

All Alone in a Crowd

By Lea Vacca Michel

I thought I had anticipated everything. I had booked a beautiful Airbnb within walking distance to the conference center. I had a list of phone numbers and the flight info for all of my students. I had spent hours helping my students to prepare their research posters. I had gone through the presentation list and created a schedule of “interesting talks” for my students to choose from. And thanks to a generous colleague, the sign language interpreters were booked for all of those sessions. We were ready.

When traveling to national meetings with my students, I typically allow one afternoon of “free time,” so that they can explore the area, take in a museum, or visit whatever local venue they fancy. This time, we were going to Orlando, so the choices were endless (and expensive). But, I was determined to make it happen- we were going to a theme park.

It would be all or nothing- we all went or none of us went. I created a poll for my students to vote on which park they would most like to attend. The results were unanimous- Universal Studios! I worked with a friend and travel agent to book the tickets so we could get a group rate. I pre-paid for the tickets and told each student I would supplement their payment so that they could all afford it. Whatever you could pay, just let me know.

We got to Universal around 2:30 PM and despite a few snafus, we made it there and were determined to stay until close. It was really hot, quite a change from the 30 degree weather we had just left. There were 8 of us, so sometimes it was a challenge to keep track of everyone, but for the most part, we stuck together. We went on rides, took in shows, ate junk food, and explored the magical Harry Potter Village. By the end of the night, my feet and my brain were equally exhausted.

All in all, the trip to the park seemed like a smashing success. But, it really wasn't, and here is why.

Before most of the rides, two of my students had to remove their cochlear implants. The movement, the water, the chaos- for all of these reasons, they did not want to risk damage to their \$35,000 implants. I am sure I would have made the same wise decision. However, little did I realize that when those students removed their implants, they were tossed into a world of silence, isolated from the group, and all alone in the crowded park.

It wasn't until the next day that one of those brave students explained what happened. How a seemingly joyous adventure had turned into a scary ordeal that they struggled with all afternoon. Even a trip to bathroom, separated from the rest of the group, was traumatic. I was heartbroken. How could I let this happen? What should I have done differently?

The truth is, I could *not* have predicted this. I do not live in a world that is not made for me. And so, I assume that everything will be fine. And it was for most of us, but not those two students. So, I realized that I was asking the wrong question. Instead, I needed to ask, “What can I do to make sure this doesn't happen again?”

I met with some colleagues and with one of the students, and we brainstormed ways to ensure that this wouldn't happen again. But, the task was daunting. There were so many scenarios, so many possibilities

of things that could go wrong. The best I could do was to sit and think- go over in my head what happened again and again.

As I thought, I realized this was not necessarily a unique situation to my two d/Deaf/hard-of-hearing students. Social activities meant to promote feelings of inclusion, to improve group dynamics, and to build a sense of comradery and belonging are often well intentioned, but sometimes misguided. I had been organizing social gatherings with my research group since I started at RIT in 2009. Most were well attended and a lot of fun, but there was a pattern that I didn't want to acknowledge until now- most of the time, the students who missed those events were people from nontraditional backgrounds and/or underrepresented groups.

So, I tried to put myself in their shoes. They were all different, but had one common thread- they were not part of the majority. Would they have fun? Would they be able to communicate with the other students? Would they understand what was going on? Would they feel out of place? Would they understand the inside jokes and the pop culture references? Would there be anyone who they could relate to at the event? If any of these answers were no, I could see why those students would be hesitant to join in. Because while I was thinking- wow, I am hosting a fun afternoon of games and free food!- they were thinking, I don't feel like I belong, and this is probably going to make it worse.

Don't get me wrong, I don't think we should cancel all social events altogether. I think there is a lot of merit to group social events. They *can* help with team building, with strengthening relationships, and with enhancing a student's sense of belonging. But, because they can also do the opposite, it is very important to think really hard about our events before we plan them. How can we make the event more inclusive? If there is a physical activity of some sort, does the activity disadvantage anyone in the group? If so, how can we alter the activity to ensure everyone is able to participate on an equal footing? Does the activity cost anything? If so, how can we lower the cost or make it free without putting students on the spot or making them feel bad about not being able to afford it? If the event is off-campus, can everyone get there and back home easily? If the event is just a potluck meal, how can you encourage conversation among the group without leaving anyone out? If someone is the "only one" in an underrepresented group, perhaps they can bring a friend to help them feel more comfortable.

Do we have a lot we have to consider? Yes- especially for large groups, like my research group. Are we going to be able to accommodate every single student, all of the time? Maybe not, but isn't it worth it to try? Isn't it good to push students out of their comfort zone? Sure, but there is a difference between outside a comfort zone and an impossible zone. Don't force students to do things where they feel physically or emotionally very uncomfortable.

So, what did I learn from all of this? I learned that even though I consider myself an inclusive person, I still have a lot to learn. I learned that good intentions don't make up for bad planning. And I learned that in certain situations, people can feel very alone, even in a crowd of friendly faces.