

(Dis?)Ability Online Course

Lesson 2: Let's talk about political activism and inclusion



Welcome to the second lesson of the online course (Dis?)Ability, in which we will explore ways to increase accessibility in activism and event organising. In this second lesson you will learn about political activism and inclusion, and ways in which we can make political activism more accessible. Let yourself be inspired by the actions Cécile Lecomte is sharing in the video <3

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Transcription of the lesson

Cécile: Today I will speak about ableism in political, activist movements, and about solutions and ways how we can act against it. Social movements, political movements are not free of ableism. What does that mean? To give a few examples, it already begins with how information is passed on:



How do these political groups appear in the social media? What do they write on their homepage? Is the information available in easy language? Is the homepage accessible for blind people? Are image descriptions available on your social media like Twitter? This "Alt-Text", that is what the screen reader from a blind person reads, because they can't see the image.

So it already begins with this kind of participation, where barriers already exist. And many groups don't pay attention to this accessibility, to the accessibility of their information.

And then, when you have contact to a political group, there are more problems, for example when the disability of a person isn't taken into account in the way the group communicates.

If they are deaf, they can't take part in a telephone conference. Does the group think to find an alternative solution? Or is the person automatically excluded from half of the information, because it passes over these inaccessible forms of communication?

Or the meeting place is not barrier free, because someone, like me, a person in a wheelchair can't get there. Or because there is no public transport for a person with a visual impairment.

And what you notice is, that there is structural ableism but what you also notice is that its very difficult to make people in these groups to change their thinking about all these physical barriers or practical barriers that there are and to get them to break those barriers down.

And often it just doesn't happen unless affected people demand it themselves. As you see I myself use a wheelchair, and with groups it's often like: If I don't deliberately ask, can I get there? Even though people know I'm in a wheelchair, the information is not just there, I always have to chase it up, like, hey... got any info for me? I need this and that, please give me some info.

With time a certain exclusion starts to happen, because you have the feeling of being a burden to the group. You don't dare to ask again and again any more, or you get angry and suddenly accuse everyone there, but that's also not a solution.

It would be nice if people would think about it from the start, because of course these problems are present when organizing events, even if the location is not barrierfree.

Sometimes its even announced as barrierfree, but it isn't.

And then people say to you: "Yes, but it's only three steps..."

"Yes, but my wheelchair still can't climb three steps!"

Maybe you can write barrier reduced, or you describe the particularities of the room, then the person will know if it is barrierfree for them. Either it fulfills the particular norm of accessibility, for example when thinking of the accessibility of buildings, or it doesn't fulfill it, and you describe what the problem is.

At events, not all needs are asked about, maybe it doesn't work.

For example I've seen workshops where a person with a speech impairment couldn't give her workshop to the end because there was not enough time left because it wasn't taken into account

that her assistance would always translate so that everybody could understand, and then she had barely finished giving her input, and there was no more time for the discussion, and all the other workshops that ran parallel were all happy that they could exchange with one another. That means that the disability was not taken into account, that means, you should think of that when planning events.

There is also ableism during political actions, for example when people tell you what kind of role you should take on based on your bodily or cognitive abilities.

Why shouldn't a person with Down Syndrome speak with the press?

We can prepare together, its definitely possible, maybe even in a language understood by significantly more people than usual.

Or why am I not asked if I felt like hanging the banner up there in that tree?

Certainly, I sit in a wheelchair, one might not think that I can climb, but what do you know?

Climbing is my passion, and I have adapted the technique to my disability so that I can climb trees with very little force.

That means, it's not written on my nose what I can or can't do, so I don't want to be patronisingly dictated what role I should take in an action but rather that we approach it together, that we plan it together.



A common problem for participation in actions, is that its extremely tedious to look for information: How do I get to the demonstration? Is the way there barrier free? Is there a place to sleep there? Can I even get there with the wheelchair?

It would be nice if this information was already available in advance, the same for information in easy language, so that everyone can take part at a demo or an action.

On demonstrations there is often typical ableist behaviour, here's one example, the demo march suddenly runs off and doesn't even look if everyone can keep the same speed, with the wheelchair I have more of a chance to catch up, unless there are kurbs everywhere, but people with crutches and stuff don't have a chance to keep up.

And sometimes its a bit like, "Hehehe, we are strong."

No! Let's please take care of everyone. Of course, there are many barriers in society that we can't get rid of so easily, they are there, but I find it ableistic not to think about how we deal with these barriers, how we overcome them together.

What I've also noticed, at political actions like demonstrations for example there are often speeches. I see very few speeches from people with visible impairments. And often there will be a speech held to say that we are against exclusion, against discrimination and then racism, transphobia, sexism and so on are mentioned, of course it's also legitimate and important to fight against these, but I rarely hear the word ableism in this context, even though it's clear to me that ableism should also be fought against.

And that's another way to forget ableism, not to think about it, not to have an awareness that it even exists, in our society, but also inside our political movements.



Possible solutions

An example of how you can overcome barriers in an action group, in a mass action I once made the experience that in case the wheelchair couldn't get over a ditch there were people who simply said: "We are prepared to carry you quickly over the ditch."

We had practiced that together shortly before, also so that the wheelchair wouldn't get broken! They were instructed about my technical aids, and there was a word that I could call, hopp! the group would come to me and quickly help me and then leave again, that meant I could be in the action with the people who I wanted to be together with, I could decide myself who I wanted to move with, and I knew I could rely on timely support from people who were up for it and knew what needed to be done, and that works well. So we were able to overcome ditches. I find that a very interesting idea.

For me, it gave me a bit of security to know that there are people who are aware of us, who take care, and who can help me when I need it, but I can still be like normal with other friends on the move.

It's also important for small groups to think of concepts, even though it's a bit easier because you normally know who is involved so you can discuss it together.

In order to progress, it's important for groups to have concepts, and the involvement of the people with disability, and their abilities, because disability is very diverse, it's not like every disabled person in the world is the same and has the same needs or demands.

Some might say: "I definitely want to be there at a sitting blockade or on the train tracks, I definitely have to come!"

Whereas others might say: "Oh, I don't feel a great need, I don't want so much hustle and bustle right now, I want to get as far as possible, but if we come to a police chain, I prefer not to pass it."

So there can be many different motivations, also amongst people with disabilities. And it's possible to already come up with action concepts for that, while we're talking about solutions that involve people with disability from the beginning as central actors, as part of the action, involving, and not just taking part.

How would it be if twenty people with disability turned up and made a wheelchair blockade of a street together where it took a long time until everyone was carried away?

That could be a creative form of action where many people with disability could be involved.

Or, thinking of people with different disabilities, because the police actually, if they hold to the law, there's no guarantee of that, but when they want to disperse a gathering, they have to communicate that so that people understand. And if there are people there with sight impairment, with hearing impairment, and so on, then the police has to be made aware of that, and then they're supposed to find a solution how to announce their dispersion order in different ways, and that can of course also prolong an action.

Or, sometimes I dream of... but I can't do it so good with my arms, because for me the movements are a bit restricted, but it would be very funny to communicate past the police with sign language, because they don't understand it.

Another example, in groups its also very important not to forget something like a person in the background, who stays home, as insurance against things like arrests, who knows straight away what medical supplies need to be brought to the police so that the person who has been arrested gets their medicine, because sometimes it is necessary for survival, and sometimes people don't take part in actions because they are afraid of these consequences, that means we should reflect together about how we deal with repression, that effects everyone, but especially people with disability, perhaps even more because it can also be life-threatening.

And perhaps another point: I find it good when, well, again and again there are groups who organise action trainings, and I find it good to consider the situation of people with disability during blockade training, for example. It's all very well to make a sitting blockade, but what about the person who uses a wheelchair?

It's all very well to do an action, but what about the blind person for whom it is a problem if people are chanting all around while the blockade is being dispersed, because they can't tell what the police is doing. Who is there to describe the situation, so that they don't get left behind?

And stuff like that can also be practised when training for blockades and actions.

Or, what are my legal rights as a person with disability? Are the police allowed to pull me out of my wheelchair? What are they allowed to do with me? And I mean, the legal situation can also be different compared to the situation for people without disability.

And I find it important to also make unusual action forms accessible if people want to join. Maybe we can find ways to make that possible, even when it appears impossible at first. For example with the action climbing, someone who is paraplegic, you might think "thats not possible".

But actually, if he has strong arms, for example, he might even climb the tree faster than me who has pain all over and not much strength.

That is the reason why I pass on my knowledge about action climbing, specifically to people with disability, mostly people who are in a wheelchair like me but for example I've also done it with people with cognitive impairments, like difficulties with co-ordination, and we found other solutions for that. And I find it really important to make these forms of action accessible for as many people as possible if they want.



And a key aspect, perhaps the last important point in this video, a key factor for solutions and also for change, is intersectionality! We should speak with affected people and not about them, because they are experts in their own situation.

But we shouldn't leave the people alone with their problems, but rather address the problem together.

And it's not only that ableism sometimes exists in political groups, because ableism is everywhere in society, and I find it nice in the sense of intersectionality to fight against ableism together, and to take action together, people with and without disability, not just to thematize the climate and so on but for example against a discriminatory law, against an ableist public authority, against a health insurance that refuses to provide assistive aids, and so on, to plan and carry out such actions.

One example that comes to mind is the disability rights movement in the 1970s in the USA, and there is a very good film called "Crip Camp: Disability Revolution" which can explain that better than I can. There is a homepage, cripcamp.com, and it's about the struggle of people with disability for their rights.

Other people from the civil rights movement joined this struggle, and so on, and this alliance of several disadvantaged groups and several activist groups led to great success.

I also have a current example from France, Antisocial made an action for accessibility.

I wrote an article about it that was published in the newspaper "graswurzelrevolution" in Summer 2021, it's called "Rollfeld ohne Stufen" ("Runway without steps").

In the struggle for their rights people occupied a runway of an airport, they got there in their wheelchairs, nobody knows how!



Or for example blocking a train line, an express train, a TGV, from departing to call attention to the fact that for years there have been no improvements to the accessibility of this train station.

I always think such actions could be well combined with demonstrations about mobility politics.

Direct action for more public transport, for more passenger transport, but also accessible transport. And then to make a nice action together, where we block a train with the wheelchair and say: "Hey, I want to ride on this train!"

The mobility transition cannot happen without accessibility. I also find small everyday acts of resistance important for example when you notice a discriminatory incident, to intervene, or to observe, to make yourself available as a witness.

Or for example, if the loud speaker announcement on the bus is broken to bring that to the attention of the bus company, because blind people need these announcements when they travel by bus.

Or people who support those who are experiencing violence. But in any case it's important if you notice an incident and you offer your support first to ask if your support is wanted, and definitely not to get physically involved against the will of the affected person, for example I don't just grab a wheelchair if I haven't asked if the person sitting on it wants that.

It's also very important to organise things with people and not over people.

Yep, that was it.



Questions

1. What problems are identified by our expert? Are they relevant for your group or in your context?
2. Write down 3 simple steps you can implement in the near future to make the information about your actions more accessible.
3. Together with your group draft a concept of inclusion. Who can you invite to support you? What perspective is dominating in your activities and what is missing? Do you know where to find more information?

Further reading recommendations:

Crippling the resistance, article by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha –

<https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/2020/08/24/cripping-the-resistance-no-revolution-without-us/>

Sick Woman Theory by Johanna Hedva –

http://johannahedva.com/SickWomanTheory_Hedva_2020.pdf

Auf Deutsch:

Artikel über Ableismus in der Linken in Analyse Kritik von Ash:

<https://www.akweb.de/ausgaben/676/ableismus-in-der-linken-wer-nicht-huepft-ist-exkludiert/>

Credits:

C. Lecomte – <https://blog.eichhoernchen.fr/>

Video Edit: C. Lecomte

Polish translation: Alex

Film Edit: Radical Resilience – <https://radicalresilience.noblogs.org/>

Graphics: Carolina Arciniegas – <https://carolina.arciniegas.de/>

Additional Images: @pikisuperstar and @freepik

Music: Delila – <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgPJzCNzTAhdDdU3Ye0ZVmw>