Accessible Participation in Academic Conferences if You Are Visually Impaired

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Abstract

Participating in academic events of knowledge exchange is primordial for researchers. The experiential experiences of people with visual impairments with accessibility differences in such scientific practices are reflected. The theoretical concept of ‘accessible participation’ is linked with the exchange of lived experiences of the first two authors—both PhD researchers who are visually impaired—who take part in academic conferences in the domain of Disability Studies. Boundary conditions, intensive preparation, connecting with colleagues and making scientific contributions...
are analysed as accessibility issues that are necessary to enable participation in an academic context.

Keywords

visual impairment – participation – accessibility – academic conferences

1 Introduction

Academic conferences are a crucial and essential part of doing qualitative and quantitative research, which is always about knowledge exchange in multiple—often visual—ways (Budge et al., 2016). The experiences of attending academic conferences often require significant navigation and negotiation of space for academics with a disability who can develop a non-stereotypical work style (Brown et al., 2018). What about the experiences with and obstacles in the accessibility of scientific practices and participating in academic conferences of disabled academics? This article positions itself in the context of disability and higher education by presenting the lived actuality of visually impaired academics who participate in academic conferences.

Contextual information is necessary for the telling of our experiences. The first two authors are both junior researchers in and engaged with conferences on the domain of Disability Studies. The first author participated in the ePATH conference 2019 (as audience), Academia Ophthalmologica Belgica (2019) with an e-poster, the online PhD sessions of the faculty’s research day (2021) with a five-slide pitch; the online International Conference on Disability Studies (2022) with an awarded 10-minute presentation; and shared the content of this text at a webinar on travelling and networking with confidence at the American Foundation of the Blind (2022). The second author took part in three academic conferences: the international disability studies conference in 2013 (as audience), the same conference in 2017 with a presentation, and a conference of the European Agency for Equal Human Rights in Vienna in 2015 (as a participant in discussions). The first two authors are sharing their experiences and reflections of being visually impaired participants and speakers at academic conferences.

We reveal our presence, our way of being and our different ways of doing, and we make our participation perceivable, meaningful and sensible. We explicate our experiences with (in)accessibility challenges and justify all matters of
inclusion. We explore workarounds with inaccessible structures of university life and uncover ways we believe barriers may be overturned. Questions arise during the interactional scenes of access struggles in an educational workplace environment and giving reasons for access improvements.

We would like to bring accessible participation to the consciousness of universities by arguing for a more inclusive version of academic conferences. The aim is to provide a constructive contribution to the accessibility of academic conferences. We change how our participation is seen and how we are—or can be—treated. We seek to explore the potential of disability to unsettle and challenge exclusionary practices.

2 Accessible Participation—Theoretical Framework

The concept of ‘participation’ occurs in a range of contexts and encompasses more than may first appear. It is extensively conceptualised in-depth as a multi-layered and relational process of becoming, as having access to and engaging with activities (McCormack & Collins, 2012; Vandenbussche & De Schauwer, 2017). Participation is about who participates, how and in what ways (Jager-Vreugdenhil, 2011). An ideal picture of such participation, of circumstances that allow everyone to take part fully, is assumed ‘inclusion’ (Vosters, Petrina & Heemskerk, 2013). Being included—enhancing participants’ access to social and educational opportunities—is a commitment required from everyone (Whitburn, 2014). An inclusive academic atmosphere facilitates everyone’s involvement and invites people with disabilities to take part. Consequently, the theme and underlying principles of academic conferences need to enlarge and maximise participation. To provide participation to and belonging in academic conferences, relational accessibility is of high relevance and priority.

Participatory involvement closely connects to the concept of accessibility (Vandenbussche & De Schauwer, 2017). Accessibility is an active interpretation, a highly relational move, and an embodied perception of how places and people are made meaningful. It is a human attitude to perceive, talk and act (Titchkosky, 2011) as the opportunity to express personal needs and how these can be met. This understanding of accessibility could imply that:

Being open, and being vulnerable to being affected by the other, is how we accomplish our humanity; it is how the communities of which we are part, create and re-create themselves. We are not separate from the encounters that make up the community but, rather, emergent with them.

Davies, 2014, p. 10
It is understandable as an orientation towards—or wondering about—who and how participative positionality can be found in social spaces (Titchkosky, 2011). Disability then poses the question of access for whom, or embodiment, and what (Titchkosky, 2008). Such interpretation of accessibility includes incorporating several, entangled layers of physical, relational, cultural, intellectual, technical, structural, financial and social accommodations that are necessary conditions to enabling participation (Schoeters, 2021). Putting attention on accessibility is important because of its fundamental condition for participation and belonging in an academic setting.

Accessible participation is experiencing occupational justice, ‘having fair opportunities to do, be, belong, and become in accord with their potential … having the resources and opportunity for engagement’ (Bulk, 2020b, p. 2). Such scholarship is about the intra-actions between the participants and their contexts (Titchkosky, 2011). Accessible participation is a basal existence for everyone, even people with (visual) impairments. It is about experiencing inclusion and engaging in meaningful (academic) occupations, based on both physical and technical, and material and social resources (Bulk, 2020a). Although assistive technologies can provide bridges to inaccessible physical and digital environments (Whitburn & Thomas, 2021), physical barriers prevent the participation of some people (Titchkosky, 2008) and physical inclusion does not necessarily result in social integration for visually impaired people (Whitburn, 2014). In a visual-orientated world, physical access could include lighting design to accommodate the lighting levels (Beckwith, 2019), and digital access to textbooks, documents, course material or presentations are often a barrier (McCall, 2019). It is about experiencing the implementation of facilitating support mechanisms and arrangements to have agency and seamless access (Whitburn, 2014). Thinking in line with Tregaskis and Goodley (2005), disabled people must reveal too much to have equal participation. Also in academic settings, equal participation is needed to fulfil a collective accessibility approach instead of a thoroughly individualised matter of disability access issues (Titchkosky, 2011). Accessible participation is a collective ethical responsibility: (non-)human supports mutually affect the constitution of inclusion for disabled people (Whitburn & Thomas, 2021).

3 Method

This article is not solely ‘research on’ or ‘research with’ visually impaired people; it is research by two researchers who are visually impaired themselves. The first
two authors took their workplaces as their analysis setting (Titchkosky, 2011). We turn the analytical lens on ourselves as an axis from which to examine our participation in academic life and experiences as a person with visual impairment. No visual impairment is the same and therefore is revealing. We offer a subjective account of impairment in social discourse that challenges others’ notions about our lived realities (Tregaskis & Goodley, 2005). Our lived experiences must be heard to better interpret exclusion (Whitburn, 2014), which concerns educational and social inclusion more broadly. Such participatory research methods involve insider perspectives, which is fundamental to privileging ontological experiences and reflections (Tregaskis & Goodley, 2005). Based on our positionality, we make our experiential knowledge more explicit and, in this way, scientific. From our insider perspectives by means of descriptions, we present our personal life experiences and/or research results on the issue of accessible participation in conferences and making a valuable contribution to scientific knowledge (Budge et al., 2016). Learning on account of different methods or types of engagement is facilitated when disability experiences are truly appreciated (Bolt, 2017). It is scientifically relevant to incorporate our experiences because of an epistemological problem of avoiding disability in the academy (Bolt & Penketh, 2016). We seek to transform this space of negation by recognising what is produced in this act of avoidance (by exploring and demonstrating ways in which we experience participation at conferences) with an aim to transform the nature of such encounters or relationships. We recognise the opportunities afforded by engaging with bodily difference; we recognise the creative capacities of such bodies, and we question the cultural rules about what we should be or how we should ‘do’ conferences. We set up a dialogue that could support conference organisers and all participants. These practical ideas and advice on how to make academia and its conferences more accessible are needed to do academia differently and feel recognised as researchers (Brown et al., 2018).

This article originated from informal exchanges between the first two authors. We are both junior PhD researchers who live with a visual impairment. We are both doing qualitative research in the domain of Disability Studies on the issue of visual impairment, and have already taken part in some academic conferences. Doing research and academic conferences as a visually impaired researcher provides some confrontations, whereby it is very helpful to learn from fellows. We exchanged our impairment effects by sending emails to each other and having some telephone conversations, and the key to developing this connection was sharing experiences, challenges and solutions (Tregaskis & Goodley, 2005). Dialoguing helped frame our experiences, reflections and
understanding, which subsequently created scientific knowledge. We searched for commonalities in experiences via dialogues with each other, focusing on our engagements in academic conferences. We asked ourselves and each other critical questions to reflect on our positions as visually impaired researchers and our personal ways of taking part in academic conferences. In this way, we enacted a micro-community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to learn from each other and educate conference organisers. Writing down what was collected in these negotiations felt like the next logical step. We brought a preliminary investigation of our individual experiences. First, we formally ordered our experiences binarily (being the audience and being the speaker at conferences), but we shifted the text into topics related to the accessibility of and participation in conferences. We surrounded ourselves with colleagues who did not have disabilities. Negotiations with the third and fourth authors structured the text and supported further thoughts on accessible participation. All the experiences were carefully discussed several times and subjected to qualitative content analysis. This process of analysis followed inductive and conceptual mapping procedures, as suggested by Clarke (2005) and Charmaz (2006). The first two authors identified reoccurring themes, common patterns and key points (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009) concerning accessible participation. The themes were examined for consistent patterns and exceptions by all researchers, and the inter-relationships between themes were discussed. Our discussions about combining a scientific and experiential positionality, or our moving back and forth between multiple ideas, shaped our understanding. The next section, which details an exchange of experiences, shows how boundary conditions, intensive preparation, connecting with colleagues and making scientific contributions emerged as meaningful for the first two authors in our academic trajectory as visually impaired PhD researchers. This analysis is written in a dialogical way to overview the personally experienced themes.

4 Results

The four parts of this section overview a dialogical exchange of experiences with accessible participation in conferences. Mobility, finding our way, and the organisational transparency of conferences are conditional accessibility issues of high significance. Arranging ourselves down to the last detail is also necessary. Preparing ourselves to a great extent in advance embodies primordially fixing support to enable ourselves to participate. Belonging at conferences includes networking, meeting others and targeting interesting speakers, which is challenging due to visual impairment. Taking part in
conferences as an audience member who asks relevant questions or as a researcher who presents their study results is the fourth topic of accessible participation.

4.1 Boundary Conditions
A consequence of being visually impaired is the challenged ability to navigate spontaneously. Physical access is experienced as more than going somewhere. Practical and informational support is appreciated and provides embedding in the event. Paying attention to multiple boundary conditions then enables participants to belong as an audience and speakers.

Leendert:

During the second international Disability Studies conference in 2013, the theme was ‘The Art of Belonging’, which ‘not only reflects on aspirations to encourage high levels of participation of people with disabilities, but also the centrality of this concept when engaging disabled people in research’ (Budge et al., 2016). To make this happen, there was the so-called buddy project: participants who needed it could make use of a buddy, someone who walked along and read texts, and indicated a convenient place in the room to sit down. In 2013, I was able to be myself in a very natural way.

Jentel:

In addition to this good practice, I experienced the value of a pre-determined assistant during the EPATH conference in 2019 and Academia Ophthalmologica Belgica in 2019. The supportive and amicable relationship provides a complementary match (Budge et al., 2016), whereby the assistant is a trustable and safe point. You can share your personal interests in advance, and they can take these preferences into account. Moreover, this acquaintance can assist during wider travelling (hotel, transport) when the conference consists of multiple days. However, it does not substitute for a community of attentive colleagues, a network of friends who take you into the ambience. You need more than good support to belong.

Leendert:

In connection with making plans—for instance, for transport or to be able to go to the right room—it is important that the information is clear in advance and at the moment you are involved in the conference; for
example, the times, the address, where you are expected in the building, etc. This information is conditional to functioning naturally during the events.

Jentel:

For visually impaired people, it is difficult to navigate unfamiliar spaces: this practical need should be acknowledged. Some locations are easy to find by car but are inaccessible with public transport. The ability to acknowledge your need to be guided to or from the event location encourages me to set up a transport plan in advance. In that case, a structured overview of sessions, speakers, rooms and additional services due to special needs on a webpage or in a (digital) conference book is very helpful. At online conferences, it is also helpful to explore the tools in advance so that short keys are well known previously.

Leendert:

Sometimes presentations may be plenary sessions designed for all attendees, and then there are breakout sections designed for smaller groups. In such a case, I often need help to find the right room. During meetings it is useful to know how a room is set up, so you do not end up in an odd place or where the guide dog must stand up in front of passers-by.

Jentel:

I personally prefer a place at the exterior of the room, close to the doors/walls, because of various motivations. I feel safer there than being in the crowd, the overload of whispering sounds is less dominant, and most times the wall outlets to charge your computer with braille, screen magnifier or screen reader software to take notes are over there too.

Leendert:

It is also helpful to receive presentations in advance so I can read the content or follow the slides. I appreciate it when these presentations are well structured because sometimes I miss the link between the speech and the visuals. I also like when relevant texts or images are read out during the meeting.
Jentel:

For the audience, having access to the content is a boundary condition, and it is an exercise for speakers to provide this. When I present research data, I also try to make the presentation accessible. For instance, I visually show citations of qualitative research on the slides and let the audience also listen to a pre-recorded voice that reads them out loud.

Lessons that can be learned by academic conference organisers are offering assistance, clearness, comfort and attentiveness. This flexibility and creativity allow accessible participation by focusing on basal issues that otherwise would dominate the person’s functioning.

4.2 Intensive Preparation

Drawing our attention to other dimensions of our participation, such as the use of assistive technology or thoughts on receiving support, prompted us to speak about other aspects of our participation that impacted our experiences. For us, accessible participation is also linked to intensive preparation. The opportunity to develop and follow our own way of acting, which we answer with accessibility to our individual challenges, makes participation possible.

Jentel:

An alternative to ordinary visual presentations is to make a presentation and record your speech in advance. Then you show a kind of movie and are present to answer questions. This feels less qualitative or professional but has equal preparation intensity. In this case, the accommodation of the room is conditional to making the sound heard.

Transcending this, I am aware of the visual support for the audience of a (poster) presentation, but I am individually unable to provide an aesthetic presentation myself. Mostly, I prepare the content in a text document, and someone else puts in the colours and contrasts. This collaborative way of working is very intensive and involves much communication to transfer my ideas into attractive slides. The development of such collaborative approaches facilitates deeper access and is an important learning experience that further enriches the process.
Leendert:

Well-sighted speakers can have a look or sign elements on the screen to guide the audience or catch up in their minds during the speech. Visually impaired people are not able to do this. When I am confused or diverted in my structure, I am lost. Often, I purely tell my story without visuals. So verbally structuring the content is highly relevant. For instance, I introduce my points, I detail them, and I summarise them at the end. Intensive preparation is again key in that case.

Jentel:

Yes, improvising or adjusting to time changes is more difficult.

Leendert:

Some blind speakers use keywords in braille, but also in that case you must read fast. The challenge is also to find effective, short words, and I experience this exercise more intensively than well-sighted colleagues who need to do this.

Jentel:

Indeed, and in my experience, I often memorise my keywords at best and find that I do not need them during the presentation. However, it is helpful to have them so you can review yourself or go over the content in a break. In my view, it is not a problem to involve your audience to check the flow of the visuals and the presentation.

The conversations on intensive preparation also made evident the need to foresee all circumstances to enable these actions. Respecting particular struggles and the temporal or collaborative differences of workarounds is an openness that recognises additional efforts.

4.3 Connecting With Colleagues

We are all subjects constituted in or as our relations. Disability brings relational encounters to the world: through getting to know one another, we all get to know a little more about disability. Thus, being blind in a sighted
environment can teach us about interdependency in expected interactions. Whitburn and Michalko (2019) emphasise that interdependent relationships between visually impaired people and other (non-)human entities facilitate everyday tasks such as inclusion, mobility and travel. Consequently, relational accessibility is embodied in conversations about participation and belonging in academic conferences. These events are fundamentally built on exchanges, so finding connectivity is highly relevant. We focused on the interactional access struggles within this educational environment by exploring our initiatives to strengthen personality and communication.

Leendert:

At the start of a meeting where interaction will take place, it is useful to get an impression of who is present and where everyone is sitting. I need a guide to get around, but I also have limited orientation of my physical surroundings, which impacts negatively on my social skills.

Jentel:

When speakers mention their names, I try to memorise who is who. This is impossible when one person introduces all speakers because then you hear vague descriptions of people and cannot link the correct name to the relevant speaker.

Leendert:

I seek to prove the meaningfulness of my social existence or legitimise my appearance or participation. To be taken seriously as a researcher with a visual impairment, it is important to be and feel included in a mutual exchange of knowledge. This involves being included in informal talks and networking situations during breaks without people who are shy to speak directly. We want to share knowledge at the intellectual level of conferences, where we are not only recognised as interested clients but as researchers. I am searching for equality in situations in which I have felt stigmatised. Using a cane is in place to facilitate my inclusion, but it sometimes inhibits my approachability because of outsiders’ assumptions that blindness is accompanied by deficiency, so they do not have the need to talk to me.

MICHALKO & TITCHKOSKY, 2018.
Jentel:

I cannot target helpers or make quick eye contact to connect with interesting people. And how do you do that to recognise other conference attendees?

Leendert:

I have no idea what many fellow researchers look like, so I can’t let someone else look out for them. I often recognise them by their voices, provided I’ve heard them before. And sometimes you catch names, and then you prick up your ears to determine which voice belongs to them.

Jentel:

During breaks, it is nice when someone invites you to join a walk so that you can get a drink or network with other conference participants.

Leendert:

Or you can go to the toilet or walk the guide dog. At the end of the meeting, it is also nice to get assistance to the exit and/or the taxi.

Jentel:

It is fine when someone describes the room. First, to experience the ability to move spontaneously on the stage or with the microphone and be sure not to stand in the middle of the screen. Also, to know where I can locate the audience to involve them by (socially modified) eye contact. This emphasis on facial expressions and body language is ocular-centric and exclusionary for visually impaired people.


Leendert:

Yes, I would like to know who is taking part and if there are acquaintances to whom I will apply my story. Otherwise, it seems far away when someone I know is asking a question out of nowhere. Anyway, vast groups are difficult to measure their alertness; small groups are easier for managing interaction.
Jentel:

We also learned some tricks to involve the audience. For instance, moving your head seems as though you have acknowledged everyone, making gesticulations or using your body to support the story, portray or emphasise words with your hands. ... It is kind of acting like a well-sighted speaker, passing the normative format of what is expected. I am aware of doing visual things that are commonly expected.

Leendert:

Yes, but this is a tricky balance too. When you are acting natural, others forget your impairment over time. When they raise their hand to add something or gesticulate when posing a question, this is still unavailable to us.

Organisers of academic conferences and all attendees can initiate accessible participation relationally by addressing the visually impaired person. Connecting with each other to give descriptions can be a starting point for further exchanges of knowledge.

4.4 Doing Scientific Contributions

Sharing scientific knowledge is an important goal while participating in academic conferences. In common with their colleagues, visually impaired academics desire to make scientific contributions. This can be at the level of making their experiential knowledge explicit by illustrating methodological confusions and solutions.

Jentel:

At international conferences, the primary language is often different to the native language of the participants and speakers. Assistance with language translation is helpful but might be confusing when it interferes with audio descriptions of presentations. Whispering to describe, translate language or translate the meaning of visual content is not always possible when there is much noise in the (meeting) room. Even taking notes during the presentations is an extra element that makes the multitasking experience challenging. All my senses are over-active during conferences.
Leendert:

Maybe due to the circumstances, I must show relatively much of what I can't do, while normally, in daily life, I can do a lot. Therefore, the first impressions I give other participants are not the impressions of someone who is doing well. In daily life, I know where I can find everything I need, for example. That's also why I find conferences challenging with all their intensities.

Jentel:

My fear of bumbling during Q & A sessions is recognisable. The volunteers in charge of roving/handing microphones to the audience members are ready to help, to hold the microphone close enough to our mouth. But this moving of objects, things coming close to your face, not knowing when you can speak feels stressful. For me, it is more comfortable to speak out loud for myself, whereby the speaker guarantees sound quality by repeating all comments or questions.

Leendert:

And do you have a wish?

Jentel:

On this issue, it is highly significant that there is openness to experiment with presentation styles. I value acting autonomously: making individual choices about my own style of presenting enables me to take part independently. We have experiences with our impairment and the common ways of presenting. Relative to time, background and experience, some presenting styles are less useful. When conference organisers are flexible, this helps massively. The goal of each researcher is to valorise their knowledge, and the way they do this is subordinate. We need the independence to prepare intensively and choose the way of saying that best fits the message of our presentation. An effective technique is ultimately what works for everyone.

The conversations showed how visually impaired academics participate in academic conferences. Recognising such expressions and showing
admissibility to add small nuances in doing academia differently can increase its accessibility.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

This article focused on the experiences and participation outcomes of the first two authors in academic conferences in a university context. Participating in academic conferences is inextricable from doing research, but the presence and participation of disability in these events are related to a host of procedures rather than peoples’ rights and desires (Titchkosky, 2010). The first two authors dialogued their experiences with and obstacles in the accessibility of scientific practices and participation in these events as PhD researchers with a visual impairment. They examined the architecture and cultures of academic conferences. The overt and covert barriers to access and presence, participation and success in education were a basis for collecting inspiration and knowledge.

The impression was that academic conferences are organised with well-sighted audiences and speakers in mind. The cultural, structural, material and relational barriers that possibly prevent equitable participation were challenged (Whitburn & Michalko, 2019). On the issues of boundary conditions, intensive preparation, connecting with colleagues and making scientific contributions, it was made explicit what happens invisibly or differently to provide seamless access (Whitburn, 2014). Noticing this could be an eye-opener; the accessibility of and participation in events could be made conscious. It can give answers to others who have questions about the accessible participation of disabled people in academic conferences. But explaining what individuals do to improve their participation—or how they unsettle and challenge exclusionary practices—is not the whole story. Using more assistive technologies can be an alternative to improve physical participation (Whitburn & Thomas, 2021). Suggestions are available for doing things differently (by arguing for clearness in advance, for instance). However, academic conferences are fundamentally relational events, whereby empathy and responsibility are expected from everyone to take part and find their way. Collectively shared engagements in setting up inclusion is primordial: accessible participation must be negotiated at each moment with who is related and based on needs of the people that attend. It is not one size fits all and there can be conflicts in the accessibility that we need to address together. We are all in the same event, but not one and the same, when it comes to our needs. Responsibility for primary participation does not lie with the first two authors but with all those involved in the
academic activities. Relational negotiation is highly relevant in this case to dialogue about accessible participation in advance, during and after academic conferences. Moving systems of participation can be a shared responsibility to fulfil the collective ethical responsibility to provide accessible participation (Titchkosky, 2011; Whitburn & Thomas, 2021).

The dialoguing provided a constructive contribution to making participation in academic conferences accessible by bringing it to consciousness. Sharing what often happens invisibly or remains unseen, has an added value. The intention was to make explicit the first two authors’ participation in academic conferences, and their unaware ways of doing this, to learn for themselves and to educate organisers of conferences. The dialogue created more insight into what is experienced. Such dialogic exchange of experiences formed a starting point for further learning and feeling embedded, not being alone in searching for accessible participation. It remained in the relational interplay and not the responsibility of one or the other, the gathering is where accessibility emerges. Accessible participation can function as a source of opportunities to connect with everyone who engages in academic conferences. The desire is to stimulate inclusive thinking that incorporates accessible participation for everyone (Titchkosky, 2011). The process of searching together is maybe even more important than a totally accessible conference. Disability is in the centre of this disturbance, it helps to continue the search, rather than accepting the status quo. This might be a starting point for further facilitating accessible participation. There will not be social inclusion all at once, but every step towards social inclusion makes participation easier. It might be an activity of working collaboratively together.

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The first two authors contributed equally to this text.

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