



**Case Study:
Developing Accessible Practices to Support Actors with Specific Learning Disabilities**

by Clara Kundin

Introduction

As academia and the field of theater at large increasingly respond to calls to improve access to learning and theatrical spaces, the broad scope of disability is often not considered when developing access measures. As a teaching artist working with elementary students with Specific Learning Disabilities¹, I found that standard theater-making processes did not accommodate actors who struggled to read and/or memorize. This experience led me to pursue my graduate degree to research, develop, and implement accessible audition, rehearsal, and performance practices for actors with Specific Learning Disabilities in a variety of settings, including professional, university, and youth theater.

This paper summarizes one case study of this research project: the rehearsal and performance process of the devised, physical-theater production of *Anthropocene*, presented at Arizona State University in fall of 2023. As the Assistant Director, I also served as the de facto

¹ The Learning Disabilities Association of America defines Specific Learning Disabilities as “genetic and/or neurobiological factors that alter brain functioning in a manner which affects one or more cognitive processes related to learning. These processing problems can interfere with learning basic skills such as reading, writing and/or math. They can also interfere with higher level skills such as organization, time planning, abstract reasoning, long or short-term memory and attention.” (“Types of Learning Disabilities,” Learning Disabilities Association of America, accessed September 2021, <https://ldaamerica.org/types-of-learning-disabilities>).

Access Consultant, implementing access measures such as daily access checks, visual schedules, and large font scripts designed to support actors with learning disabilities that largely impact reading, writing, and sequencing. Based on the theory of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), I offered accommodations to all actors, regardless of disclosed or perceived disability². At the end of the process, I sent a survey to actors requesting their feedback on the access measures; nine of the fifteen actors responded to the survey, a 60% completion rate. Additionally, I interviewed the director after closing to gain her insights on the process of implementing the access measures. The subsequent analysis is based on that data and my own observations and experiences.

In this paper, I describe not just the implementation process, but the challenges and ethical considerations for twelve of these practices, including the process of negotiating conflicting needs. I considered complex questions such as: How do you proceed when an access measure like extended rehearsal time benefits some participants but harms others? Should you use large print that requires more paper when producing theater about climate change? How do you balance the access needs of others with your own access needs and time constraints? The principles of Universal Design fell short when certain access measures benefited some but not all, even harming some people. Ultimately, I conclude that access is not a one-size-fits all process. Several of the access measures I describe should be implemented as often as possible because they benefit many and harm none, but those findings were not universal. This case study shows that access is a negotiated process and documents the complexity behind making theater accessible, ultimately highlighting the impossibility of “universality” as an approach to accessibility.

²“The UDL Guidelines,” UDL Guidelines, CAST, accessed February 8, 2022, www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl.

Context

I served as the Assistant Director for the 2023 production of *Anthropocene*: a devised, physical theater production about themes of climate change and consumerism. The director, Rachel Bowditch, allowed me to implement certain access measures into the rehearsal and performance process of the show. The show was devised over a three-year period, but I only began access work during the “traditional” audition and rehearsal process after the script was formally set. The actors in the production were both undergraduate and graduate students in a variety of majors, and the undergraduate theatre program itself offers only B.A. degrees. The play involved minimal dialogue, heavy choreography, and a nonlinear narrative. Due to the unique nature of the production, Bowditch already utilized several access measures without needing my recommendations; I note these in my discussion of this process below.

Access Measures

During the audition, rehearsal, and performance process of *Anthropocene*, we implemented the following accommodation measures. I will discuss each measure in detail and describe both actor and production team response as well. Several of the access measures were recommended by me but were implemented by the director or stage manager without my guidance:

1. Used sans serif fonts in text materials.³

The use of sans serif fonts frequently makes reading easier for dyslexic individuals. Director Rachel Bowditch had prepared the original script document in a serif font. When I recommended changing the font, she easily changed the document font to Arial, a sans serif font often recommended as one of the best practices for readers with dyslexia and one already

³ This practice is drawn from many different sources, The Autistic Self Advocacy Network being and the British Dyslexia Association as examples, though I am unable to cite the original source.

installed on most computers. Generally, the stage manager and directing team were able to use sans serif fonts in any additional text materials. The rest of the production team, including designers who were not involved in discussions about my research, largely used serif fonts in presentations to the actors. As the Assistant Director, I was not always present in production meetings to communicate this access measure, nor did I feel comfortable making this demand in my role.

In my survey to the actors, I asked specifically about the use of sans serif font for the script. This accommodation was one of the least beneficial according to the actor survey, with 33% of actors responding neutrally or only slightly positively toward the accommodation; the remaining 33% responded highly positively toward the accommodation. As the use of sans serif fonts is specifically targeted to aid individuals with dyslexia, it makes sense that more actors did not find this practice useful. Importantly, no actors found the practice harmful, indicating that a simple switch to sans serif fonts can significantly benefit some while not harming or inconveniencing others.

2. Used size 16 font on printed materials when possible.

This practice is also targeted to support dyslexic individuals.⁴ This recommendation conflicted with the ethical imperative of this show to reduce waste. While making a show about climate change, it felt contradictory to demand that the team implement an access measure that would require the use of more paper. I discussed this conundrum with the director and we agreed that we would ask the actors if they wanted a script in a large print font. Seven of the fifteen actors requested scripts in this larger font, so I made a distinct larger font script.

⁴ Deborah Leveroy, "A Date with the Script": Exploring the Learning Strategies of Actors Who Are Dyslexic," *Theatre, dance and performance training* 6, no. 3 (2015): 307-322.

While this method of printing the script eliminated excess waste, it made tracking scenes more difficult as not all the actors, stage managers, and directing team had scripts with the same page numbers. One of our assistant stage managers spent the time figuring out how the page numbers corresponded and gave that information to the production stage manager who was then able to call out the parallel page numbers. This process worked until we needed to modify certain scenes due to the nature of the devising process. It became very difficult to track who needed a larger font and how page numbers would then be adjusted. At this point in the rehearsal however, actors were largely memorized in certain scenes so the discrepancy in page numbers proved less problematic. I decided to trust that actors who wanted a larger font would make that request to me for additional printed pages. In other devising processes, I would recommend universally adapting large font size scripts and then asking actors if they would prefer printed or digital copies to eliminate excess printing waste. In show processes with set scripts, having multiple sets of scripts with different font sizes might be reasonable as long as the stage management team is willing to take on the one-time labor of coordinating page number differences. Adjusting margins or printing on larger sized paper may also assist with this issue.

Similarly to issues with universal implementation of the use of sans serif fonts, using large font size proved difficult to implement across the entire production team in actor-facing materials such as design presentations. This speaks to the need for and difficulty of systemic change. The majority (55%) of actors who responded to the survey indicated that this practice was beneficial with only one respondent answering neutrally, which indicates a need for a shift to larger font scripts for a significant number of actors.

3. Provided advance digital copies of audition/callback text.⁵

⁵ Sally D. Bailey, *Wings to fly: Bringing theatre arts to students with special needs* (Woodbine House, 1992).

This practice supports actors with a variety of disabilities, including dyslexia. Everyone who viewed the audition sign up form was provided a link to the entire show script. In this way, actors could familiarize themselves with the script and any text sent out for auditions. We did not send out a specific cut from the script for the callbacks, and my initial suspicion was that many actors probably did not take the time to read the full script, meaning that the callbacks effectively would require cold reading. However, based on survey responses, 77% of the actor respondents found this practice highly useful and all responses were positive, indicating that this accommodation was utilized by many.

4. Provided digital character descriptions in advance of auditions/callbacks.⁶

This accommodation supports actors who struggle with reading comprehension and might need additional time to understand a character as written. One of the requirements of mainstage shows at Arizona State University is that they must provide a description of all characters. I am uncertain as to the origin of this requirement, but it functions both as an access measure and a content warning for students who are auditioning. Due to the nature of this show, with most actors playing multiple characters, the audition form listed a description for thirty-seven characters, most of whom did not have lines or full backstories. One character description read, “Flight Attendant 3 (movement-based/dance) 1950s flight attendant who performs the hip-hop inspired flight safety dance.” We also provided a list of what characters each actor would play; for example, one actor would play a mother, then a gardener, and then a cleaning lady. My suspicion is that the character descriptions might have been more useful and accessible if we had only described roles that were not intuitively understood, such as the “Water Seeker,” and not roles with obvious titles, such as “Sewing Factory Worker 2.” Additionally, while the list of

⁶ Whitney Lowrey, Google Docs comment, June 11, 2023.

characters played by each actor seems like it would have been very helpful, the turnout of people for auditions required us to adjust the number of actors we cast and therefore roles they played. Our original breakdown indicated twelve actors, but we cast fifteen, necessarily requiring us to adjust the role allocation. A more useful character description might have included descriptions of some characters, an indication of how many roles would require movement and/or speaking, and a statement that all actors would be required to perform multiple roles. This small shift would have required negotiation between the production team and the university administration as it would have violated the audition policy but ultimately may have better served students. This result reflects how standardized implementation of access measures is not useful or practical; instead, finding nuance within access recommendations might yield more useful results. Despite these complications, 66% of survey respondents found this practice highly useful.

5. Eliminated cold read requirements from auditions/callbacks.⁷

We did not require cold reads for auditions and in theory did not require them for callbacks to support dyslexic individuals; however, as I previously mentioned, because we did not indicate which scenes would be read at callbacks, it is quite likely that some actors did not familiarize themselves with the entire script prior to callbacks. Survey responses were mixed between highly positive (44%) and moderately positive (44%) with one respondent answering neutrally. The general culture of auditioning has conditioned actors to expect cold readings, and many are prepared to do so, but a significant number of people would benefit from eliminating the practice. One of the respondents who indicated they had dyslexia provided extra context for their response, saying, “I tend to get extra anxiety when I [*sic*] comes to cold reading in front of people. Because of this I tend to mess up more while reading. Even though I don’t have trouble

⁷ Deborah Leveroy, “A Date with the Script’: Exploring the Learning Strategies of Actors Who Are Dyslexic,” *Theatre, dance and performance training* 6, no. 3 (2015): 307-322.

reading in low pressure situations having a chance to have the materials ahead of time allowed me to take the time I needed to familiarize myself with the text. This allowed me to concentrate on the audition rather than how I sound reading.” This is another example of how a practice that significantly benefits one person while not harming others should be implemented as often as possible.

6. Used an extended rehearsal period of eight weeks.⁸

This was an accommodation measure that was already in place because of the nature of the show and the director’s rehearsal preference. She prefers to rehearse fewer days a week over a longer stretch of time to spend more time at home with her child. Additionally, extra rehearsal time allowed for the first week of rehearsals to be spent in a physical theater style training intensive that additionally served to support cast bonding, instead of having to immediately jump into blocking. This scheduling choice aligned with my recommendation to provide a longer rehearsal timeline to give actors with disabilities impacting memory adequate time to learn the show, so I discuss it as an access measure despite the decision originating outside of my recommendation. Working within a university setting without the financial constraints of weekly actor salaries made this scheduling possible as well.

One difficulty with this schedule is that for many, the longer time commitment to the project caused other challenges. As I work professionally outside of my school obligations, I had to work on all my days off from rehearsal. This meant that I was away from home and my family for seven days a week for the entire eight-week process. I imagine that other student actors who have other work and school obligations may have faced a similar struggle. One of the survey respondents indicated that this practice was significantly harmful to them, aligning with my

⁸ Sally D. Bailey, *Wings to fly: Bringing theatre arts to students with special needs* (Woodbine House, 1992).

suspicious and own situation. This is a scenario where universal accommodation is not possible because no one rehearsal schedule can benefit all people. I generally recommend that university settings provide show opportunities on a variety of rehearsal timelines to allow student actors to make the choice that will work with their personal schedules, particularly since many of the survey respondents found this timeline highly beneficial. Professionally, longer rehearsal timelines generally result in more money for the actor, to their benefit, though of course additional cost to the producing theater is always a challenge.

7. Sent an access survey to actors in advance of rehearsals.⁹

The mainstage shows at Arizona State University always send access surveys to the actors. As the Assistant Director, I was not privy to the responses, but the director informed me that a quiet room had been created based on a requested accommodation from one of the actors, so the responses are clearly valued and acted upon when possible. As I was not part of that access survey process, I sent an additional email to the actors to solicit answers to the following questions:

1) Would you like the script printed in a larger (size 16) font? Yes or No.

2) We will be reading through the script on the first day. Reading out loud or just listening are both options. Do you consent to read out loud for the read through?

Yes or No.

3) The first week will involve heavy movement, including on Day 1. Do you have any physical/movement-related access needs you would like us to be aware of?

As I previously indicated, seven actors requested scripts printed in a larger font. All actors consented to the cold read through, and none of the actors shared any access needs related to

⁹ This recommendation is drawn from the practice of many access consultants, Lily Lipman being one of them.

movement. The question about consenting to the cold read was an option collaboratively created between the director and myself in response to my suggestion that we eliminate the common practice (to support actors with a variety of reading disabilities) and her feeling that it would be beneficial for the actors to hear the full performance treatment read aloud because it was an unknown, devised play. I highly recommend creating a consent-based cold read procedure for processes where a first day cold read of the script feels useful. Most of the actors who responded to the survey (66%) indicated that the procedure was highly beneficial.

8. Began each rehearsal with an access needs check in.¹⁰

The director always begins her classes and rehearsals with a ritual that includes movement and an energy check-in on a scale of one to ten. I added an access check in to this daily ritual, following the procedure of Nicole Brewer.¹¹ Actors share their access needs or say, “My access needs are met,” if they have none. I explained what an access need was on the first day and generally this procedure was easily adopted by the cast and production team. This practice was the most observable as a change that began to infuse other settings. When we moved into tech week, the Cultural Consent Representative¹² led an introductory check in and did not prompt actors and crew to share their access needs; most of the actors still did, indicating a habit formed and a step in the creation of a culture of access. Most excitingly, a student in one of the director’s classes indicated that the director/teacher had added an access needs check in to the top of her daily class ritual. Bowditch verified this shift in her post-show interview saying, “I loved the access needs check in. I now do it in my classes. Access needs help humanize

¹⁰ This practice and the use of access surveys support all individuals as access needs are not specific to just disabled individuals.

¹¹ Nicole Brewer, “Anti-Racist Theatre,” workshop, 2021.

¹² A unique position at ASU designed to support student safety in school production processes.

people.”¹³ Bowditch’s comment should not be misconstrued as to suggest that sharing access needs helps make disabled people seem human but rather that the process of sharing them allows people to express their shared humanity in a system that often represses that expression. Seeing this practice move out of the rehearsal space for this one production and into a class culture at the school was perhaps my proudest moment during this process. Most actors who responded to the survey (66%) found this practice highly beneficial.

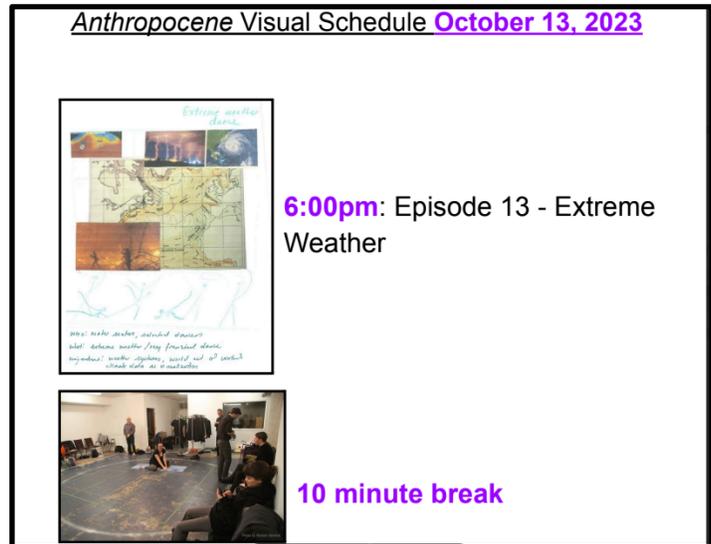
9. Provided an advance visual story description of what to expect at each rehearsal.¹⁴

In addition to sending the standard rehearsal call, I created a visual schedule for the actors that was sent out with the rehearsal call email each night. The use of visual schedules is a common support for autistic people as well as young people; I incorporated it due to the low reading requirement that could also support dyslexic individuals and those who struggle with sequencing. Using the director’s visual script images, I could indicate the rehearsal order using only images and minimal text (start times, names of people, etc). I depicted things like warmups and breaks using images sourced from the internet and maintained the same images throughout the rehearsal process for familiarity. If we had designers attending rehearsal, I sourced images of the people to include. These visual schedules were always made using size 16 sans serif font.

¹³ Rachel Bowditch, Personal Interview with author, 2023.

¹⁴ Sophie Scanlon, Phone Interview with author, April 13, 2023.

Making these visual stories (see figure) each night was the most challenging accommodation practice I implemented simply because of the time it took to make each one. I found myself hoping that the post-production survey would reveal that the actors had not found these visual schedules helpful because I tired of making them. Ultimately, I was thrilled that they did prove useful for several people, with 44% of survey respondents indicating they were highly beneficial, but my fatigue speaks to the challenges of labor that might arise when trying to support certain access needs. This is one accommodation that I would only offer in the future if actors specifically indicate they need it in a pre-



production access survey or if I worked with a dedicated accessibility officer on a production. In this example, the access measure benefited several, harmed no one directly, but the labor of implementation was stressful and time consuming as I had to prioritize making schedules over my other responsibilities in rehearsal. Since this rehearsal process, I have developed a template and standardized process for making visual schedules which has significantly reduced the labor required in making them.

10. Recorded scenes and choreography and provided in an organized digital format.¹⁵

This accommodation was designed to support individuals with disabilities that affect memory and sequencing. We created a shared Google Drive for all the actors. The drive contained a folder for choreography with subfolders for each relevant scene. After blocking or

¹⁵ Sally Bailey, *Barrier-free theatre: Including everyone in theatre arts – In schools, recreation, and arts programs – Regardless of (dis)ability*, (Idyll Arbor, Inc, 2010).

choreographing each scene, we filmed a run through of the scene and uploaded the video to the appropriate folder, labeling the file with the dance name and date of recording. The only difficulty with this practice was managing the required phone and Google Drive storage capacities of those taking the video and hosting the shared drive. This was one of the most popular accommodations we offered with 89% of respondents indicating the practice was highly beneficial, suggesting that any complications of storage are well worth problem-solving to support actor learning.

11. Sent actor notes by email as well as giving in person.¹⁶

As the Assistant Director, I was in a convenient position to type the director's notes while she gave them to the actors. In the typed document, the choreographer and I were able to add any additional notes prior to sending the document in an email to the actors, including a few we did not have time to give verbally. In this way the actors had opportunities to process the notes by listening, writing them down, and/or reading them in an email which benefited individuals with reading, writing, memory, and auditory processing disabilities. This was another incredibly beneficial measure with 89% of respondents marking highly beneficial.

12. Provided individual, actor-specific scene lists.

Because of the complex, non-narrative nature of the show, the director created fillable printed documents for the actors with space to indicate character(s) played, quick changes, entrances and exits, and any other useful information. Because of the document created by the director, my workload was lightened and the actors were able to reinforce their knowledge of their track throughout the show by writing it down themselves. I then collected the documents and typed them up, maintaining any spelling or symbols used by the actors, so they could easily

¹⁶ Ibid.

read and reference them during the run of the show and to support individuals with disabilities affecting sequencing and memory. Most respondents (89%) found this practice highly beneficial.

Conclusion

Working in this university setting allowed me to implement a significant number of access measures to support actors with Specific Learning Disabilities. Overall, the majority of actors who responded to my survey found all the access measures helpful. My general observations of actors align with the survey conclusions. Many of the practices required only small changes or adjustments that had large benefits for certain individual actors.

The only measures which proved harmful at times were the extended rehearsal and excess printing measures. Additionally, several measures proved significantly challenging for me to implement due to my own time constraints. These conclusions suggest that access is not something that can always be universally implemented but must be tested, negotiated, and continually evaluated if it is truly to the benefit of all. Additionally, continuing to provide choice, flexibility, and the use of consent-based practices will allow for actors to engage in processes that support them in the unique ways they need support.

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