Special Forum: An Ethical Imperative of Open Access

Opening a Level Road

by Kelly Bilz and Ira M. Gansler

Beyond the often-cited convenience and financial equity benefits of open resources lies an ethical imperative to use open resources for reasons of accessibility. Open access and open educational resources have a unique focus on accessibility for people with print disabilities, which is defined as "the difficulty or inability to read printed material due to a perceptual, physical, or visual disability" (Priyashan Sandunhetti et al. 2022, Abstract). Print disabilities may stem from learning disabilities or vision impairments, and those with print disabilities may utilize a variety of accommodations, such as screen-reader-accessible digital copies of print texts, to access information. For these purposes, open resources present a wider array of options, akin to universal design, which offers a "level road," as spoken by the prophet Jeremiah and interpreted by Connelly-Vetter (2021) as a call for inclusion for people with disabilities. Open resources are unparalleled by proprietary materials in their flexibility and adaptability and therefore carry an ethical imperative. In this forum submission, we explain how open resources relate to accessibility and tie the use and principles of open materials to Jeremiah 31:8-9.

In this passage, Jeremiah prophesies that God will lead all the Israelites in exile back home "on a level road, without stumbling" (Jer. 31:8-9, New American Bible translation). In reflecting on these verses, Connelly-Vetter (2021) highlights two things: the specific presence and inclusion of people with disabilities in this call and the "level road" that provides access. She says, "If God cared enough about the disabled Israelites to name their presence specifically, surely we must care enough about our disabled community members to ensure their inclusion, comfort, and wellbeing" (Connelly-Vetter 2021, para. 3). The verses, along with being a promise, are also a directive regarding our own actions among the disabled community, especially for the able-bodied to take part in intentionally designing inclusive and accessible spaces. Connelly-Vetter's reflection provides examples of what a "level road" might look like in liturgical contexts: "with no stairs to the sanctuary, or to the communion table, or to the fellowship hall… with closed captioning on our livestreams and image descriptions in our newsletters" (Connelly-Vetter 2021, para. 4). Unfortunately, many such barriers continue to limit access for some within the community.

In education, individuals with disabilities also face numerous barriers to equal access. If we accept an interpretation of the "level" road from the prophet Jeremiah, it is apparent that we have an ethical imperative to remove these barriers. For individuals with print disabilities, barriers often include obstacles to accessing closed-license or proprietary materials. Not only are there a limited number of sites that allow access to digital forms of many academic materials, but these sites can also be cumbersome to navigate or involve a time-intensive process for requesting accessible materials. The additional time and effort required to access these materials becomes particularly difficult for students with print disabilities when professors provide short lead time on required materials or frequently post reading assignments shortly before they are due. Even for those with software that helps change written material into accessible formats, locked formats or DRMs (digital rights management) can be problematic for compatibility with accessibility software. Finally, older titles may not be available as digital at all, which can be problematic in terms of seminal research in many fields. One solution to this issue would be to approach all materials from the standpoint of universal design.

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Universal design is a manner of creating buildings, items, or programs in a manner that is inclusive of all individuals, with and without disabilities. When applied to the problem of inaccessible educational materials, universal design can help ensure that access pathways and educational resources are truly open to all users. Although the research addresses pleasure reading, the work of Berget (2021) can be applied to academic reading. According to Berget (2021), most materials are developed so that "special books" are created as a version of a regular text to allow accessibility to the material. This practice is a significant contrast to the idea of universal design (185). Furthermore, the use of special or obviously adapted books can create a stigma and reduce motivation to read (191). For academic materials, this creates a barrier to education for individuals with print disabilities who need these adapted items. An alternative way of addressing the issue from the perspective of universal design would mean that a book is produced in a way that makes it accessible to a wide variety of individuals, including those with disabilities. Applying universal design to create a single version accessible to all audiences, combined with open resources and software to make materials accessible, could result in greater access to reading and education for traditionally excluded individuals. By utilizing universal design and providing open access to learning materials, we are fulfilling our ethical imperative to create the "level road" described by Jeremiah.

How exactly do open materials focus on accessibility? Many resources are available, from toolkits to checklists, to guide authors toward making their content accessible. These resources—from what we have seen, and we have only scratched the surface—cover standards like DAISY and WCAG 2.1 — and they encourage creators to use existing tools like accessibility checkers within software platforms. Given that open materials are often born digital and are frequently licensed to be modified and shared freely, open materials offer more flexibility than some proprietary publishers are willing to offer; moreover, open materials present this adaptability without jumping through hoops or making requests. As Connelly-Vetter says in her reflection, "Barriers to access are neither holy or natural, but rather human-made and heretical, inherently oppositional to what God wants for each person" (Connelly-Vetter 2021, para. 4). She is speaking of barriers to following God, but her argument also has merit for access to information, a public good as well as a potential tool for learning and spiritual development.

Thus, regarding accessibility, the ethical imperative lies in two characteristics of open materials. First, they provide greater accessibility from the start, without the need for submitting requests to the accessibility office and delaying access to the material; this respects and upholds the dignity of the human person from the beginning. Second, open materials are (often—an important caveat) designed with accessibility in mind. People with disabilities are included with intention and care in the design process—or at least, the tools exist to support it. To revisit the framing metaphor from the prophet Jeremiah and reflection from Allison Connelly-Vetter, the road is built to be level, to welcome the print-disabled and those with other obstacles inhibiting inclusion, to "gather them from the ends of the earth…on a level road, without stumbling" (Jer. 31:8-9). Removing these barriers is the ethical imperative to promote open resources.

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