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Teaching Deaf on Zoom While the World is Muted

Early in my year teaching on Zoom, I stared down my worst fear: a wall of video-deactivated black squares. Without an audience of expressive faces, I was unsure where to make eye contact. Should I look at my camera? Keep my eyes trained on the only student who had turned on her video? Or should I focus on the closed captions hovering at the bottom of the screen, my only lifeline in this warble of noise?

As a deaf person who relies on lip reading and facial cues to supplement my auditory capacities with bilateral cochlear implants, teaching online during the pandemic has been a story of access fails. Design historian and disability scholar Elizabeth Guffey describes access fails as the "letdowns, glitches, and hazards" that disabled folks encounter in public on a daily basis. Access fails present obstacles in our environments that we must navigate through personal ingenuity. Though access fails are everywhere and simultaneously invisible to the non-disabled public, they tend to be, as Guffey notes, "quiet, desperate battles fought alone."

Yet the COVID-19 pandemic has metabolized access fails into a universal experience, especially in remote learning. We have all experienced a grid of contorted frozen faces, intrusive background noises, or glitchy connections that make it hard to see and hear each other. At worst, we run our classes from the tiny screens of our phones, or we cannot log on at all. Compound these scenarios with my own—and other disabled teachers' and students'—access needs, some of which shifted in response to the conditions of our virtual environments, and it becomes more complicated.

When my university announced over the summer that all courses would move online, my program chose to require synchronous class time over Zoom to support student engagement. As I teach in an undergraduate writing and rhetoric program, where classes are small and designed to intensively workshop student writing and research, this choice was unsurprising. But I was unprepared for the throat-rattling anxiety I felt. The prospect of being launched into a communication black box made me question my ability to teach. I was comfortable with one-to-one online interaction, but a spontaneous conversation with 15 students on a small screen at the whim of our shared internet-bandwidth? Well, that was something else.

"Can we talk?" I emailed our technology and learning specialist. We determined that Zoom did not have automatic captioning. It could integrate with a costly third-party software with significant drawbacks that made it both non-intuitive and onerous to enable. Even as our directors recognized the value of implementing this tool program-wide, they faced material limitations with budgets significantly tightened during the pandemic, even at a well-endowed institution like ours. After experimenting with some of these third-party services, CART captioning (Communication Access Real Time Translation) remained the best option for the information-rich environment I needed to teach. For the first time as a faculty member, I requested ADA-sanctioned workplace accommodations.

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Working with a CART captioner in the physical space of a classroom is usually a hands-off experience. Similarly, for Deaf teachers and students who communicate through American Sign Language (ASL)—a highly visual and embodied language—Sign Language interpreters are well-suited for in-person learning. But in an online learning environment that demands we fluidly navigate multiple spaces and roles, negotiating this system with accommodations requires constant vigilance.

At the end of my first quarter of teaching online, Zoom enabled its own proprietary automatic transcription services. Auto-captioning became a fail-safe when CART was not available, like office hours with my students or impromptu committee meetings. "Sorry," "I forgot!" or "How do I turn them on?" colleagues said, when I prompted them to activate the captions. Auto-captions generate a whole genre of access fails unto themselves: they are brimming with algorithmic Freudian slips and homophones, words and phrases that can be wildly inaccurate and even harmful. These are a product of variable accuracy rates due to biases in voice recognition algorithms that do not transcribe accents well, including my own. Deaf and hard-of-hearing people have been calling out caption fails in voice recognition technology long before their first appearance on social media sites. In our view, sometimes auto-captions are worse than nothing at all.

Disability media scholar Liz Ellcessor observes that caption fails represent one example of how digital media cultures "take for granted an able-bodied user position." These ableist assumptions about users have always been present. These values have simply surfaced through the frictions we experience in course management and video conferencing tools.

I share all of this to set the scene for one of the most difficult days I have experienced teaching online. One of my students (let's call him Jay), who earlier had disclosed his identification as person with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), privately messaged me that he could not participate in a small group activity I was explaining to my class. He was facing significant sensory processing difficulties that day. Meanwhile, one of my other students, a blind student (given a pseudonym Kosta) needed assistance with our class activity on Jamboard, a visual mapping platform that we had discovered was not fully accessible to him or his screen reader.

This moment presented a three-way access conflict between myself, and my two students: our individual accessibility needs were incompatible. Jay opted to log off. When I joined Kosta in his breakout room, the CART captioner was not there; I turned on the automatic captions. Kosta preferred to keep his video off, and had a strong accent that made it difficult for me to comprehend him—perhaps even more so with the auto-captions. My plan to transcribe his notes was ill-fated. Admitting as much with a rueful chuckle, I proposed that we converse entirely through the chat, and together we hacked the activity. Even when I design my courses for access, I alone cannot solve the able-bodied user position baked in our communication platforms and learning systems.

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Regardless of my failures , this scenario was made possible because I model my own access needs for my students. I disclose my deafness and the presence of a CART captioner on the first day of my course, a first-year writing seminar which focuses on dismantling disability rhetoric and the COVID-19 pandemic's disproportionate impact on disabled people. I invite students to share their own access needs privately with me in an introduction letter about what learning environments they need to thrive, and we work together to integrate these into our classroom. Early in the course, students crowd-source access fails from their own lived physical or virtual spaces. They observe how certain spaces code for particular audiences in their design. We even turn the lens to our own virtual classroom. This is a lightning-rod moment: students marvel at how the specter of ableism touches everything.

Advocating for my own access needs as we moved online has benefited my students, disabled and non-disabled. According to new research from Oregon State University, when captions are made available, 75 percent of students use them as a learning aid. Being deaf has made me deeply sensitive to students' individualized learning modalities, and how important it is to provide multi-pronged communication avenues. Captioned video recordings with linked slides that contain visual descriptions for students to re-watch at their own pace, asynchronous materials that provide multiple choices for engagement, and flexible deadlines are a few practices I plan to carry forward when we return to in-person instruction.

As I think ahead to the prospect of teaching in person, new trepidations arise. Will I need to request new accommodations if we remain masked? How will my teaching be irrevocably altered, again, to adapt to these new conditions? I fall back on the reassurance that just like my d/Deaf and disabled forebears, we are experienced hackers and tinkerers, and are continually reinventing the world around us to make it more usable.