

Development of Social-Haptic Communication in the Netherlands

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Abstract Following the inspiring Hapticconf conference in Venice in September 2023, we would like to contribute by sharing our experience. In our contribution, we would like to highlight two key aspects: firstly, the role of experts by experience in the development of SHC in the Netherlands, and secondly, the materials we have developed for the SHC training courses we offer.

Keywords Social-Haptic Communication (SHC). Experts by experience. SHC training materials. Inclusive communication. Netherlands.

Summary 1 The Role of the Expert by Experience in the Process of Development of Social-Haptic Communication in the Netherlands. – 2 The Material Developed for Delivering SHC Courses. – 3 Future Developments and Comments of Hapticconf 2023 Conference.



1 The Role of the Expert by Experience in the Process of Development of Social-Haptic Communication in the Netherlands

The Netherlands project group for social-haptic communication (SHC) was formed in 2015. The group consisted of a representation from various organizations that work with people with deafblindness, both experts by experience and employees. The experts by experience are deafblind persons who have played an important role in the development of haptices for the Netherlands.

After learning and experiencing about SHC, the group selected words that would enrich communication and were therefore important to develop haptices. The project group collected as much material as possible from other countries such as Finland, Denmark, and Belgium where SHC manuals had already been created. We reviewed them and decided that they would allow us to make good choices for our haptices. Then we paired up (an expert by experience with a teacher), and we asked the expert by experience to receive/feel all the haptices that had already been developed. Subsequently, these experiences were discussed together in the group, and a new haptice for the Netherlands was regularly added. The experts by experience had the final say in the choice of (usually) one haptice for one word. Since every expert by experience has his or her own background, during the development of new haptices, there was often a difference in preference between someone who was born deaf or someone who was born blind. This often resulted in very inspiring conversations, sometimes resulting in us developing two haptices for one word.

The expert by experience also has an important role during training courses, which are almost always delivered by a teacher and an expert by experience together. Often, the deafblind expert can say a lot about the use and benefits of SHC from his/her own experience, and this is a very valuable addition to the training. Experts by experience also offer valuable support in developing bodynames, that is, haptic names used to refer to specific persons.

During individual training sessions, the role of an expert by experience may vary. Sometimes participants struggle with meeting someone who also has a hearing and vision disability, or it is still too complicated or confrontational at that moment. This is why, in these individual training sessions, participants' wishes regarding the involvement of the expert by experience are always discussed before the start. It is regularly agreed upon that the expert by experience can be present one or two times during the whole training. The presence of the deafblind expert is often perceived as positive because questions could be asked directly to him/her, and it is possible to try out haptices with someone who already has a lot of practice. It is also nice for the participants' network to witness that

you can still communicate with someone in this way when they see less and hear less.

2 The Material Developed for Delivering SHC Courses

After a two-day training at the end of 2015, led by Russ Palmer and Riitta Lahtinen (both SHC trainers; Russ Palmer is also an expert by experience; see Palmer, Lahtinen 2015), the project group went on to develop its own Dutch SHC course materials. These materials consist of (i) a manual for teachers who want to deliver a basic SHC course; (ii) a manual for SHC students; and (iii) a SHC handbook.

In the teachers' manual, lessons are described in detail. In each session, lesson goals are stated, theoretical background information is provided, and exercises and assignments are specified. This manual represents a guideline for any SHC teacher.

In the students' SHC manual, lesson goals are described as well as the theory that is discussed in each session. Haptices and homework are included as well.

The SHC handbook simply contains all the haptices we have developed. For each haptice, there is a photo with a description of how the haptice should be performed.

All three books have been published in different formats: standard font, large font, and braille version with a tactile-version of the pictures in order to feel the hand-shapes.

For both the teachers' manual and the students' manual, we have also prepared an adapted SHC training for people with deafblindness and intellectual disability. The target group is highly diverse, ranging from individuals with mild to profound intellectual disabilities, and from congenital to acquired deafblindness. These different factors have a significant impact on how communication is learned, understood, and applied. This will always have to be taken into account when using SHC. This course is offered to the deafblind person's network and to healthcare professionals.

There are similarities and differences in the application of SHC to people with and without intellectual disabilities. In the training for people with intellectual disabilities, the emphasis is on their own experience, where the personal profile is leading, instead of the focus on providing information about the social environment. For people with intellectual disabilities, it is important that haptices are offered in a clear and consistent way: with the right movement, frequency, size, and at a fixed location on the body. This is often the body area where the activity or movement represented by the haptice takes place. This information is described in the personal profile. Examples of haptices for people with deafblindness and intellectual disabilities are the use of tactile messages on the part of the body where the

action takes place. For example: tapping on the foot when the person should put on a shoe; a gentle tap on the hip to ask the person to sit down; or a gentle tap on the head to indicate that it is raining. For example, the haptice JACKET ON is performed on the shoulder, while the haptice LAUGHTER is performed on the stomach. Only under these conditions are haptices well understood, and only in this way can they be used effectively (Palmer, Lahtinen 2017).

This differs from haptices used for people without intellectual disabilities, where there are much stricter agreements about where on the body a person may be touched to convey a tactile message.

Some similarities are that we work with both haptices and haptemes with both deafblind individuals that have or do not have intellectual disabilities, and that for both groups, SHC is a complementary form of communication and there is always respectful contact.

After completing the basic course, it is possible to schedule a follow-up session to refresh previously learned haptices and to learn additional haptices. For this purpose, a supplementary manual has been developed, including photos and descriptions of all the extra haptices.

At the request of participants, we can develop new haptices, which we design in collaboration with the project group. In doing so, we always carefully assess whether the new haptice is a generally applicable addition or it is a haptice that is specifically tailored to an individual personal profile.

We also developed additional materials such as flyers about Dutch SHC and workshops of one or two hours.

3 Future Developments and Comments of Hapticconf 2023 Conference

After we started as a project group in 2015, we have seen great developments. For example, SHC is becoming more and more well-known in the Netherlands, and it is being used and applied by more and more people. We are also receiving more requests for training courses and workshops.

The collaboration with the experts by experience within our project group has been and will always be essential to us. Of course, the development of materials is also constantly evolving. For example, we are currently investigating whether it is possible to develop an app for Dutch haptices.

The conference in Venice greatly contributed to establishing international connections. Attending the various presentations was very educational; it provided us with new insights into how SHC is used in other countries, what developments are taking place there, and so on. For example, it was fascinating to see that SHC can also

be used to explain the concept of the galaxy (see the contribution by Russ Palmer and Stina Ojala in this volume).

This gave us valuable insights into using SHC in ways that differ from our usual practices. Through conversations, presentations, and insights we received upon our return, we immediately began investigating whether developing an app for SHC within the Netherlands could be feasible and how we could approach it. The conference helped us take more action on this.

Thanks to the conversations, presentations, and new perspectives we gained, we immediately began exploring how we could raise more awareness of SHC and make it more accessible within the Netherlands. The conference helped us take concrete steps in that direction.

For a future conference, we would appreciate seeing more space in the program for breaks, which are especially important for people with hearing and vision impairments and their interpreters.

We also hope that more time will be allocated for personal contact and networking, to facilitate even greater knowledge exchange.

Above all, we hope that another SHC conference will be organized soon, where we can meet again and continue learning from one another.

Bibliography

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