Access in Book History Methodology and Pedagogy: Report from the "Touch to See" Workshop

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Exploring the history of blind and low-vision reading can present a paradox: without consistent access to in-person reading materials, sighted scholars following traditional research processes rely on digital archives. This research usually requires the study of two-dimensional books, pages, and other objects that were necessarily three-dimensional and tactile in their design. Blind and low-vision researchers may need to rely on verbal descriptions by sighted viewers or automatically generated image descriptions that may be flawed.[1] Blind, low-vision, and sighted participants encountered this paradox in a small hybrid workshop, "Touch to See: A Nineteenth-Century Book for Blind Readers," sponsored by the Bibliographical Society of America (BSA). The workshop centered on an 1836 New Testament embossed in raised roman letters. During the nineteenth century, blind and low-vision readers would have read this book with their fingertips; in our workshop, we attempted to study the history of this text through the book's materiality. The infrastructures used to digitize images and to host the workshop both barred and enabled access, while workshop materials themselves, during the nineteenth century and today, simultaneously barred and enabled literacy.

In planning, facilitating, and reflecting on the workshop, I attended to access on the levels of form and content. I encouraged participants to consider the ways we might actively challenge assumptions built into the raised-print materials we studied and into our methods of study themselves. Workshop materials and methods aimed to consider the marginalization of literacy practices associated with blind and low-vision readers.[2] Since we studied an artifact of disability history, I drew on disability pedagogy to plan and facilitate the workshop. As disability studies scholar Joanne Woiak and disability activist Dennis Lang write, pedagogy itself can be an "effective means of explaining and modeling course content" that requires us to rethink the hierarchies and divisions of labor

assumed in bibliographical and teaching practices.[3] In planning "Touch to See," I was interested in confronting these assumptions from my own privileged position as a white, sighted teacher. Participants' responses before, during, and after the workshop suggest a significant area of overlap between liberation bibliography and disability pedagogy: both, like access itself, are ongoing processes, to be incited rather than completed in a four-hour workshop span.

As part of its mission of "fostering the study of books and other textual artifacts in traditional and emerging formats," the BSA sponsors hands-on workshops that take one textual artifact as an entry point into larger histories of the book and bibliographical practices. I planned the "Touch to See" workshop as a hybrid event, accessible to in-person and virtual participation, for the summer of 2022, at the Swem Special Collections Research Center at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Designing a hybrid workshop also resonated with the BSA's Equity Action Plan of 2020, which affirms that "material texts created by/ for and studied by under-represented groups deserve better representation within all forms of bibliographical scholarship." The ability to host the workshop both in-person and via Zoom seemed to grant the "emerging format" of the raised-print book "better representation," as the hybrid option exposed more participants to an understudied artifact of disability book history. Yet this hybrid option also generated questions about access, a cornerstone of liberation bibliography and disability pedagogy. Access entails disrupting conventional systems of knowledge transmission to change the norms surrounding the materials and methods of fields like bibliography and book history. Swem's New Testament is part of a larger history of disability education, and planning the workshop around this book required awareness of present-day access in terms of the infrastructures through which we conducted our inquiry. The planning and design of the hybrid workshop had to take into consideration not just the object but also the methods we would use to explore it, including, as Woiak and Lane write, "universal design, privilege, and embodied identity."[4]

These considerations require flexibility and planning. Long before the workshop's date, thanks to research conversations with a former student and a current instructor of a state school for blind and low-vision students, I recognized the need first and foremost to determine accessibility according to the range of the needs and preferences of those who would be participating in the workshop. Once workshop registration ended, I designed and distributed a questionnaire that allowed participants to discuss accessibility needs to the extent they felt comfortable and that opened a channel of communication for ongoing access needs.

Beginning with the questionnaire allowed me to foreground accommodations and, as literary scholar Sarah Chinn writes, "decenter . . . normativity."[5] I did not make structured plans until the questionnaire was completed by more than half of the participants who had registered, to build responses, accommodations, and suggestions into the workshop design and content.

The questionnaire responses revealed the range of participants and interests that the workshop brought together, including librarians at organizations for the visually impaired, bookmakers interested in the role of touch in book creation, individuals working in acquisitions, and individuals engaged in research projects on specific collections. Some participants were accessibility specialists, worked for organizations teaching technology to blind and vision-impaired users, worked at archives specializing in diversity and equity initiatives, or were librarians with commitments to improving their institutions' accessibility. Many sought to explore teaching and access with the goal of considering how tactile books could impact pedagogical practices today. Others worked with disability technology and mobility devices, often in instructional roles. Overwhelmingly, participants sought to challenge the structures of these institutions by learning beyond the canon and by engaging efforts to make collections more representative, diverse, and accessible. As I read participants' responses, requests, and suggestions, it became clear that this workshop would have to address a key question that emerged repeatedly: How can historical materials for blind and low-vision readers be made accessible online, especially in digital spaces?

The questionnaire also made apparent the scope of abilities that would be in attendance, including visual impairments that ranged from fully blind to low vision. Participants included lifelong braille users and those requiring large print, as well as neurodivergent and other invisibly disabled users. Responses figured tactility as a connecting thread between nineteenth-century technologies and today's, observing that preserving raised-print materials may facilitate continuity with today's forms of tactile communication.[6] Responses also indicated that participants sought ways of making online spaces accessible; these spaces included digitized materials and collections as well as webinars and other forms of digital instruction. Many mentioned interests in historic and contemporary technologies, including technologies of raised-print and braille systems and educational tools for blind and low-vision students. I hoped that our time together in the workshop would expose participants to this range of entry points through which to study a raised-print book like the New Testament and also to the questions of access that each entry point raises.

The time leading up to the workshop allowed me to address individual needs and questions as best I could. Responses indicated that while Zoom came with issues, it was largely the reason why participants were able to attend. Indeed, Zoom attendance enabled participation on both a global level (with participants registering from indigenous communities, Mexico, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands) and on an individual level, with participants disclosing that they were able to join the workshop while at work. To aid participation, workshop attendees requested I circulate materials, including a bibliography of relevant sources, through various channels before the workshop.[7] In considering accessibility and Zoom, some acknowledged a preference for participating over the chat while others indicated that, because of large-print needs, the chat was a barrier to participating. Image descriptions and verbal descriptions of materials would be necessary. Some participants indicated that they would be using braille displays during the workshop, a technology that refreshes digital content into different combinations of braille pins as the user's curser moves throughout the screen. Several participants recognized the collective work of accessibility, offering to read materials aloud or describe slides and images for fellow participants when necessary.[8] Accessibility proved to be an ongoing adaptive and collaborative process, one that began long before we encountered the workshop artifact.

Indeed, the artifact itself, a relic of nineteenth-century attempts at access, brought access concerns unique to our twenty-first century study. The 1836 New Testament, volume 1 of 2, was embossed at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts. Throughout the nineteenth century, Perkins educator Samuel Gridley Howe experimented with embossing books like this New Testament in a style of raised roman letters known as Boston Line Type. The format of raised-print materials was certainly "emerging" during its time, as it underwent decades of experimentation and trial-and-error during the long nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic. In studying Swem's New Testament, we encountered access issues both similar to and diverging from those that its nineteenth-century users would have also encountered. The seemingly simple act of "viewing" the artifact presented the first accessibility concerns: the book's inkless, tightly packed raised letters are difficult to discern virtually, as the reliance on computer and document cameras flattens the letters' relief and prevents tactile experience. Early in the workshop planning process, I consulted Swem's Makerspace about creating three-dimensional "printouts" of the New Testament's title page to distribute to participants—following the model of the 2019 exhibit Touch This Page, featuring raised-print materials at Perkins[9]—but to do so proved cost prohibitive. Chance seemed

in part to compensate for this lack: Swem's New Testament is preserved as a stack of embossed pages, carefully unbound for unknown reasons at some point in the book's history. Swem's Special Collections instruction and research associate Phillip Emanuel was able to hold individual pages of the book to the document camera for sighted online participants while also offering a detailed verbal description. We were able to manipulate the book gently for virtual and in-person participants in a way that would not have been possible had the book been bound.

After encountering this artifact in different ways unique to each participants' position, whether through touch, sight, or listening to verbal description (clarified through questions and answers), we moved into a thirty-five-minute overview of major developments in raised-print systems, from the first raised-print book produced in roman letters in France in 1786 to the acceptance of Standard English braille as the United States' "official" blind/low-vision reading system in 1932. Participants followed along with the slides, transcript, and image descriptions shared in the precirculated materials. I also described relevant features of the images as I verbally tracked our place throughout the slides. For images for this overview, I relied almost exclusively on Perkins's digitized archival holdings, which provided high-resolution images and permissions free of change.

We next used the Zoom feature to assign the roughly thirty participants randomly to the planned breakout room session. The goal of each breakout room was to examine an image of a raised-print artifact through the lenses of information shared in the full-group session and participants' own expertise. I prepared four OneDrive documents for our archive explorations and one hardcopy for our in-person participants that contained the different images and a uniform set of questions designed to guide the groups through an accessible investigation of the artifact. Rooms contemplated images of *The Blind Child's Second Book*, compiled by Howe and embossed at Perkins in 1836; *The Blind Child's First Book*, a revised version of the 1836 book also compiled by Howe and embossed at Perkins in 1852; the 1877 *Memoir of Samuel Gridley Howe* by Julia Ward Howe and other contributors; and *Elementary Arithmetic*, a book compiled by Mabel Townsend and embossed in 1894. I was able to include one or two images of each artifact based on the reproductions and permissions I had received from Perkins and from the images taken during my own research at the American Antiquarian Society.

I hoped that the breakout rooms would model one key tenant of disability pedagogy: that, as education scholar Joseph Michael Valente points out, accommodations, access, and other forms of "difference d[o] not have to be an individual burden but can be a group responsibility."[10] Guidelines

for each room asked participants to think about and create the accessibility of the space; each group designated a room coordinator who would read questions aloud and describe the images. A scribe and spokesperson would take notes and report back to the group. With images of four artifacts representative of decades of raised-print experimentation, the breakout rooms considered the following questions:

(1) Coordinator: Describe the artifact/image for the group. You may read the text if you are able. Your group's Scribe may take notes on the description, here:

(2) Note the year this artifact was produced. Based on your knowledge and the information provided, where does this artifact fall in the timeline of embossing books for blind/low-vision readers?

(3) Who do you think was the intended audience for this artifact? How might this artifact help that audience's literacy? How might it hinder literacy?

(4) What are some considerations and/or challenges in viewing this artifact digitally? Compose an image description for this artifact that could accompany an online exhibit or gallery.

Thinking back on these questions, I recognize the ways in which sighted privilege is built into the wording, considering, for example, how we view the artifact digitally. Examining images of tactile materials requires us to expand our definitions of "view" to include touch, image description, pinpoints of braille cells, and listening as ways of reading and experiencing an object.

In each breakout room and during the discussions afterward, responses to the artifact images allowed us to consider them on multiple levels: in terms of how students, teachers, and printmakers may have accessed these materials during their time; in terms of how librarians, conservationists, and researchers may encounter the book in the present; and in terms of how we confronted images of these materials during the workshop. We did not always find answers to these questions, as those of us in the room confronted questions of the ethics and boundaries that we as sighted researchers bring to the study of these artifacts. Planning the workshop according to tenets of disability pedagogy, in particular to Chinn's urging to "decent[er] normativity" in order to "focu[s] on accommodations rather than impairment," created the space for nonlinear discussions that toggled back and forth from the past to the present, from sight to touch.

In turn, participants identified the ablism underlying even an arti-fact designed specifically for the capacities of vision-impaired audiences. For example, several commented on the New Testament's assumptions about its audience, suggesting that its creators sought to educate blind and low-vision students through an ableist definition of literacy, one that focused on making blind reading approximate sighted reading as closely as possible. We asked whether roman-letter embossing—which had been established as less legible and less accessible for blind and low-vision read-ers who, like Louis Braille himself, preferred point systems—would be favored by readers who became blind or lost their eyesight late in life, retaining memories of ink-print roman letters. Some groups observed that the books seemed to be designed for instructors and students alike, with alphabetic systems that kept sighted instructors from having to learn a new system. Others observed Boston Line Type's preference for angular rather than curved shapes and its elimination of descenders, sug-gesting that this version of roman letters may have disoriented sighted readers. Another group noted that the oblong shape of the children's books provided may have allowed readers to trace longer lines without having to move to the next line as often. This group noticed that the size of the letters gradually decreased as the assumed audience worked its way through the lessons. Several observed that this structure of learning letters may have been imported from sighted primers of the time and may have left unconsidered the ways in which learning to read by touch may have required other scaffolded learning besides letter size.

Attendees also addressed issues of the artifact's nontextual elements. Room 3 observed that their title page, while fitting the conventions of ink-print title pages, leaves large areas of blank space that may have dis-oriented blind and low-vision readers and left them searching for the next line of embossing. Similarly, room 4 paid particular attention to the decorative elements that appeared on the embossed arithmetic book. The title page bears several flourishes that do not seem to contribute to the text or content of the book, and the embossed borders seem to recall the point systems that, as room 4 noted, had already begun to encroach on alphabetic systems due to blind and low-visions readers' preferences for point legibility. While the images of this book may have demonstrated the value of visual flourishes to sighted audiences, the room wondered what value these decorative elements would have to audiences reading by touch. This raised the larger, unanswered question of the value of decora-tion to literacy acquisition or to the pleasures of reading. One participant suggested that the embossed flourishes may have functioned as training to the fingertips, generating additional sensitivity to tactile form.

Participants with backgrounds in conservation and in digitizing materials embraced the question about challenges in viewing two-dimensional images of a three-dimensional artifact. Thoughts on the challenges of experiencing the artifact through images alone inspired several groups to create an image description for the artifact–and to ask whether they were describing a two-dimensional image or a three-dimensional artifact. As Ryan Cordell has argued, digital editions and OCR (optical character recognition) versions of a historical edition form another "setting" of that text, constrained within its own set of historical, social, and political conditions, just as the original print or manuscript objects had been.[11] The online archive explorations vastly changed the setting and conditions of the artifact participants explored to the extent that in-person participants studied a different object than what online participants encountered. Beyond questions of scale and the inability to touch the artifact, participants noted that audio would be needed to access the artifact; sound, not just text, would be an additional sensory layer required to make (images of) this artifact more accessible. Others noted the need for raked lighting as well as unbinding of the book to demonstrate each page more clearly. These questions about digitization also led to questions of material problems unique to these works, even offline. One participant noted that over time, in an archive context, the relief of the embossing may be flattened due to binding, asking how binding techniques could be applied without damaging the text. Participants familiar with in-person examination of raised-print books noted that many alphabetic examples contain "spacers" or thick paper inserts throughout the pages, as part of the binding, to keep the pages from pressing too tightly to one another.

After the breakout rooms, I stated and posted instructions for an optional "working lunch" during which participants searched their home institution's catalogs for (or, as some participants proved, have at the ready) embossed materials or any other artifacts related to blind and low-vision education and drop links, images, and other descriptions into a full group shared document. This was a participant-driven conclusion to the workshop that relied on individuals quickly searching for, identifying, and "presenting" their findings through their own webcams or screen sharing. Participants shared an embossed prayer book, embossed musical notation, an 1837 Howe-compiled Boston Line Type atlas, examples of embossed ephemera, and stories about their own efforts to build a raised-print collection at their institution's library. This unstructured time was both rewarding and problematic for participants. While these moments of spontaneity were enriching to those who could

access them and seemed to fulfill the workshop's overall goal of collective knowledge building, despite our efforts to provide verbal descriptions for the artifacts demonstrated, this part of the workshop was likely the least accessible to blind and vision-impaired participants. Since we performed these searches in "real time," we discussed questions and discoveries that arose during the process of searching, of reading library catalog entries, and of sharing collective knowledge in response to these findings. To preserve opportunities for these discussions and to make this spontaneous portion more accessible, in the future I would aim to describe this activity in the pre-workshop questionnaire, allowing participants to opt to complete it in advance and to share not just the results of their searches but also the questions and discoveries they had along the way.

At the workshop's conclusion, I emailed copies of the shared resource list, the breakout room documents, and a post-workshop reflections questionnaire to participants. This questionnaire asked participants to assess the workshop according to their expectations going into it and to consider what helped and what hindered their learning. Roughly half of the participants completed the reflections questionnaire, and their responses demonstrated the ways in which disability pedagogy has the power to break down hierarchical dynamics of instruction as well as to facilitate the creation and transmission of knowledge as multidirectional and collective. The reflections suggest a blurring of lines between the content and the structure of the workshop in ways that some participants seemed to find generative and others seemed to find unsatisfying.

Indeed, this simultaneous appreciation for yet dissatisfaction with these blurred lines questions whether collectively producing knowledge is always legible as a process of learning. Some participants had never considered the history of blind and low-vision reading, while others had considerable experience with this history and its materials. Some noted that the content itself felt lacking, without the direct instruction that more traditional pedagogical tactics might make apparent. The precirculated materials and the resources shared afterward—meant to reflect the knowledge produced collectively during our four-hour span—were not always understood as "content" and perhaps served some more as a record or notes of our time together. Almost all reflections noted that learning from the variety of participants and their expertise did offer the most stimulating content of the workshop, as they expressed gratitude for fellow participants' enthusiasm, contributions, and efforts at accessibility. Reflections observed that the range of participants' backgrounds allowed entry points

to raised-print materials from unexpected directions, which helped us consider new aspects of and approaches to book history. Participants described these varying levels of familiarity as a community-building aspect of the workshop.

Participants also reflected on the accessibility of the workshop, noting the helpful aids of precirculated materials that may have benefitted from a prereading assignment. Participants called the chat content a "terrific benefit" and appreciate the freedom of being able to share and of being responded to in the chat, either by my posing the question to the group or by a group member freely responding, creating an "engaging" atmosphere and "environment of sharing" for the workshop overall. The breakout rooms generated mixed reactions; some participants acknowledged that while the OneDrive documents provided a clear structure for the activities, the rooms became spaces for speculation rather than instruction. Variety in the distribution and collaboration of information assisted neurodivergence, including the precirculated materials as well as the shared resources at the workshop's conclusion. Tracking our place on the slides with the precirculated materials as we went through workshop activities, in particular the first hour, proved to be a beneficial means of balancing in-person, online, neurodivergent, and vision-impaired participation. These reflections demonstrate the ways in which form can dictate content and in which content can take shape through various forms structured by disability.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to access in this four-hour span was my own role. While my research, pedagogy, and workshop planning aims to be collaborative with students and with members of communities whose histories and texts I study, I was unable to coordinate cofacilitation with a member of the blind and low-vision community. Accessibility to *allow for* participation is not enough; rather, according to liberation bibliography, access must be deliberate and proactive. Access must *be* the process itself. While the visually impaired and fully blind participants did make their access needs known in the pre-workshop questionnaire, asking for verbal descriptions of visuals and for large print rather than have the workshop simply start from the position of vision and then fit abilities into that preexisting structure, what would the workshop be like to allow visual impairment to completely upend that preexisting structure, exposing it as ableist and already excluding? This question emerged during the workshop, but I wonder what the workshop would look like if it was a guiding pedagogic principle rather than an unanswered conclusion.

NOTES

I am grateful to the editors of this special issue for their invaluable feedback on this piece. I am especially grateful to the staff at William & Mary's Special Collections Research Center, in particular to Meghan Holder Bryant, Phillip Emanuel, and Jay Gaidmore, for making the "Touch to See" workshop possible.

1. See, for example, Meg Miller and Ilaria Parogni, "The Hidden Image Descriptions Making the Internet Accessible." *New York Times*, February 18, 2022.

2. Derrick R. Spires, "Liberation Bibliography" (Keynote lecture at the Annual Meeting of the Bibliographical Society of America,") YouTube, 2021, accessed June 21, 2022, https://youtu.be/xv5_8cEqiVc.

3. Joanne Woiak and Dennis Lang, "Theory Meets Practice in an Introduction to Disability Studies Course." *Transformations* 25, no. 2 (2014): 96–113, quotation on 97.

4. Woiak and Lang, 97.

5. Sarah E. Chinn, "Teaching Crip; or, What We Talk about When We Talk about Disability Pedagogy." *Transformations* 25, no. 2 (2014): 15–19, quotation on16.

6. One participant shared an article about the twenty-first century Protactile movement, a series of principles designed to "make tactile communication more legible" that centers touch within the DeafBlind community. Andrew Leland, "DeafBlind Communities May Be Creating a New Language of Touch" *New Yorker*, May 12, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/deafblind-communities-may-be-creating-a-new-language-of-touch.

7. In preparing workshop materials, I drew on the work of those in direct contact with raised-print materials, whether as readers, catalogers, or historians. These sources included the accessible work coming out of the Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, MA (https://www.perkins.org/research-library/), archivist Erika Piola's work at the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the work of American Printing House for the Blind historians and museum directors. I also drew from curators of exhibits on blind history and reading. Conversations with former students and instructors at state schools for blind and low-vision students and with registered participants in advance of the workshop were also invaluable in putting together workshop materials. Edward J. Waterhouse, *History of the Howe Press of the Perkins School for the Blind* (Waterton, MA: Howe Press, 1975); Erika Piola, "The Michael Zinman Collection of Printing for the Blind," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 141, no. 3 (2017): 361–64; Carol Brenner Tobe, *History in the Making: The Story of the American Printing House for the Blind, 1858–2008* (Louisville, KY: Butler Books, 2008); Elizabeth M. Harris, "Inventing Printing for the Blind," *Printing History* 8, no. 2 (1986): 15–25; and Elizabeth Harris, Richard Virgo, James Spears, Robert Conklin, Stanley Nelson, and Marcia Tucker, *In Touch: Printing and Writing for the Blind in the 19th Century* (September 22, 1980–October 18, 1981), National Museum of American History, Smithsonian, June 21, 2022, https://www.si.edu/exhibitions/touch-printing-writing-blind-19th-century-event-exhib-3932.

8. Woiak and Lang, "Theory Meets Practice," 141.

9. *Touch This Page! Making Sense of the Ways We Read*, Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, MA, Touch This Page, accessed January 31, 2022, https://touchthispage.com.

10. Joseph Michael Valente, "'Your American Sign Language Interpreters Are Hurting Our Education': Toward a Relational Understanding of Inclusive Classroom Pedagogy," *Transformations* 25, no. 2 (2014): 20–36, quotation on 24.

11. Ryan Cordell, "Q i-jtb the Raven: Taking Dirty OCR Seriously," *Book History* 20 (2017): 188–225.