"Accessibility sounds great, but where do I start?"

How intentional everyday communication practices can change the world.

Below are the extended notes for our lecture, held at the Digital Inclusion Policy and Research Conference 2019 held at the Liverpool University in London.

A short introduction: Angela is a trained communication designer and Anthropologist. Victoria is a social scientist who is currently working on a PhD in the field of Human-Computer-Interaction (HCI). We met during our master's in Science and Technology studies (which, simply put, is a field in sociology concerned with people and technology). Transdisciplinarity is not an accident for us, but at the core of what we're trying to do.

We have a history together planning events, notably a two year conference series called Changing Worlds that we co-founded with a few colleagues from university. For the conference, we tried to explore transdisciplinarity, accessibility and inclusion and what those can mean in practice. After the project ended, one question kept popping up: *"Accessibility sounds great, but where do I start?"* Over time this has shifted from being something we are trying to figure out for ourselves to something other people approaching us ask and would like a little help with.

Working as a designer with small businesses, it quickly becomes obvious that many of them are interested in being more inclusive, but most don't know how to start in the first place – The same is true in many other contexts where someone wants to organize an event or bring people together.

This is why we are currently working on materials (Finding Useful Questions) as a starting point for anyone who's interested in learning about diversity and inclusion.

Accessibility, Diversity, Inclusion:

Accessibility, Diversity and Inclusion are loaded terms that are commonly attached to big policies. It's often so complicated and so far away that it's easier to just hope somebody else will do it. We think that big changes have to start small, so rather than looking at big plans, we want to talk about small, everyday tasks and practices.

Inclusive environments don't just happen, we have to actively create them together.
We would like to invite you to re-think practical matters of accessibility and inclusion by approaching it as part of everyday communication.

We want to highlight that **accessibility is not necessarily about solving a fixed set of problems,** but about cultivating an ability to critically and productively engage with people and their needs in our daily lives.

We have to define a few terms and our usage as a starting point. For the sake of this project, they may look overly simplified to some of you, but they are intended to give an easy-to-understand overview for those new to this conversation rather than being in-depth discussions of established terminologies.

Accessibility
Access is about physical needs. An accessible space or situation means the particularities of someone's body (and mind) will be accommodated.
Accessibility here **does not include other forms of discrimination** such as racism, sexism, social class, ….

Inclusion
Accessibility is an integral part of inclusive practices.
Being inclusive here means dealing responsibly and respectfully with **all structural disadvantages** a person or community might experience.
This includes issues relating to (dis)ability, gender, race/ethnicity, class, religion, …

Diversity
Ideally a state where people of many different backgrounds can exist as equals.
Diversity is an end goal, but at the same time diversity reproduces itself the same way homogenity does. It is widely acknowledged that diverse environments (companies, working groups, communities, …) are usually more open and inclusive in whatever it is they do.

Tech Support for Social Issues

Accessibility, just like Inclusion and Diversity, is a social issue which is often framed in technical terms. As a consequence, accessibility is dominantly approached as a problem that can be solved if you have the right strategy, if you find the best practice, or stick to guidelines. In the wild, this is not how it happens mostly. Understanding access needs and creating acces-

sible spaces is very context-dependent and often has to be done on a case-by-case basis. There are no *"one size fits all"* solutions.

And as such, the approach of dividing it into a dichotomy of problem-solution has its limits because they work with categories that inevitably frame accessibility as a problem of minorities. This creates ambivalences. First, it doesn't take into account that people often don't fit the boxes they are being put in. Second, it frames accessibility as a complex add-on, that one only tackles on top if they still have time or financial resources and so on. Hence, it is very easy to dismiss dealing with access issues with arguments like *"Oh, we are just a small organization, it is very hard to do and we can't afford it anyway."*

We want to change this perception. By approaching it as part of everyday communication, we are emphasizing that accessibility is not about solving pre-defined problems so much as cultivating an ability to critically and reflexive respond to access issues arising in our daily lives. To do so, we need not only embrace that we are all different, but actually have to take care and take responsibility. Build inclusive practices is an important step. Communication processes are creating a response-ability, so to speak.

Next I will walk through some examples of small, doable actions everyone can take to bring more people in. A big part of this approach is making the invisible visible, and we want to facilitate that by helping you to ask the right questions. Because often asking the right questions is much harder than finding good answers. This goes together with the resources we have compiled on our website. They are designed to give examples of issues people might encounter in order to help them work with those questions. No matter if you are preparing an event, have a small business or set up a website, the goal is to reach a wide range of people. Adapting inclusive/accessible practices can help with that.

Set Up, Play, Rewind

We came up with three stages of planning/adapting for your audience: Set Up, Play and Rewind. They represent the loops of communication and the lightness in which you can approach an otherwise complicated issue. In the following we will elaborate on them using practical examples around the topic of food in event planning. We choose food, because we didn't want to single out a particular group – we all have to eat. Further, it is still a complex issue as it has so many aspects such as allergies, religious preferences, cultural taboos or even body shaming issues.

Set Up

With Set Up we want to emphasize that planning is important. Starting to think about access from the beginning will make it easier to incorporate any measures you decide to take. For the Set Up we created a set of questions one might consider it in early stages of planning, or people migh ask an organizer before an event.

These questions are supposed to provide a starting point to challenge our tacit assumptions and consciously reflect on problems that are often perceived to be too minor to even be noticed by those in charge. Many of us want to be inclusive and accessible, but how can you adapt and establish workflows and communication channels with all relevant (groups of) people? What are the questions you might need to provide answers to?

Play

Creating accessible spaces is a continues effort that doesn't stop with planning or having good intentions. The considerations from the Set Up stage need to be put in practice. This means that the communication channels are turned into information and puts people in a place where they are able to respond to expected and also unexpected inquires; who know what measurements to take or who to ask in case of unanswered questions or unplanned circumstances.

Rewind

Rewinding is an important part of any learning process, where you reflect with others on the different organizational aspects of your project. In particular it helps to build a sustainable communication network and can make it easier to hand over information and responsibilities if needed. It also helps to compile information that you might want to share with others in the future (e.g. with colleagues, new employees, collaborators, etc.).

Getting feedback from your team and your audience can prove invaluable for crafting a better experience for everyone in the future.

It's important to note that Set Up, Play and Rewind - while circular - are not an orderly sequence, but rather a messy process of interdependent practices.

Set Up – Questions

At the very beginning, it's good to ask yourself the question: What are we planning to do? Are we organizing a conference with 3000+ participants or will 70 be more likely? When gauging the scale and potential audience, you can start thinking about how and what you want to communicate.

Depending on the scale for example, you might want ask people about their dietary requirements. If this is done through an online form, this needs to be set up in a way that it can be processed on your side, but also gives people an way to give input or a way of contacting the people in charge. This also means creating communication chains and work flows is part of inclusive practice. Provide information what when and where food might be, ask participants, organize it accordingly with catering staff.

Also, often you would like to offer something or accomodate specific needs, but it is not possible for some reason. What if it's not possible to include for example gluten-free, kosher or halal food? Limitations can be annoying, but they definitely need to be communicated.

Not communicating practical limitations can seem like an easy way out, but it is putting participants in the awkward position to chase you. This needs a shift of responsibility, away from the participants, back to the organizers. Because if information even about limitations is provided people can plan around it (e.g. bring their own food).

Play – Questions

What's important during Play is finding – and communicating – who is responsible and how to contact them. If there are any inquires or problems during the lunch, dinner, or coffee breaks, who is responsible for food during the event? Is information displayed on signs and are they legible?

In our experience people sometimes stop thinking once they have reached the Play stage, because they believe they have done enough in the Set Up. For example, it's not sufficient to just order vegan or gluten-free food, but the staff needs to be informed that there are people with specific requirements who might ask them. And are those information up-to-date available on the website, also in case something changes?

Is there someone who can provide assistance if needed? Here the staff often becomes the point of contact for participants and must be able to respond quickly to any query or at least know who else to ask. For example, there are many places who ban straws for environmental reasons. Some people need bendable straws to be able to drink with more ease. One possibility is to not provide for everyone, but to communicate again: Do you need a straw?

In short, signs, info on websites and training are important and you need people responsible to manage the different aspects during event.

Rewind

Afterwards (or in the case of continuous operations: In regular intervalls), there needs to be some space to reflect on what happened, what went well and so very important: what didn't? This is also where the need for feedback comes in. But how can you get feedback? Here it's again to create spaces for communication and enable all involved parties to give you feedback.

The options for that depend on the type of event. For example, was it a one time workshop or is supposed to be a recurrent event? Is there a Facebook group? Is the event part of a regular meeting of the same group? Every interaction with a public/audience is a learning experience. But often there is much to do and establishing feedback is part of communicating issues, potential problems, or even what went well. However, sometimes feedback is not pleasant. Since it can be hard to deal with negative feedback, we are also including tips on how to deal with it.

The key point we want to emphasize here is that any **feedback is an act of caring**. Nobody owns us this, and giving feedback is work and effort. Which means, is that they care and we have to again take up the responsibility and learn to listen.

To sum our approach up: Creating communication channels is creating space.
When building things and envisioning new events, services and environments, we can (and should) create them to be accessible and inclusive from the beginning – and that means talking about (and reflecting on) people's needs.

Thank you very much!

Help us collect resources!

We could only give you a glimpse into potentially useful questions to ask when aiming to adopt more inclusive everyday practices. There are a lot of topics that we couldn't cover here.

The examples from our talk and many more can be found in the compilation we are currently working on. It is called Finding Useful Questions and is a collection of questions to get started and work with to adapt inclusive and accessible practices to different contexts.

The questions are supposed to bring up a range of issues, but as this would far extend the scope of one document, they cannot be in-depth resources for learning all about all the problems brought up. This is why we would like to ask for your help in compiling a list of resources for anyone interested in going deeper.

If you know any good, easily approachable resources (in English or German) that can help get people started thinking about inclusion and access in practice, please let us know.

We'd love to hear from you: where@angela.is or v.neumann@lancaster.ac.uk.

The current state of materials is available on the project website: www.angela.is/SocialTech