

Improving access to teaching and researching history

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For people to be able to write and research history, the discipline needs to be accessible. Yet in the past and into the present, people with hearing loss have faced fundamental barriers to academic historical research and education, given that classes and other events are held in German or English spoken language.

In this contribution, we show how to provide access for hearing-impaired students and researchers in a university-setting by discussing the example of a research colloquium at the University of Erfurt history department. It is based on the experiences of the authors, who are hearing impaired and communicate in spoken and written language. The research colloquium is online and provides written live transcripts. Automatic subtitles are not precise enough.

Among the most common challenges in university life is that they tend to be planned with little advance notice. Moreover, financing for live transcripts interpreters is not generally secured. To solve this problem, colleagues from the Erfurt history department often support the professional interpreters or pair up to transcribe themselves. This is not an ideal solution, but it enables participation where it would otherwise be impossible.

Yet even when spoken language is written down almost simultaneously with the spoken word, there is always a slight time delay. For the participants who rely on the transcripts, this means that they receive information a bit later than the hearing participants. It would be helpful to slow down proceedings for such events. Yet there is a general lack of understanding that such a slowing down would be a gain for everyone: All participants would have enough time to process what is being said. Moreover, many participants talk too fast so that those following the transcripts do not have the chance to think about content and

contribute to the discussion. Often, participants need to be reminded to speak more slowly. This can be difficult in an online setting where not all participants are always visible. Last but not least, it is difficult when the person who is participating via transcripts wants to react to the spoken discussion yet needs time to write down their contribution. This is seen as a disruption of the usual fast-paced discussion. Such delays bring unpleasant attention to the hard-of-hearing person.

Live transcripts do not only help hard-of-hearing people but enrich the experience for all participants. They are an offer for reading along when someone has lost track of the discussion. Our experiences so far show that live transcripts are welcomed and seen as helpful by more people than just those who are hard-of-hearing. Once live transcripts are visible for all participants, they become more tangible and real. They thus help to make participants aware of existing barriers and of alternate forms of communication.