Navigating Graduate School with a Disability

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bit.ly/navgrad
In graduate school, people with disabilities use various disability accommodations to learn, network, and do research.
However, these pre-planned accommodations may not work in many situations.
Through a trio-ethnography of three graduate students with disabilities, we highlight complexities of cases in which our usual accommodations did not work and the use of alternate in-situ coping strategies.
**Related Work**

Past work reports on a few autoethnographies of graduate students in the fields of education and disability studies.

Within computer science, however, researchers have only investigated singular aspects of graduate education (e.g., use of specialized classroom technologies).
We examine *longitudinal experiences from within*, generating rich personal insights *rarely available through other research methods* in HCI.
A qualitative research method where researcher adopts the role of participant and critically reflect on their experience.

We chose this method because disability is highly personal. We wanted to amplify our first-person voice as people with disabilities and as computer science researchers.

Specifically, we use trio-ethnography, a form of autoethnography, where three researcher-participants engage in a colloquial dialogue.
THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHERS

DJ
Fourth year PhD, CSE, UW
From India
Hard-of-hearing

Venkatesh
Third year PhD, CSE, UW
From India
Blind

Ather
Third year PhD, CSE, UW
From Pakistan
Limited mobility
We report on our experiences from earlier years of graduate school.

To document our experiences, we used a combination of *retrospective accounts* and *in-situ fieldnotes*.

We analyzed the notes using *open, axial and selective coding*.
THEMES

1. Self-image
2. Relationships
3. Technologies
THEMES

1. Self-image
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Due to the cultural shift and the heightened expectations in the graduate school, we are sometimes conflicted in our ability to advocate for our needs.
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Ather, Jan 2019

\[ E = \frac{kQ}{r^2} \]

\[ E = qE \]

Electric field is proportional to charge.

\[ F = qE \]

Electric force is proportional to charge.

\[ F = ma \]

Newton's second law.

\[ \frac{1}{2}mv^2 = \frac{1}{2}mv_0^2 + \int F \, dx \]

Energy conservation.

\[ V = \sum V_i \]

Potential energy.

\[ W = \int F \, dx \]

Work done.

\[ E = mc^2 \]

Mass-energy equivalence.

\[ E = kT \]

Temperature.

\[ V = kT \]

Gas law relation.

\[ \text{Electric field can store energy.} \]
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These examples show graduate school can magnify the fears of disclosure due to increased self-expectation and due to power relationships.

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2. Relationships

**Complex relationships in graduate school** impact our disability and the accommodation process.
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[However,] when I got to the beach, I became a little anxious. So, I tried to call [a friend] whose phone number I had but she didn’t answer. I posted in the event group: “I am at the entrance. Can somebody get me?”
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I got a text back: “Knowing where you are would help :)”
I wanted to say “I obviously don't know where I am” but I didn’t want to appear as this helpless person asking for help [...]

Call using a Free Offer

Become an Explorer

Guest Access is available here! Tap to learn more.
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This example shows how complex relationships (with peers on the beach, Aira agent) can cause issues of privacy and inaccessibility while using an accessible technology.
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Accessible technologies can cause barriers, specifically when people with different disabilities interact with each other.
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However, all the visual cues that I benefited from were **inaccessible to Venkatesh** who was also the part of the seminar...
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“However, I eventually got over it as it was an “accessibility seminar” [...] Many people missed catching the pillow as it was thrown around and so it became a “funny” playful thing where people would laugh if anybody, including me, missed catching.”

- Venkatesh, Sep 2019

I have the talking pillow.
Our experiences show how (in)accessibility really happens in the details using social, cultural, and emotional negotiation.
While advance planning and care can improve access, **not all situations** can be **accommodated** beforehand.
So, what to do?
In the paper, we propose four ad-hoc in-situ accommodations:

1. Proactive customization
2. Effective collaborations
3. Community participation
4. Repurposing existing technologies
Let’s together make graduate school More inclusive!

For more information: bit.ly/navgrad