Making Conferences Accessible: Experiences from 1995 SDS

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The Society for Disability Studies (SDS) annual conference serves as a national laboratory for conference accessibility. Over the years since the first annual conference in 1983, the Society has promoted access to conference materials and activities. In 1995, the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research provided funding for an expansion of accessibility resources. The Materials Access Center for the conference is unique. We are not aware of any other conference, except one exclusively for people that are blind, that has had this capability. We feel that such a capability would enhance access at any conference, particularly for conferences where disability is a major focus.

This paper summarizes the results of this effort.

Several accessibility features were introduced in the 1995 session. Key features included:

- a materials access center (providing Braille translation from print and disk, outputting with Braille embosser),

- conference program available at registration in print and Braille,

- a personal assistance service (PAS) for public conference events (eating, meeting support, etc.),

- ASL and Oral interpreters for all sessions, including poster sessions,

- expanded written instructions to authors, presenters, moderators, and general participants about alternates to print formats, and methods of presentation,

- meeting communications that best accommodate people with a wide variety of hearing, vision, speech, learning, hidden, and physical disabilities.

These features, supported by NIDRR, complemented the existing access approach of the Society. They also complemented the accessibility efforts of the Parc Oakland Hotel. The Parc Oakland had worked on model accessible conferences with many different disability organizations, and with RSA and OSERS. While all the access features were important to the overall success of the conference access, this report concentrates on the two newest and most unique aspects, the Materials Access Center and Personal Assistance Services.

The Materials Access Center

The Materials Access Center was a new feature at the conference. Over the years, although the Society has attempted to provide conference materials in alternate formats, and has insisted that speakers make their papers available on disk, there is always a last-minute piece of information that does not fit the access model. For instance, it has been difficult to make final program changes available in alternate formats on site. This conference provided the opportunity to field-test the concept of a conference Materials Access Center. The Center tested was the product of volunteer efforts of several organizations: InfoUse (Dr. Susan Stoddard, 1995 Program Chair) was responsible for the Materials Access concept, for recruiting other organizations, for identifying the appropriate configuration of hardware and software, and in organizing the Center; WID (Dr. Devva Kasnitz, 1995 Conference Chair) was responsible for conference operations; Telesensory provided equipment for Braille embossing and both the hardware and software needed to scan documents, read disks, translate the documents, and print the Braille documents on special Braille paper.

The machine from Telesensory was a Versapoint Brailler. We used OsCaR, which is the scan

to text program. The software that converted the text to braille was MegaDots braille translation software. We also used WordPerfect (Version 5.1) to do proofing and editing of documents. (Scanned documents required significant editing, particularly if they had been printed in 2- or 3-column formats.

For the most part, a document was scanned and converted to text. The text was opened in WordPerfect and edited. It was then opened in MegaDots and printed in Braille. Voice output was available at every stage.

Telesensory also provided training on the hardware and software, which is quite specialized. The Center for Accessible Technology and InfoUse provided the staffing for the Materials Access Center. Staffing responsibilities included translation.

The Center operated during the business hours of the registration desk and book exhibits. The Center was always staffed by one or two members of the participating organizations. During the conference, the Center was able to provide a complete Braille translation of the conference abstracts (which had been submitted by each author, and assembled, as a paper document rather than as an electronic file). It was able to provide translation of a small number of graphic images. It was able to deliver individual service (with a 1-day turnaround). The Center included the capability of voice output from text; during operation of the Center, this feature was not used, but should be a part of any full-range Media Access Center.

The operation of such a Center is labor-intensive and specialized. While the hardware and software provide a new level of access for meetings, this is not a resource that is easily established. The Society was fortunate that, in this demonstration effort, it was able to secure the assistance of Telesensory, and to borrow such specialized equipment. Estimates for setting up a Center should include hardware and software costs. We were able to obtain the following estimates for the specialized set-up we used: Versabraille printer: $3,795, MegaDots $500, OsCaR including scanner $1,595, ScreenPower with DecTalk Speech Synthesizer $1,695. The system required a 486 computer with at least 8 MB of RAM and speed of at least 33 mhz, and WordPerfect or other comparable word processing software.

There were further refinements of the Center that remain to be implemented in other conferences. There was no technical manual available for Center staff; while Telesensory provided training, and some notes on the software needed for Braille, many technical questions on DOS and on the software came up during operations. Thus, much of the operations were concerned with "trouble-shooting."

The software is primitive, in terms of "user-friendliness" or interface design. This is no doubt due the small market for such specialized resources. However, the learning curve is steep, especially for those not well-schooled in DOS codes. In fact, much of the Versabrailler codes were not even DOS codes but rather totally arbitrary TSI instruction codes.

We feel that the 1995 Conference demonstrates the feasibility and the utility of a Materials Access Center for conferences and special events. But the difficulties and the training required present cost and implementation issues on a case-by-case basis. If such a Center were to become a regular part of a conference, we recommend that the Center be potentially a business opportunity that could be developed and made available to hotels and conference centers.

Personal Assistance Services

The NIDRR access grant allowed the Society to offer personal Assistance Services (PAS) to Conference participants for the first time. Assistants were available both on a scheduled and ad hoc basis. Participants were told in their pre-registration materials that this service would be available.

Two participants attended who would not otherwise have come and many others were able to

participate at an increased level. Needed services included eating, carrying, note-taking, toileting, assistance from sleeping room to meeting room and constant attention to conference handouts, microphone access, and local mobility. Service participants were not concerned with the gender of the providers and were extremely appreciative.

Into The Future

In the course of planning and conducting the 1995 conference, we have identified a very useful conference planning resource which meets many needs of organizations seeking more accessible conferences. The manual - "A Guide to Planning Accessible Meetings" - is by June Isaacson Kailes and Darrell Jones. This manual will be very useful in planning access features of the future conferences as SDS continues to pioneer in the area of conference access.

[Editor's note: information on obtaining the manual by Kailes and Jones will be found below under Resources.]