

Access as Relationship: Lessons from Lived Experience

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As a nonprofit director myself, I know that it can feel overwhelming to absorb all the information in the Arts Access Hub. It helps me to remember that access is an ongoing process of engaging with communities who live with diverse intersectional barriers. Aiming for adaptation is more important than seeking perfection. Many of these guiding principles on learning to adapt were shared with me by multi-marginalized artists that I admire:

- Everyone has access needs - your access needs may be the default for a space or group so often that you no longer notice them but this does not mean that you do not have them.
- With whom, how, where, and why people communicate our access needs is a fluid process.
- adrienne maree brown identifies “moving at the speed of trust” as one of the pillars of Emergent Strategies. Communicating access needs is vulnerable for people and will need to move at the speed of trust. Don’t be surprised if someone’s access needs shift as you get to know them better.
- People don’t have to tell anyone about any of their access needs unless they want or need to share them.
- Modelling your access needs first creates space and trust for others to share with you.
- If someone shares an access need with you, it does not mean that they wish for you to share those needs or any other information about their embodied experiences with others.
- Just because someone has an access need does not mean that you will be able to provide that accommodation or support. There are often access needs within a group that conflict with each other.
- Listening to each individual is vital. If someone says that their access needs are met and does not ask for help with an apparent disability, do not force your help onto them.

In addition, having acquired disabilities teaches me about navigating public spaces and cultural environments with a new perspective than I used to experience. I share these experiences not to shame any particular individual or organization but to help people understand what it feels like to be excluded by design—and how small changes, intentional listening, and genuine care can transform spaces into places of belonging.

- **Encourage access conversations regularly within your daily life.** When we start to acknowledge our needs in ongoing ways, we learn to communicate and support each other better. For example, Monkeyhouse has developed an [access doula kit](#) based off of advice from [JJ Omegalah](#) from [Embraced Body](#). When we first started offering it for participants at dance events, I would just say that it was in the room. As we would discuss access needs, I realized that people could use tools in the bag but were not asking for them or just taking them out of the bag. The kit was more effective if support tools were spread out on a table, where people could see them and more importantly, see others take them and use them.
- **Know that having resources means that you should maintain those resources.** This includes keeping extra batteries and charging cables around for electronic resources. For example, I was at a space recently that proudly proclaimed that they had roll-in showers for artists to use...right before they explained that they use it as an added storage space during events. If you treat these resources as things that will not be needed but are there for compliance reasons, they most likely will not be fully useful to people when they need them. And as a person who may need them, see them being used inappropriately, make me feel dismissed and disrespected.
- **On the other hand, do not police your resources.** I have been asked if I can provide a doctor's note at a theater to prove that I need an accessible seat when my walker was broken and a friend assisted me. Last year, I was barred from using an elevated lift at a work site. A staff member had never seen my new walker before and thought it was a personal shopping cart/dog stroller. These situations where I have to defend my reasons for needing a resource are humiliating.
- **Before you list resources that you have on your website, ensure that those resources are available to anyone who uses your building.** For example, if I read a job listing that says that your organization encourages people from marginalized

communities to apply, I may check your website and see if your building lists accessible ramps, accessible bathrooms etc. I will be really frustrated, however, if I apply and discover that the business offices are up a flight of stairs and there are no elevators to that area.

- **Reaching out to people with questions can make them feel welcomed.** Too often people don't ask questions because they are afraid of being seen as ignorant. When a friend who does not identify as having a disability reached out to me to ask if I wanted a new theater to invest in mats for floor seating, I felt deeply valued. That friend had attended performances with me where I could lie on the floor during a pain episode and observed that I was much more comfortable than in places where I had to remain in a chair.