Balancing accessibility and creativity in the classroom: The case of zines

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ABSTRACT

Improving the accessibility of teaching materials and activities in higher education can include a process of standardising texts (e.g. their format and font), while also providing a range of options for students to engage with information and express themselves. Zines have the potential for creative teaching, but it is unclear what aspects of zine-reading and zine-making are accessible to a wide range of students. Zines are typically hand-written or typed, hand-drawn booklets, photocopied and distributed at low cost. As well as being resources to learn from, zines can also be used as a creative activity and/or assessment in the higher education classroom. Used in this way, zines engage students' 'head, heart and hands': supporting the development of higher order critical and analytical skills; connecting emotionally to the content; and with tactile engagement in the creative process. Yet despite the possibilities of zines to support creative teaching and learning practice, little is currently known about the specific ways that zines are used in an accessible way. This work aims to fill this gap by searching academic databases, zine databases and 'grey' literature. The early findings of this literature review bring to attention two contrasting ways of creating accessible zines. The first approach is an online ezine, which has a variety of modes of expression (written, visual and audio) and meets the requirements of digital accessibility through inclusive practice such as transcripts for audio tracks and descriptions of images. The second approach is creating traditional paper zines with tactile elements that can engage a range of people in different ways but might be harder to standardise and to make accessible. This offers a starting point to consider how to approach the problem of standardisation and creativity and brings up questions to investigate further regarding the accessibility of zines in higher education teaching and learning.

Keywords: zines, disability, creativity, accessibility, inclusion

Introduction

As with much Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL), initial thoughts around this topic developed from personal reflections of my own experiences of teaching (Godbold et al., 2021). This has often focused on making teaching accessible to as many students as possible, for example by ensuring digital resources meet accessibility standards. This approach is influenced by the social model of disability, which states that people are disabled not by their bodies or minds, but by barriers in society (Barnes, 2019). This moves our locus of work as educators away from seeing our disabled and neurodivergent students as "deficient", towards removing barriers to education through tools such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Liasidou, 2014). UDL offers an approach to removing barriers to learning – for example, by supporting "multiple ways to perceive information", including digital text meeting accessibility standards and all images having descriptions (Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST], 2024a). Some resources used in Higher Education (HE) teaching can meet these standards easily, such as text-only digital documents with simple pictures. However, more creative resources with non-standard layouts, things can get a bit more complex. I found myself troubled by the tension between freedom and creativity on one hand, and the imperative to

standardise materials in a way that could potentially flatten out nuance and creativity, in both creating and reading zines, which I used in teaching Education Studies undergraduates.

To understand more about the accessibility of zines in HE classrooms, I undertook a six-stage scoping literature review, as this approach is appropriate as a rapid way to "examine the extent, range and nature of research activity" in an area and to "identify research gaps in the existing literature" (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, p. 21). I searched academic and zine databases, as well as "grey" literature, and found thirty-six sources, ranging from academic journal articles to zines and library webpages. Here, I discuss some initial findings, and how we can build on this knowledge to ensure that this form of creativity is inclusive to every student. I begin by introducing some of what we already know about how zines are used in HE, before considering what it might mean to ensure that they are accessible as creative, nonstandard texts. Then I discuss some of the early findings from the scoping review and potential directions for future research.

Zines in higher education teaching

Zines can be a creative resource or activity in HE with much potential but with some accessibility pitfalls. Typically, zines are hand-written or typed booklets of any size—often with illustrations that are hand-drawn or collaged—which are photocopied, bound and distributed at low cost by creators or 'distros' (distributors), rather than via formal publishing routes (Radway, 2012, p. 27). Zines have received some attention in the scholarship for their use as a creative pedagogical tool in HE, for example as part of a "feminist pedagogy" which promotes "participatory learning, validation of personal experience, and the development of critical thinking skills" (Creasap, 2014, p. 156). They are "independently written, produced, and distributed media that value freedom of expression and freedom from rules above all else" (Duke University Library, in Radway, 2012, p. 28). It is precisely this "freedom from rules" that makes them a potentially rich and valuable resource or activity in the HE classroom but also brings up questions about making them accessible to students to create and/or read.

The creativity of making zines has been framed in opposition to the restrictions of conventional student learning activities and assessments. Creasap (2014) explains that "Unlike research papers, zine style is decidedly informal" with hand-drawn or cut-out images and hand-written, non-standard writings (p.155). Used in this way, zines have the potential to engage students' "head, heart and hands": the head developing higher order critical and analytical skills; the heart connecting emotionally to the content; and the hands with tactile engagement in a material, embodied and creative process (Terrell & Pugh, 2023). McElroy and Jackson (2021) cite Piepmeier's position that the materiality of zines "can be a tool of critical pedagogy, leading to pleasure, vulnerability, and embodied learning in the classroom" (p. 59). Yet Radway (2012, p. 28) argues that those discussing zines often overlook the material and social aspects of zines and focus on them only as "booklike texts" and primarily consider their content, rather than the material and social aspects of zine culture that are so important. It follows that if we, as educators, aim to make zines accessible in our classroom, we need to understand the creative, embodied and material aspects of zines to make them fully accessible to all our students.

Accessibility considerations

What does it mean to make our teaching accessible? One approach is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), "a framework to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible, inclusive, equitable, and challenging for every learner" (CAST, 2024b). Consideration 1.2 of UDL urges teachers to "support multiple

ways to perceive information", which includes following accessibility standards when creating text (CAST, 2024a). Additionally, United Kingdom universities are bound by legislation such as the Equality Act 2010 (which creates an obligation to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students) and the Accessibility Regulations 2018 (which outline how online information should be made accessible). Queen's University Belfast (no date) summarises the latter regulations into the acronym "THRIVES": Tables (descriptions and headers), hyperlinks (descriptive), recordings (transcript and closed captions), inclusive font (sans serif), visuals (alt text), examine (accessibility checkers), structure (heading styles and left-justified text). Many zines are, by this standard, inaccessible. They might be unavailable digitally; their writing might be small and/or unclear; images might be difficult to make out once photocopied over and over. So, we have a dilemma: guidelines to make resources accessible focus on standardisation (of structure, font, etc.), yet one of the appeals of zines is their idiosyncratic lack of standardisation. How, then, can we use zines and other non-standard texts in our teaching while still being accessible? The preliminary literature review on accessibility, disability and zines in HE gives some first directions for research in this area. While several issues emerged, I will be focusing only on the accessibility of teaching with zines, rather than wider aspects of inclusive teaching such as the content of the zines. Three publications are particularly helpful as starting points for unpicking some of these issues, and I will consider them each in turn.

Accessible zines in HE

McMaster Disability Zine Team (2021) is an ezine (online zine) in the form of an edited collection of disabled students' experiences of university. This proves a useful example because it demonstrates how zines can be created and made accessible in a university setting with the engagement of disabled students. This ezine follows various good practices for accessibility. For example, contributions take various formats such as text, images, or audio, allowing contributors to express themselves in ways that suit them. This relates to UDL consideration 5.1 "Use multiple media for communication" which "reduces media-specific barriers to communication among learners with disabilities, honors forms of communication that have historically been devalued, and increases the opportunities for every learner to develop a wider range of expression in a media-rich world" (CAST, 2024c). Additionally, content other than plain text is provided in an alternative format so that people can access it in different ways (UDL Consideration 1.2, discussed above). For example, the contribution "Windless" by Lisa Shen is in the form of an audio recording accompanied by a transcript, while the image in "Your eyes" by Renee has a written description. These considerations mean that both creating and reading the ezine have been made more accessible and multimodal – in other words, with more creative possibilities. However, as mentioned above, zines should not be thought of as simply "booklike" texts (Radway, 2012, p. 28) but as having other material qualities – tactile, idiosyncratic, and creative. Creating an ezine with accessibility considerations built in is admirable and important, and indeed it follows the advice to design accessibility from the start, where possible. But can we imagine ways to maintain the more tactile and creative aspects of zine-making and zine-reading while ensuring accessibility? Or is this no longer necessary in our digital world?

To better understand the creative and tactile potential of zines in the classroom, consider Congdon and Blandy (2003) who describe using zines to teach about postmodernism and the communication of ideas. One student in that class, Molly Sheehy, creates a zine as:

> a meditation on her relationship to her mother's body and her mother's struggles with a
> life-threatening illness. In the centrefold of the zine is a pop up of her mother with arms

outstretched illustrating her success in fighting her illness but bearing the scar of her struggle (Congdon & Blandy, 2003, p. 48)

We might infer that the format gave this student room to express ideas in a visual and tactile way (a centrefold pop-up of her mother with outstretched arms) which would not have been possible in a more typical university assignment. Whether intended or not, using tactile elements makes this zine more accessible to some – for example blind people who cannot see illustrations have an alternative way of engaging with the image. If the zine were digitised, or unavailable in person, there would be ways of making it accessible – for example, the tactile elements could be described in speech or writing, but does this fully capture the experience of holding the zine and experiencing the outstretched arms?

A second example of a zine created in an HE classroom comes from Ross and Pears (2022). Pears is a student who created a zine on "revenge porn" (Ross & Pears, p. 118). Pears describes the tactile nature of zines, explaining "there is something magical about holding a physical zine in your hands and flipping through its pages" (Ross & Pears, p. 118). She goes on to describe the process:

> I used erasable markers to handwrite every piece of body text. I printed photos in black and white onto photo paper, and pasted them individually into every zine. For headings, I used strips of hot pink paper and wrote them out with a Sharpie (Ross & Pears, p. 119)

She also hand stitched copies for each student in her class, to one peer's astonishment. Pears explains the "incredible impact" (Ross & Pears, p. 119) that zines have had on her personal and professional life and how she uses zines to process emotions. While it is not explicitly stated, it appears that part of this impact is the creative, material and tactile process of zine-making on paper. Again, we can interpret these aspects as enhancing the accessibility of creating and reading the zine but also moving away from the more standardised aspects of accessibility.

Conclusion and next steps

At this stage, the literature seems to point to some questions about how zine-making and zine-reading can be brought into the HE classroom accessibly. On the one hand there is evidence of good practice, such as McMaster Disability Zine Team's (2021) digitally accessible ezine, and the choices of students to express themselves in various ways in Congdon & Blandy (2003) and Ross & Pears (2022). However, there is still a knotty problem: namely the tension between creativity and standardisation. We often ask for a certain level of standardisation from our students' work: marking many assignments that follow the same format makes it easier to fairly assess students' work, for example. Standardised texts, similarly, make digital accessibility much simpler. However, academia is about much more than simplicity – and making creativity accessible is one example of this. There is a need to better understand how creative, tactile and embodied classroom activities and resources are used and can be used accessibly. The next stage is a deeper dive into the literature regarding how we can balance creativity and accessibility. Ultimately, I hope that this can lead to a broader discussion and empirical work on using zines accessibly in HE. This could involve working with educators and students to understand the realities of using zines accessibly in learning and teaching practice.

Biography

Katharine Terrell is a lecturer in academic practice at the University of Glasgow, with a focus on inclusion and accessibility. She has a varied background in languages and literature, Disability Studies and British Sign Language Interpreting and has worked in a variety of roles in schools and universities in England and Scotland. She can be contacted at katharine.terrell@glasgow.ac.uk.

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