration of what academics consider “academic work.”

Open digital teaching practices provide space for students and faculty with fluctuating capacities to engage at their own paces, to participate according to their own

needs (76), but this again demands a broad-scale expansion of the rigid institutional course schedules and semester structures.

I pose a politicization of open access that centers the lived experiences of people doing the teaching and learning. The scholars I am centering here (see bibliography) are speaking to a widespread practice of centering access pedagogy – pedagogy that is culturally responsive, flexible, and reimagines “rigor” as intellectual curiosity, critical rhetorical skill-building, and an embrace of non-normative English.

Price’s emphatic embrace of “ethical” translated into a pedagogy that expects institutional policy to be exclusionary and works on centering access in its broadest incarnation.

The goals of access pedagogy parallel some of the broad impetus of CUNY-wide OER initiatives to reconceptualize teaching and learning resources, accessibility, and open learning. In my role as a Digital Pedagogy Fellow with the OpenLab – City Tech’s digital platform for OER initiatives at the college – I’ve collaborated with the OpenLab Community Team to develop a series of informal access-centered workshops as part of our Open Pedagogy discussion series. In developing this programming, the OpenLab team has collectively expanded our ideas around how access is delimited by exclusionary forces in the university; framing access as mere compliance further stymies pedagogical innovation and ethical student-centered teaching. Relying solely on formal medical documentation to guarantee access necessarily excludes uninsured and poor and working-class students (and staff/faculty), and English language-learners, to name a few.



Figure 1 Screenshot of an October 2018 tweet by @fortunafiasco that reads “requiring doctor’s notes to excuse absences due to illness is inherently classist in a country w/o universal healthcare and I really wish we talked about it more.”

Even when the administrative burdens of filing formal accommodations with a disability office are possible, the university is only required to adhere to loose, vague guidelines spelled out by the Americans with Disabilities Act, e.g. “reasonable accommodations,” leaving any specific need up to the discretion of disability services staff. Since these administrators – and most higher education staff – lack training in access pedagogy and disability justice, sick and disabled individuals must again undergo a medicalized and legalized process of assessment to formally justify their needs.

Access pedagogy instead trusts disabled people to name their own needs and requires that non-disabled people defer to the lived expertise of the sick/disabled person to determine and communicate their own needs. Talking the body is always an uphill battle in academic spaces: the body is placed secondary to the mind – as if they are extricable. Developing illness is difficult to explain to anyone without illness; Susan Sontag writes of these two kingdoms, of the sick and of the well, and I imagine them parallel but uncommunicable to each other, as if the sick speak a language unknown to the well.

Without a recognizable diagnosis, securing accommodations is close to impossible. Eli Clare, disabled activist and writer, tackles the liminality of misdiagnosis in *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*: “These experiences of disorientation and devaluing are often called misdiagnosis, as if the ambiguity and ambivalence contained within diagnosis could be resolved by determining its accuracy” (42).

This is what institutions demand for recognition: a signed, notarized, official letter from a healthcare professional to prove that my body hurts all the time the way I say it does. Not only do I have to pay for this privilege, I must stay well enough to submit the documents in the specific, timed, formatted way implicitly expected – but not explicitly communicated – by higher ed administration.

For me, access is working from bed and counting that as work.

Access is your grandmother died last week, turn your work in by the end of the semester. Sneak snacks into class, use the bathroom, ask for help, receive help when you ask. Cancel class when you need to. Up-front conference funding, reservable rental scooters, unscented cleaning products. Long breaks. Normalizing lying down in meetings. Mental health absences. Physical health absences. Attendance not counting towards course grade, nor against “professionalism.” A contract for adjuncts that guarantees courses, guarantees pay, guarantees that retaliation will not be tolerated.

Eli Clare wants us to shed the shame of our bodies falling apart, to recognize the implication of chronicity, how, despite the reputation of academic schedules as forgiving, there is always another fellowship deadline, a pressing CFP, daytime

conferences and evening panels and never enough time to do it all. How can I reconcile my narrative with the priorities of the academy, having to spend all my time off recovering from my time on? For others who share my institutional positionality: graduate teaching fellows or non-tenure-track faculty, this means loosening our obsession with bureaucracy. We cannot ethically demand medical paperwork for accommodations in a country where medical insurance is pay-to-play.

When students ask for help, we must believe them.

Access Pedagogy Strategies:

- Begin with the assumption that the classroom is *not* a “safe space”
- Practice dialogic assessment and grading, e.g. grade contracts, labor logs, reflection-based assessment
- Provide course materials in as many formats as possible
- Do not enforce administrative burden, e.g. students must provide formal documentation of disability to be eligible for “accommodations”
- Reimagine “participation” to include online contributions
- Reimagine “attendance” to include online contributions
- Resist authoritative/ontological approaches to instruction, e.g. remembering that there is no “correct” writing process
- not enforcing standard American English, instead discussing code-switching
- discuss citation practices openly
- provide models for students

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