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Increasing Accessibility and Access to the Medieval through Open Textbooks

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Abstract

This essay considers how open educational resources (OER), particularly open textbooks, can address barriers of cost, representation, and access in teaching medieval literature. Beginning with the adaptation of existing free digital materials, the author outlines the benefits and challenges of curating resources that emphasize disability studies and diverse cultural perspectives. The discussion then turns to the creation of original open textbooks, such as Heritages of Change, which integrate Universal Design for Learning principles and cultural heritage frameworks into first-year writing and literature courses. These initiatives expand the accessibility of medieval content by eliminating financial burdens, embedding multiple perspectives, and offering flexible pedagogical approaches. The essay argues that the labor of developing OER is offset by the ability to provide equitable, inclusive, and up-to-date course materials. Ultimately, open textbooks not only increase student access to medieval studies but also foster connections between the past and present through inclusive and socially responsive teaching practices.

Since 2004, when Universal Design (UD) principles were defined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and particularly in response to the increasing diversity of college and university students, UD has been applied beyond disability contexts to education in a variety of ways, beginning with course design and access to course materials and expanding to an overarching teaching philosophy called Universal Design for Learning (UDL). As a medieval disability scholar, I am always keenly aware of and concerned about the accessibility of my classrooms and my teaching practices. In this article, I will discuss both the adaption and the creation of open educational resources (OER) to assist with accessibility in my courses.

Accessibility of course materials, in particular, can have many meanings. First, it can refer to the ability to take advantage of resources, which can mean having an actual physical and/or digital copy of course materials. It is no secret that the cost of higher education textbooks has been on the rise for some time and has an adverse effect on student success. In 2018, Nicholas B. Colvard, C. Edward Watson, and Hyojin Park (263) made note that "textbooks and ancillary materials are a key variable [in the equation of student debt], especially since many students find it challenging to budget for the cost of books because they typically don't learn about the true scope of those expenses until the beginning of a semester" and that these costs are particularly burdensome for "low-income individuals and their families," perhaps even to the point of preventing these individuals from either enrolling in or finishing a degree. These circumstances have only intensified with the financial insecurity of the COVID years and beyond.

The same study by Colvard, Watson, and Park – itself based upon other studies with similar findings – also asserts that even if students enroll in courses they may make the "financial decision to take courses without purchasing the textbook." There are many reasons for this decision. Indeed, many students have to make the choice between purchasing course materials and taking care of other basic needs. According to the 2023-2024 Hope Center "Student Basic Needs Survey Report," "59% of students experience at least one form of basic needs insecurity related to food or housing, including: 41% of students experiencing food insecurity, 48% of students experiencing housing insecurity, and 14% of students experiencing homelessness" with "73% of respondents fac[ing] basic needs insecurity when we consider other basic needs (mental health, child care, transportation, and internet/technology access) in addition to food and housing." Further, a considerably higher percentage of Black and Indigenous students experience at least one form of basic needs insecurity than White students. It is difficult to justify asking students struggling to secure food and housing to prioritize purchasing textbooks, particularly when those books are often significantly highly overpriced.

A second definition in terms of accessibility can refer to what the CAST's Universal Design for Learning Guidelines (3.0) calls "Multiple Means of Action & Expression," or providing both accessible materials and technologies as well as a variety of methods for interacting and navigating materials. While we often think about this concept in relation to assistive technologies with respect to students with disabilities, more issues emerge when we apply it more broadly to all students. For instance, if a course is taught online asynchronously, it can be even more difficult for students to contextualize readings without specific, organized detail. Another example is the sheer size of certain

textbooks. Even when a course only reads limited sections from such a textbook, it can still be daunting and overwhelming for students as they make their way through the course, not to mention the accessibility issues with physically carrying books of this size. In addition, when a course only reads limited selections in a large textbook, it can often seem to students that purchasing the book is a "waste of time," thereby increasing the chances they forgo purchasing the book or are resentful for having done so.[1] A third example of this type of accessibility is the lack of a diversity of perspectives and identities in many textbooks. If students do not see themselves or their identities, they have much more difficulty connecting with the material (see the work of the Remixing Open Textbooks through an Equity Lens project, which will be discussed more later).

In terms of teaching medieval content, particularly literature as I do, these issues of accessibility take on unique forms. Students can initially find the Middle Ages unusual territory, as they might not bring much background knowledge to the course. This requires a higher level of contextualization to prepare students to read medieval texts. Further, these texts, even in translation, can include language that is unfamiliar. The UDL Guidelines address the need to "[c]larify vocabulary, symbols, and language structures" and emphasize that semantic elements are "differentially accessible to learners with varying backgrounds, languages, and lexical knowledge," stressing the need to "[e]mbed support for unfamiliar references within the text." It should be noted that they also encourage "[c]ultivat[ing] understanding and respect across languages and dialects" and "[c[elebrat[ing] linguistic diversity to showcase languages and cultures," which are key elements of teaching medieval literature.

General medieval literature textbooks, however, are often unable – or unwilling – to keep up with the current issues in medieval studies, particularly those related to diversity and marginalized communities. Yet, textbooks with the goal of rectifying this oversight tend to be singularly focused and do not necessarily include a broad range of literature, which makes them difficult to use as the primary book in a survey course that is intended to cover an expansive chronology and/or geography. A persistent concern for medieval-trained instructors is that not all of us have the opportunity to teach courses primarily focused on the Middle Ages (see *The Ballad of the Lone Medievalist*, 2018). As a result, part of our work involves finding ways to incorporate medieval content into non-medieval courses, where assigning an entire textbook on the subject is often impractical.

Many of these issues of accessibility can be addressed through the compilation and creation of OER and, in particular, open textbooks (see the UNESCO definition of "Open Educational Resources"). I will discuss two methods I have used: 0ne, compiling digital textbooks comprised of free, accessible resources and adding contextual framework, and, two, writing my own open textbooks.

When I initially decided to explore the idea of converting two of my survey courses – British Literature I and World Literature I – to OER with a small grant provided by my university, I compiled digital textbooks that pulled from a variety of sources: other open textbooks, free translations, and, as necessary, copyrighted materials disseminated only through our learning management system. This method did achieve the goal of eliminating the need for students to buy textbooks, thus increasing basic access and making sure students have course materials on the first day of the class. With this

[1] There are arguments about the need for students to learn to read longer pieces or the consequences of "catering" to student perceptions of the value of course materials, and, while valuable, the present discussion is focused on the value of open textbooks in addressing these realities rather than looking at the larger issues.

process, I was able to choose the resources that emphasize our specific course outcomes and themes. Given my specialty, disability studies is one of these themes. The *Medieval Disability Sourcebook: Western Europe* is an open-access volume (available both through the publisher and JSTOR) of primary sources with introductions focused on each work's disability connections. The introductions and the glosses guide the reader to analyze the texts through a disability studies lens. An additional open access resource, the *Medieval Disability Glossary*, provides both discussions of specific words that appear in the literature as well as text introductions. These introductions serve a similar purpose to those in the sourcebook. To use either of these resources alone as the primary textbook would leave out numerous other approaches, but to include one or two texts from the sourcebook and glossary helps students explore the topic of medieval disability, which they would otherwise not have the background to do as disability is not typically a topic covered in general textbooks of medieval literature (at least, not yet).

Using open access resources allows for the opportunity to include scholars from marginalized communities as well as scholarship about marginalized identities, such as people with disabilities or, in other cases, people of color or multiple genders, etc. Students need to know that this work is being done, even if as yet it has not consistently made it into traditional textbooks, which is an issue that can be discussed with students when introducing the purpose of providing a digital textbook. In addition, there are many texts that are (re)discovered, finally translated, or previously ignored that need more attention (for instance, the Manden Charter from Mali - really, almost any premodern African literature), but are not yet included in traditional textbooks. The change to an OER digital textbook for a survey literature class reinforces and operationalizes the desire to bring in diverse perspectives that have not typically received emphasis in such a course and remain current. It is also easier to change out readings from semester to semester depending on new availability or significance.

A major concern I discovered with this particular method is the variation in site designs and layouts of each of the readings as they are pulled from different sources, each with their own format and structure. Given this variance, it can be difficult for students to experience the material as a connected whole, rather than disjointed pieces. It might also take students longer to adjust to each style of reading, especially in a digital format, than if there was some conformity. To address this issue, my next step was to provide my own introductions to each reading on my course sites in an organized, compiled fashion, thereby creating a sense of conformity that might lessen the jarring difference in the format of the readings and translations. I provide methods for analyzing each reading and what to look for in order to help make the readings more approachable and even turn the potential drawback of variation into a positive. This approach also provides opportunity to provide multiple translations of the same text.

From starting with compilation of textbooks to adding contextualization, my next step was creation. As an English professor, in addition to literature, I teach first-year writing, particularly a two-course sequence every student at my university takes as part of their General Education curriculum. A problem that I wanted to address is that students often do not engage with writing as a medium that can have impact on others and do not realize what effective, passionate writing can accomplish. Thus, I began to use disability studies and disability cultural heritage as the theme for our writing practice in the first of the courses in this sequence. Disability touches a large percentage of individuals, either directly or indirectly. In higher-level literature courses, as I mentioned above, I often include

units with readings, discussions, and assignments on historical disability as a facet of the human experience. How disability is presented in various forms of writing affects how people are treated and how they are perceived, but it also affects how people see themselves. Not writing about disability has the effect of erasing people with disabilities; writing about disability in misinformed or disrespectful ways reinforces stereotypes.

Further, while UDL is certainly not exclusively focused on students with disabilities, there is an undeniable connection between disability studies and the UDL framework. Expanding upon that connection in courses can create a useful relationship between content and the pedagogical principles that guide its implementation. The practice of UDL becomes more transparent and more aligned with the content in addition to a support for learning in general, and it opens up opportunities for integrating campus disability services and staff (and related) into academic work while reinforcing their usefulness as strategies for helping students succeed.

For the second course in the sequence, which has more of a research focus, I expand the emphasis to cultural heritage and, specifically, heritages of change, which I define as "attempts to bring to the fore heritages that have been historically marginalized – forgotten, hidden, or erased." We focus on applying what Maura Reilly (2017) calls curatorial activism, "the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that certain constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art." For my courses, I expand that definition from only "art" to focus on "cultural heritage" more broadly. Students create mini-exhibitions for the Heritages of Change physical and digital exhibition that is published on the Cultural Heritage through Image site. Heritage topics that students focus on include (but are not limited to): peoples of color, indigenous peoples, women/gender/LGBTQIA+, climate change, etc., in addition to disability. This approach gives students an opportunity to explore not only the heritage of these issues but their own stances, experiences, and beliefs while also delving into curation and exhibit-making. Then, more importantly, it emphasizes how their writing can address those issues and contribute to communication of their chosen topics.

After teaching an iteration of the course with this emphasis, I realized I had a problem. After consultation with cultural heritage experts in the field, it was clear there is a lack of textbooks appropriate for undergraduates and especially first-year students that addresses curatorial activism, cultural heritage more broadly, or disability heritage in this context. In addition, there are by extension none that do so from a writing or communication perspective, especially with the use of exhibition creation. Thus, I needed to create one.

At the time that I was considering embarking on the creation of an open access textbook, I was fortunate that the Remixing Open Textbooks through an Equity Lens (ROTEL) project was getting started. ROTEL is a Department of Education grant-funded project that "provides stipends, training, and support for faculty at six Massachusetts public higher education institutions to create free open educational resources (OER) textbooks and adaptations of existing open textbooks […] using an equity and inclusion lens." In addition to a stipend for this work, I was able to take advantage of an editing and publishing team and platform experts from whom I learned skills that I can apply to future open textbooks projects. *Heritages of Change: Curatorial Activism and First-Year Writing* was first published at the beginning of 2024 with a revised edition in September of the same year. This textbook includes principles of writing and information literacy, but through the lenses of curatorial activism, cultural

heritage, and curation and exhibition. Students get a broader understanding of cultural heritage and disability heritage in general in order to apply the concepts through their writing, allowing them to practice communication and research. The principles of cultural heritage and curatorial activism are transferable to different courses, and the writing and information literacy pieces of this book are certainly transferable with or without the cultural heritage lens. Given the flexible nature of OER, I also am able to use my own photography in the textbook to emphasize more relevant elements of certain cultural heritage or to record cultural heritage that is not typically represented.

First-year writing courses are not, of course, inherently related to medieval content. Yet what the creation of this textbook allowed me to do is weave in the Middle Ages where it was appropriate and to do so in a cohesive way. Since students in the first course of the sequence focus on disability heritage, especially local disability heritage by working with the local historical society and the university's Disability Services, they need grounding in historical disability. We cannot cover in the course, nor is it appropriate in this context, to cover the entire history of disability; instead, I maximize my expertise in medieval disability to provide a sense of the longer history while also helping students question pre- or misconceptions. For example, in the textbook, to discuss the complexities of disability heritage, I point to two Middle English sermons (translated by Julie Orlemanski) that represent leprosy in different ways. I use the mental health community in medieval Geel, Belgium, to challenge the idea of a singular narrative about any time period or subject. I reference the *Medieval Disability Glossary* for examples on how language(s) around disability have changed. Students then have opportunities to explore artifacts of medieval disability and contribute to the Cultural Heritage through Image digital exhibition entitled "Disability Heritage: From the Medieval to the Local."

Practicing the principles of accessibility through Universal Design for Learning pedagogy has led me to the use of open textbooks and, further, to fit my needs as an instructor of literature and writing, the creation of my own textbooks. Certainly, while there is a high workload initially in the labor of compiling and/or writing, the rewards are abundant in the ability to be flexible, to address inadequacies or inequities in traditional materials, and to increase student access to the medieval.

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