

Universally designed conferences, some Norwegian examples

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to share some experiences from working with universally designed conferences. Universal Design is about achieving an inclusive society where everyone can participate on equal terms. The paper will explore Universal Design in relation to hosting events and conferences, and will discuss this through examples from universally designed conferences in Norway. On these conferences the focus was on finding solutions that would allow anyone interested in the subject of the conference to attend, and to do so on equal terms.

Keywords: *disabilities, accessibility, universal design, library conferences.*

The purpose of this paper is to share some experiences from working with universally designed conferences. I will start the paper by briefly explaining the term universal design and relating it to conferences, before proceeding to give some examples from my work on conferences in Norway, and finally I will attempt to summarise and conclude.

The goal of universal design is an inclusive society where everyone has equal opportunities to participate, whether they are young, old, disabled or able-bodied. To achieve this we must design products, environments, programmes and services so that everyone can use them, to the greatest extent possible without adaption or specialized design. Universal design shall however not exclude assistive devices for particular groups, and a combination is within the scope of universal design.

Related to hosting a conference, universal design is about giving everyone equal rights to participate. By creating events in a way that will benefit as many participants as possible, The end result will be appreciated by most of the group.

I will proceed to discuss this statement by giving some examples from working on universally designed conferences at the Norwegian centre for accessibility and participating. From 2010 to 2013 the centre organised an annual national or international conference on universal design for the transport sector. For these conferences we focused on finding solutions that would allow anyone interested in the subject to attend, and to do so on equal terms. We wanted to assure that everyone could register for the conference via the same web form; get to the conference venue; enter the conference centre through the same entrance; get accommodation at the

conference venue; enter the conference hall and find the location that suited them best; stay in the conference hall over time; access the parallel sessions they wanted; enter the dining room and have food they tolerated; and be rescued in the event of an emergency situation.

There is however little help in being able to enter and get around a conference centre, if you cannot also benefit from the presentations you have come for, participate in the discussions, or contribute within your area of expertise. These are likely scenarios if you can't access what's being said; either because you don't understand it, can't hear it or can't see it. To counteract this we used a few things to achieve presentations that were accessible to as many as possible. We used induction loops and microphones (even in small assemblies); a speech-to-text interpreter in all major sessions and in group sessions. There were guidelines for speakers regarding presentations (slides should be short and easy to read, any images should be described, no presentation should last longer than 20 minutes), and the podium had a reserved space for sign language interpreting.

The measures above were necessary for some, but at the same time they were good for everyone, and enhanced the conferences for far more people than the primary users. Microphones and induction loops were essential for persons with hearing aid, but it also made it easier to understand what was being said for the rest of the audience. Speech-to-Text interpretation would allow someone who did not hear or understand everything that was being said to read and follow the interpretation. Short sentences, easy to read slides and description of all images made it easier for all to understand both the slides and what the speaker said. The feedback after the conferences showed that most participants highly appreciated these inclusive measures and felt that they benefitted from the adaptations. It also gave us a lot of repeat participants, and even attracted new participants that would come because they had heard about this accessible conference.

In Norway the aging population is growing, people live longer and choose to stay on the workforce longer before retiring. This growing group of older conference participants will also benefit from a universally designed conference and the measures outlined above; sight and hearing may not be as good as it used to be, it might be harder to climb stairs, it is tiring to walk long distances. People can also become temporarily disabled, for instance if they break a leg or an arm. Parents can be dependent on bringing a pram. A universally designed conference will also enable these groups to participate.

Detailed guides on how to organise a universally designed conferences can be found on the web or by contacting accessibility organisations in most countries. In Norway, there are several guidelines on the subject. The Norwegian Directorate of Health has made a brochure called Available meetings, courses and conferences, - a tool for the organizer who wants to include everyone. The Norwegian Center for Accessibility and Participating has published the guide: Organise a universally designed meeting / conference - Advice and recommendations on how to arrange a meeting, seminar or conference that is accessible to all participants. The Nordic Welfare Center, a joint Nordic effort reporting to the Nordic Council of Ministers, has also made a guide: Meetings for all - Advice and inspiration for accessible conferences, seminars and events. These guides will give you tips about what to do before the conference, during the conference and after the conference. All of them are in Nordic languages, but these days a computer and a translate program will get you a long way.

In this paper, I have shared some experiences from Norwegian conferences and tried to highlight the importance of universally designed conferences. Universal design is about human

dignity, not stigmatizing people, but giving everyone equal opportunities on equal terms. Universal designed conferences is about giving everyone equal opportunities to participate at a conference, whether you are young or old, disabled or able-bodied. If you follow these principles when planning an event or a conference you will get a far better conference for all participants.

References

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Meetings for all - Advice and inspiration for accessible conferences, seminars and events <http://www.nordicwelfare.se/Publications/Moten-for-alla/>