

Transcript for Accessibility Bites: Access Friction
BCcampus webinar hosted on December 11, 2025
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Host: Helena Prins

STEFAN SUNANDAN HONISCH:

I'm joining today from St. John's College, University of British Columbia, located on the traditional ancestral and unceded lands of the Musqueam First Nation. Anishinaabe scholar Nicole Ineese-Nash reminds us that "The label of disability is a construct that exists as a mechanism of colonialism, which does not align with Indigenous perspectives of difference." I ask that we hold her observation in mind as we think about the slipping, sliding and jolting of ability and disability inclusion and exclusion, identity, and difference, learning, mislearning, and when needed, unlearning that fill our lives and work with friction.

Today's presentation unfolds in three parts. First, I offer some preliminary thoughts in which I summarize definitions of access friction by disabled researchers, educators, and activists pointing to areas of basic agreement while marking significant disagreements about how best to navigate the contested terrain of disability access writ large. Second, I invite you to respond to a hypothetical case study of access friction. This part of my presentation also welcomes you to discuss examples of access friction from your own experience as students, instructors, or both. My concluding thoughts turn to philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who decades ago called for us to go back to the rough ground. That's from his philosophical investigations. When we want to understand some aspect of our world, including the languages we use to describe our experience and our practices of communication. Provisionally, I suggest that in trying to understand what disability inclusion, and access mean for our teaching and learning, we would do well to heed Wittgenstein's call in our own practices.

In today's workshop, we will explore what access friction signifies, both the impossibility of addressing all learning and access needs through universal design for learning and other approaches and equally, the possibility for access friction to spark collaboration, creativity, and curiosity in how, where and with whom we learn. Using a hypothetical case study of access supports that simultaneously include and exclude learners with different access needs, we will conceive access friction as an invitation to strive towards transformative rather than consumptive access. That's a framing that I take from Jay T. Dolmage's 2017 book, *Academic Ableism: Disability in Higher Education*. I'll just briefly note that following today's presentation, I'll send out some links including the full open access text of Jay Dolmage's book. In collaboration, we will develop responses that remind us of the contested nature of disability access and inclusion that our case study for friends. Setting aside measurable learning outcomes, we instead rediscover what it means to learn collectively through experiment and improvisation.

In preparing for today's workshop, I came to realize that the reality of access friction exposes what I might somewhat humorously characterize as access fiction. That is the unrealistic abstract and sometimes misleading examples of "done and dusted" solutions to the problem of accessibility that broadly characterize neoliberal approaches. This helps us to clarify what is at stake in understanding and acknowledging access friction. One example that has attracted much attention, not to say controversy, are so-called access overlays and widgets. A widget, as *eCampus Ontario's Digital Accessibility Toolkit* explains, can be added to a website or application as a standalone feature. Think also, for example, of the descriptions of appearance that participants sometimes use to introduce themselves and frame their participation in both online and in person learning environments. A 2024 submission by Blind Citizens Australia gives us reason to pause over whether there is a clear need for such descriptions and to ask how and why such a practice in the words of this submission, can often end up being unhelpful.

In a print essay available online titled "Against Access," deafblind poet John Lee Clark draws our attention to the problem of access. Only this problem is not one we might expect. "The question I am asked most frequently by hearing and sighted people is, how can I make my [website, gallery, exhibit, film, performance, concert, whatever]." That's the end of the bracket, accessible to you." John Lee Clark notes that companies, schools, non-profits and state and federal agencies approach me and other deafblind people all the time demanding, how do we make it more accessible?

Characterizing the question as suffocating, John Lee Clark also notes that it entails a presumptuous mindset. "Why is it always about them?" he asks. "Why is it about their including or not including us? Why is it never about us and whether we include them?"

Clark's polemic may initially strike us as bearing but remote connection to the topic at hand, namely access fiction. But I want to suggest otherwise. To the extent that "Against Access," John Lee Clark's essay asks disabled and non-disabled people alike to examine not our motivations, it's too easy to flatter ourselves that we have the best of those. But the actual and conceivable consequences of our asking disabled people to help us make stuff more accessible. What happens if instead we flip the proverbial script or better yet set it down completely? Instead of assuming that what matters is us including them in our collaborative activity about which I'll say more in a few minutes, I invite you to keep Clark's question in mind as we think with through and "Against Access" in friction producing ways that may very well help us all to learn and also to unlearn.

But first, I want to start in the more familiar place in which access, in some always incomplete, always aspirational sense, guides the commitment to greater disability inclusion. In this more familiar place, what we will understand as access friction has often been framed in terms of conflict and competition. In the interest of time, I'll provide a mere sketch of prior conceptual frames.

The way of thinking about access friction that I'd like to use as a point of departure and return comes from Tangled Art + Disability's *The Access Anthology Reflections on Disability, Art and Culture*. An explanatory note for the glossary emphasizes its synthesis of previous work by El Alto, the British Council, *Crippling the Arts Access Guide* from 2019. It is worth quoting in the Glossary's explanation of access friction, which balances the general and concrete in swift, succinct language. Access friction occurs when two or more people have access needs that are in opposition to or contradict one another. For example, if one person needs music playing to focus while another needs silence. Access friction can pose challenges to implementing access and demonstrates there's no one size fits all approach to addressing access.

It is worth appreciating the irony that the appearance of access as a competition or conflict often begins with what we have come to think of as universal design principles, a point noted by Jay Dolmage in his 2017 book, *Academic Ablism Disability in Higher Education*. Here it is worth quoting Dolmage at some length.

“It is easy to think that a celebration of universal design could be a way to actually shrink the safety net and widen structural inequalities. What if universal design, as it is being argued for and implemented at colleges and universities, just camouflages claw backs to other essential support systems. These are systems that are stunningly inadequate already.”

Several pages later, Dolmage explains what I'm calling friction, taking my cue from more recent analytical conversations in terms of what he characterizes as conflict. Where my approach to access friction purposefully aligns the difference between teaching and learning, Dolmage locates the conflict or friction both between learners and between instructors and learners. He elaborates his way of thinking as follows: “The strategy we use to make engagement more accessible for one student could be experienced as profoundly limiting for another. Moreover, often the demand to make a class accessible can be experienced as conflicting with a teacher's access needs.”

A case illustrative of how failing to consider access at all can generate immediate access friction comes from a recent *New York Times Magazine* article about the potentially generative role, as it were, of artificial intelligence in university-level English courses. Boston College instructor Carlo Rotella writes, “To qualify for any grade at all in my courses, you have to actively participate in class discussions, which means at minimum speaking up at every class meeting. You can't just turn in the deliveries, sorry, you can't just turn in the deliverables rather and sit quietly. You have to pull your weight.”

Rotella also subscribes to the belief, citing anecdotal evidence in what he characterizes as “device-free classrooms” that supposedly “allow students and instructors to leave off the endless clicking and scrolling, slow down, and do some thinking for themselves and with others.”

There's a moralizing undercurrent in these claims, which is at best unhelpful. But the core problem is the failure to acknowledge what the experience of access friction can teach or reinforce, namely that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing access, as I noted earlier, quoting Tangled Arts *Access Anthology*.

I decided against using a slide deck for today's workshop for two reasons, one personal and one pedagogical, but the two are in some sense connected. My own access needs as a disabled person mean that it is difficult for me to manage both reading from presentation notes and navigating a slide deck. But the second reason for not including a slide deck is because I wanted to try and model access friction. Taking my cue from John Lee Clark's question or his objection, rather, to the constant question of being asked, How do we make a certain presentation or experience more accessible? I want to, in this presentation, take a minimalist approach. In this case, reading from a prepared written script.

At this point, I'd like to offer a case study of responding to access friction. So for this case study, let us consider an online learning environment. Although this is a hypothetical scenario, it grows in part out of my own ongoing reflections on course evaluations I've received. Individual students have expressed diametric responses to the access supports I built into my course design and teaching methods on my assumption that an inclusive learning environment depends significantly on what I do to make things more accessible. Reading their critical responses, social responses from students, alongside Clark's essay "Against Access," however, I've come to question the assumptions and priorities and equally important, the possibly miseducated consequences of equating proactive approaches to access with deeper forms of inclusion. Here I borrow John Dewey's term "mis-educative" to represent a rote approach to access, deploying access practices without as John Dewey puts it in defining the term mis-educative without a realizing sense of why we do them.

Back to our case study. For our purposes, the course modules, let's say, include synchronous lectures, weekly assignment, weekly assigned readings, written assignments, and then asynchronous discussion board hosted on a learning management system such as Canvas or Moodle. For our purposes, the course proactively includes the following access supports, alternative text and image descriptions for visual material, and then conversion-ready readings available in PDF and Word format. Class recordings uploaded to the learning management system provides students with opportunities to catch up on missed classes and to review key concepts and discussion points on their own time. Now, let us consider some possible sources of access friction. One or more students wants to keep their cameras off during synchronous class sessions, another student uses lip reading for communication and finds auto captions available on many video conferencing platforms to be an unhelpful substitute. Yet another student finds the range of access supports bewildering and even restrictive, expressing concerns similar to those raised by John Lee Clark in *Against Access*. Specifically, this student does not want to discuss how the course can be made more accessible and instead prefers to figure things out as the course progresses.

So here I'll offer a prompt. What are some possible ways for us to respond to these points of friction without subsiding into either the imagined smoothness of universal design for learning or into the magical thinking and self-congratulation that transforms conversations and disagreements about access into defeat devices. Here I paraphrase the words of Jay Dolmage from his book, *Academic Ableism* in which he discusses how course syllabi that use universal design for learning approaches can become defeat devices.

So I'll just invite you to respond to this prompt, depending on your preferences and what works for you best, either by sharing your comments and suggestions in the chat or by speaking. I'll also be mindful of the time limit for this presentation. Maybe we'll spend about 5 minutes with this activity.

So just to let everyone know to facilitate access and to provide additional access points. I will read the response. Wendy M writes, "I think remaining flexible and working with the students to find creative solutions is important." Absolutely. John Lee Clark, just to provide some additional context, and I'll send the link to his complete essay, which in the interests of time, we can't dive deep into his essay, but he's been at the forefront of a movement called Protactile, and there's a Protactile. a Google group, and there is active correspondence via text in written form, using plain text formats to engage with articles of shared interest or discussion topics. One approach in this hypothetical scenario might be to emphasize the possibility of engaging in written forms of communication, which provide greater scope for individual learners to then do what works well for them.

Christine Miller writes, "Please don't take silence as non-engagement. I'm just learning, so not ready to give ideas, opinions yet." Thanks very much, Christine. This is also, if I could connect your response also to the aspect of the case study in which some learners prefer not to have their cameras on during an online session and very often in discussions that happen in mainstream media or in sources such as *Chronicles of Higher Education*, cameras off and a lack of comments is precisely those things are precisely equated with non-engagement as you frame it, Christine. So thank you for the way that you've framed your own response. And for what it's worth, I absolutely understand that non-response to this prompt certainly does not reduce to lack of engagement.

CS Ferguson Volk writes, "Acknowledgment of friction is helpful to me as a first step. A universal awareness of discomfort builds connections that allows for dialogue." Thank you very much. I very much appreciate that acknowledgment of the importance for both instructors and for learners. Within an inclusive learning space, discomfort is a part of what it means to think about inclusion.

Joe Schofield writes, "Very much agree in discussion allows us to find a balance for the people who are participating because that balance might be different than we expect if trying to prepare for every possible need." Absolutely. There are, what we sometimes think of as proactive forms of access. But then, Joe, as you mentioned, discussion. So in real time and

finding out in a specific context what might best work for people for a specific context and for a specific purpose is an absolutely important aspect of that.

Sorry, I'm trying to keep up with the written responses. Tricia writes, "Technology [and engagement], which allows for student choice, i.e., each participant can control the tech tools such as turning captions on and off and responding in multiple ways. I realize this may be along the universal design for learning, imagine smoothness. Thanks very much, Tricia, I note what you mentioned in particular about turning captions on and off. Sometime ago, there was an essay about, in that essay was framed as competing access needs. Now there's been something of a shift towards thinking about access friction. And one of the examples that was given is actually captions and subtitles. So for people who are hyperlexic and who pay close attention to language, a situation in which captions or subtitles cannot be turned off can create an access barrier. As you've noted, the element of choice so that individuals can decide whether or not and be provided with the option of using captions or not using captions. That's absolutely important.

Stephanie Jack writes, "I am a kinesthetic learner alongside many students. Lectures are bad for absorbing knowledge, exams, tests, blindness. No matter how much you study, oral exams and final projects, instead of exams, would be great." Absolutely. In my own teaching, there's no need for me to have quizzes and final exams and even sometimes with end-of-term final papers, I find sometimes that depending on the context, extensive written documents might not work all that well for learners. So that is an ongoing opportunity for me to think about what opportunities to assess student learning might look like.

And Paul Lehmkuhl writes, "I think teachers reflecting on how they can promote authentic content delivery for themselves and the learners. Also utilizing genuine connections with students, personalizing learning, and using accommodations." Absolutely, Paul, thank you very much for emphasizing the importance of flexibility and what in some approaches to universal design, for example, is referred to as plus one thinking. So how do we add points of access? In the interests of time, I'll just move forward. Thank you, everyone.

Also just going back to the earlier point. Some of you have shared thoughts and responses and techniques for managing access friction. And then I also understand that others might be taking the time they need to reflect on the case study. I appreciate all of your ways of engaging with this.

Just in the interests of time, I will move now to the I initially included another question about examples from your own teaching and learning. In some sense, the responses thus far have responded to that prompt. Thank you. So just to wrap things up, I will just briefly mention the distinction between consumptive access and transformative access, which is something that Jay Dolmage discusses in his book. Consumptive access allows people to enter a space or access a text, transformative access questions and rethinks the very construct of allowing access. And in some sense, what I'm hoping to do in this presentation on access friction today is to rethink the

construct of access. Jay Dolmage observes that “In pursuing this distinction relative to universal design, to question who exactly is allowing whom to participate and to what end is to accept that learning is always as he put it in process.” In sharp contrast to Carlo Rotella's access-less and therefore frictionless classroom, which imagines that disregarding learner differences altogether by, for example, disallowing assistive technology will somehow push learners to take responsibility for, as he puts it, “pulling their own weight.” Transformative access is guaranteed to produce roughness and ambiguity and indeterminacy.

While friction is a likely experience in both the consumptive and transformative modes, its presence in the latter is welcoming, opening possibilities for us to ask ourselves basic questions about our motivations in teaching and learning. In contrast, when we think of access narrowly and practically it is that which enables us to consume knowledge to enter a place for making and transmitting knowledge, which is roughly the frame of mind and practice with which John Lee Clark takes issue in “Against Access.” Possibility slides headlong into limit and the quest for access turns friction into a problem to be solved by answering the procedural question How can I make this more accessible? To be clear, consumptive and transformative access need not be reduced to opposing practices to the conflict between right and wrong ways of being inclusive. But in deciding which approach best meets a context for specific people. We should bear in mind the question that Clark, that John Lee Clark raises: Who is including whom?

And just very briefly to wrap things up, I would like to leave you with the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, he reminds us that our desire for “crystalline purity and logic” can lead us astray, making it impossible to understand what we do with language, how we communicate with each other. As in philosophy, so too with disability, I suggest. Here is Wittgenstein: “We have got onto slippery ice where there's no friction, and so in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal, but also just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk so we need friction back to the rough ground.” While the parallel is inexact, familiar approaches to disability inclusion do not merely strive for universal access, surely a laudable effort in itself, but instead too often proceed as though we can use access supports to create conditions of what Wittgenstein calls crystalline purity, as though in striving for universal access, we can smooth the rough edges away. To be inclusive of all learners and to recognize our own access needs in maximalist ways, I argue we need the rough ground that real world teaching and learning afford. Let us go back to the rough ground. Thank you very much for joining today's session for your time and engagement. I welcome your questions and comments.

HELENA PRINS:

Kevin wrote, “Would you say that access friction is caused by both sides of the issue? In other words, the person with the access limitation is not necessarily easily identified and the other person not being aware of the limitation?”

STEFAN:

Thanks very much for the question, Kevin. And the short answer, I would say is yes, absolutely, that access friction is never I think or almost never about what's happening on only one side of the teaching and learning interaction. If I've understood the point of your question. So this goes back to an earlier point that was shared in the discussion in response to the case study that there's the importance of discussion. There are things that we might think that we can do in advance to provide maximum access supports. But then, Kevin, your question also once more raises the importance of real time discussion. Finding out from each other and with each other and together, what in disability justice is framed as collective access. So we can all be invested, as it were, in supporting our own access needs in a given interaction or setting and being mindful of what we can do to support each other.

Resource links:

1. [John Lee Clark, "Against Access"](#)
2. [Jay T. Dolmage, "Academic Ableism: Disability in Higher Education"](#)
3. [Tangled Arts and Disability, "Access Anthology"](#)