

Navigating the Silent Challenges Suggestions for a more (Deaf) inclusive academic environment

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Reading the contributions in this volume, which focus on the literary and historical implications of disability, readers may have wondered about such implications for modern life in an academic setting. In any case (and thankfully!) the editors did. When they asked me if I would be willing to contribute to this volume, they offered me the choice between an academic contribution and a more personal approach, which I chose. I am truly grateful for this opportunity to raise awareness and perhaps also encourage dialogue between people with and without disabilities.

Since this is a personal account, it seems appropriate to provide at least some details of the perspective and the biography from which it derives: I am now in my mid-thirties, born and raised in Germany, and I have been profoundly deaf for as long as I can remember. I received my first pair of hearing aids at the age of four and then was raised with spoken language. At that time, access to sign language was not offered to children of hearing parents in most cases. It was not until many years later, when I had lost what was left of my residual hearing and received a cochlear implant (an electronic prosthesis that replaces the function of the inner ear and stimulates the auditory nerve), that I began to learn German Sign Language (DGS). Since then, it has become an important part of my daily communication. Unfortunately, I am still not fluent in it. Although it may seem counterintuitive after these preliminaries,

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languages have always fascinated me and influenced my academic education. I have studied Scandinavian Studies, Finno-Ugric Studies, and Medieval German Literature, and graduated with a doctorate in 2020, although I had already decided to leave academia by that time. Before the doctorate, I had completed a diploma in public administration and became a civil servant, and I am currently working on issues related to disability and education. It is important to emphasize again that the following account is based on my specific set of experiences. Other people's experiences may be very different, as they depend on many different factors such as the severity of the hearing loss, upbringing, access to language and general education, willingness to compensate, and so on. I have also included some of the experiences and observations of people I know.

But I think it can be said that even with the support of the most advanced technology available, hearing loss has a major impact on an individual's everyday life, and this is certainly true for academic education and perhaps even more so for an academic career. Therefore, I will begin with an overview of the challenges that people with hearing loss may face in their studies, as some of these challenges also apply to early career researchers. I will then focus on teaching and conferences as typical examples of academic settings.

Five years ago, a survey conducted by the Studentenwerk, a national non-profit organization for student affairs, showed that about 11% of students have a disability, most of them invisible (Poskowsky, Heißenberg, Zaussinger, and Brenner 3-5). While most of these figures include neurodivergent people and people with mental health problems, this also applies to people with hearing impairments. University buildings are often not suitable for people with hearing loss, i.e., most rooms are large and empty, resulting in poor acoustics. Listening comprehension is further limited in such environments. The very essence of studying, the in-depth mental examination of what is being heard in lectures or courses, is greatly reduced by the increased cognitive effort required to compensate. Background noises such as rustling paper or whispering classmates are highly distracting and add to the mental load. Compared to other students, those with hearing loss must invest more energy in post-processing to process lectures adequately.

Technical solutions often require extra time. Interpreters (either written or sign language) need to be organized, paid for, and scheduled. In Germany, the cost of interpreting services is usually covered by the authorities, which requires several applications and often a lot of waiting until a positive decision. However, these services are frowned upon by fellow students and/or teachers because they raise (unnecessary) privacy concerns. Sometimes, digital infrastructure (such as wireless networks) can also be a barrier to remote interpreting services. Lost connections and poor data transmission can seriously affect the comprehension of a lecture.

Teaching also presents several challenges, most of which are related to the aforementioned acoustic surroundings in university buildings. However, teaching virtually during the pandemic lockdown had some advantages that I had not anticipated. Most videoconferencing tools allow for automatic live captioning, which is very helpful in understanding what is being said. While not perfect, they make up for some of the disadvantages of video calling, such as the reduced ability to lip-read parts of what is being said. The chat feature also helped me understand the students' questions. It was much easier for me to respond to questions written down in the chat box because I could focus on the content of the question rather than having to understand it acoustically first.

Academic conferences serve as important forums for the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and research. However, despite their overarching goal of inclusivity, some academic conferences fall short in providing accessibility for people with hearing disabilities. The barriers faced by people who are deaf or hard of hearing can prevent them from fully participating in these events, ultimately limiting the diversity of perspectives and voices in academic discourse. Typically, there are many different accents and dialects to be understood at conferences, often in a second or third language, which adds to the problem of mere acoustic understanding for non-native speakers. Fortunately, I have noticed a growing awareness and willingness to be more inclusive, e.g., presenters may be willing to share their manuscripts and even do so in advance. If presenters do not (yet) feel comfortable sharing their manuscripts, it is also possible to agree on the confidential use of presentation manuscripts. In these circumstances, they are only used to help deaf or hard-of-hearing people read along during a presentation. However, communication barriers extend beyond the presentation room and affect networking opportunities and informal discussions. Social interactions at conferences are crucial for building professional relationships and collaborations, but people with hearing impairments often face challenges in fully participating.

So, what can scholars do to make courses, conferences, and scholarly work more inclusive of Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, and more generally to provide spaces that are welcoming to all? Fortunately, there are some relatively simple ways to overcome the silent challenges, and the reader may have already incorporated some or most of them into their academic routine. While none of these suggestions will negatively impact people without disabilities, some of them can benefit everyone:

- Turn on live captioning during video calls and schedule enough breaks. Those who do not want to see the captions can easily turn them off, but for those who need them, they can be a game changer. Breaks are essential to recover from longer periods of listening.

- Most universities have guidelines for accessible teaching and learning. These are very helpful tools for getting information about specific disabilities and how to create accessibility at a short glance. They also provide contact information and resources for further reading.
- If you are asked to wear or place a microphone for a hearing aid near you, please do so. These microphones do not record what is said, but transmit the audio signal directly to hearing aids or implants, greatly improving the wearer's understanding. Because of the way they work, they do not produce the distracting echo that some ordinary sound devices do.
- Do not deny access to technologies such as speech-to-text or sign language interpretation. These services are essential to help people with hearing loss understand what is being said. Interpretation is offered live or as a remote service that works through an on-screen display. For remote services to work, the presenter needs to wear a microphone like those used for hearing aids. For use within the European Union, these services must also comply with European data protection laws.
- At conferences, lectures, and seminars, consider making your manuscript available to those with accessibility needs in the audience. Since the purpose is to help people with hearing impairments read along with your presentation, you can ask them to return the script after the session.
- When organizing a conference, look for additional smaller rooms with better acoustics where people can converse. Often the central networking events, such as the conference dinner, are held in large halls with dim lighting. In addition to poor acoustics, such settings reduce the possibility of lip-reading, making conversations difficult to impossible. If available, one or more additional smaller rooms can help alleviate this situation.

Although this list may seem quite specific, the effectiveness of these suggestions depends very much on the individual setting, the personal and medical situation of the person, and the general circumstances. This brings me to what I believe to be the most effective action: communication. In order to find out what the overall needs are on all sides, it is crucial to have an open atmosphere that allows individuals to freely express their needs and find solutions that work for everyone involved. Open communication should work both ways, by which I mean it should be possible to talk about one's own insecurities about understanding and addressing these needs. Only by talking about mutual needs and available resources is it possible to overcome barriers

together. I was fortunate to have always had understanding people around me and a generally open atmosphere like the one mentioned above during my time at the university. If this short report and list can contribute to a little more awareness and inclusiveness in academic settings, I would be very happy.

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