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Improving, Achieving, Excelling: Developing Inclusive Assessment Processes for a Degree-Level Learning Disability Arts Programme

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Abstract

In Spring 2021, York St John University and Mind the Gap collaborated to validate a Certificate in Higher Education (Cert HE) programme in the Performing Arts for learning disabled and autistic adults. This short article presents some context surrounding inclusive education in the performing arts, identifying the histories of ableism within assessment processes. We then discuss how we worked in consultation with learning disabled students from MTG to develop our bespoke assessment criteria. Our objective was to establish processes that were developed with and understood by learning disabled students and which used language from the students themselves as core definitions. We argue that through establishing inclusive arts education, recognised at degree-level, we can begin the process of enabling greater future representation of learning disabled actors and practitioners in the performing arts sector as a whole.

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In Spring 2021, York St John University and Mind the Gap collaborated to validate a Certificate in Higher Education (Cert HE) programme in the Performing Arts for learning disabled and autistic adults. A Cert HE is the equivalent to the first year of a University degree and this is the first performing arts programme designed for learning disabled students validated at this level in the UK.

This paper focuses on the assessment model we developed in partnership for this groundbreaking validation as a way of exploring questions of inclusive, progressive arts education. We first provide some additional context about the history of the Mind the Gap (MTG) Academy and performing arts programmes for learning disabled students. We then discuss how we worked in consultation with MTG students to develop and validate our own model and processes. In doing so we will also draw upon general reflections on models of

inclusive assessment within a university context. The approaches and practices we discuss here are informed by broader contexts, particularly disability politics, inclusive education and applied theatre. Our Cert HE programme emerges from the intersection of these contexts, with the discussion relevant to applied theatre practitioners interested in furthering the development of learning disability arts, education and activism. (Note on language: in this paper we have adopted identity-first language.)

Mind the Gap and Performing Arts Programmes for Learning Disabled and Autistic Students

Founded by Tim Wheeler and Susan Brown in 1988, Mind the Gap are England's largest learning disability performance and live art company. The company have an international reputation for making and touring theatre that places learning disabled artists at the centre of the creative and performance processes. The company's involvement with formalised training programmes date back to 1998, and what was a theatre apprenticeship course titled Making Waves. In his history of MTG, Dave Calvert relates how Wheeler's desire to provide a solid grounding in performance skills and professional development was met by 'the absence of any existing in-depth training schemes that could – or would – accommodate such students within mainstream education' (2015, 135). In this context, MTG decided to establish their own. As Calvert accounts, in establishing Making Waves in 1998, MTG were attuned to a growing movement towards inclusive education that followed a social model of disability in seeking to focus on how educational structures might adapt and respond to individual learner's requirements. In the UK a leading figure in this movement was John Tomlinson, whose work led to the introduction of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act in 2001 (Calvert 2015: 135).

Beginning with this one theatre programme in 1998, it became apparent that MTG could provide education for learning disabled performers in a manner that wasn't available anywhere else. The training gave performers the skills to work professionally and also equip them for making work outside of Mind the Gap. This provision of specialist training programmes for learning disabled performers has remained a constant feature of MTG's work over the subsequent 20 years, shifting and evolving over time. From 2001 a one-year theatre programme called Making Theatre was established, offering school-level qualifications accredited through the Open College Network (Calvert 2015: 145). Today the Mind the Gap Academy offers five part time training programmes in dance, theatre and music, along with a three-year part-time Performing Arts programme. It is an evolution of this course that is now validated as a Level 4 Cert HE in conjunction with York St John University.

Over these 20 years of developing educational provision, demand has kept increasing. Today the courses are always oversubscribed, with over 90 places existing across the range of programmes. One thing that hasn't changed significantly over this period, however, is that initial observation that prompted the establishment of the original Making Waves course in 1998. There remains a lack of mainstream opportunities for performer training for disabled students and artists. While figures for learning disabilities are unavailable, a report in *The Stage* suggested that in 2018 just 1% of graduates from major UK drama schools declared a physical impairment (Masso 2018).

In this context the development of the MTG Academy is part of a growing movement of alternative educational and training opportunities for disabled students in the performing arts. What is noticeable is that all of these, like the partnership York St John University have developed with MTG, see university providers operating in collaboration with creative industry partners. In the context of physical disabilities, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland combined with Solar Bear Theatre company to offer a BA in performance in British Sign Language (Meth 2015); while in 2021 Graeae theatre company and Rose Bruford College, London, collaborated to validate a Cert HE in performance making for D/deaf and disabled people. In the context of learning disability and autism, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, run a diploma in performance making in conjunction with London-based company Access all Areas. Such collaborative partnerships are essential, with universities recognising that innovative practice in inclusive education and training in the arts over the last 20 years has been driven from within the creative sector – universities are able to learn from these contexts and hopefully begin to integrate such practices and approaches into their own programmes. The expertise and knowledge rests within the arts sector, and for this reason it was vital to carefully consider the validation process so as not to damage or destroy the innovative inclusive practice that had developed at MTG under the weight of academic systems and procedures.

The validation process therefore built upon this accumulated expertise, while also needing to engage with and satisfy University regulations and practices. In its discussion of inclusive education, the Tomlinson Report argued for ‘redesigning the very processes of learning, assessment and organisation so as to fit the objectives and learning styles of the students’ (1996: 4). It was this attitude that we sought to adopt with this validation process, looking for ways for university structures, particularly in terms of assessment, to flex and adjust responsively.

The University Context

Following the 2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, and the 2005 Disability Discrimination Act, the attention given to inclusive education and assessments within UK Higher Education has increased dramatically. Waterfield and West describe these acts as providing ‘an opportunity for change for all’, while at the same time recognising that there remains ‘a gap between policy and practice’ (Waterfield and West 2006: 24). It’s worth noting that similar descriptions would apply to other contexts in the arts, such as the accessibility and inclusivity of performances to learning disabled audiences or the presence of learning disabled practitioners on stage, back stage and in arts administration. Here also, while improvements in practice are happening, material change often lags behind aspiration and policy.

The validation of the MTG Academy programme as a Cert HE in Performing Arts therefore needs to be considered within the context of a history of exclusion from mainstream education and an implicit and sometimes explicit devaluing of the potential and abilities of learning disabled people. The validation could be considered within the context of widening participation – that is increasing access to higher education for individuals and communities that have historically been under-represented in higher education. Or, perhaps more politically assertively as the enabling of social justice and educational rights. Either way, we were seeking to operate within a social model of disability and insisting that, like society in

general, universities must adapt to enable everyone the opportunity to reach their full potential. This was asserted in our press release accompanying the announcement, which included the statement: 'Through this unique partnership we are able to challenge some of the presumptions about who education is for and who can access higher learning' (YSJU 2021).

Validation of a learning disability educational programme therefore had political meaning and symbolism. As a Certificate in Higher Education we are asserting that the work and attainment of students on this programme would be of the same standard as that of any other student on any other level 4 performing arts programme at any university in the UK. Given the historic exclusion or marginalisation of learning disabled people from formal education this was worth stressing. We were therefore aware that one of the things that would require particular attention would be assessment – which within the educational system is the marker that underpins and benchmarks standards. While MTG's Academy courses had previously had moments when students would share work, and had processes of feedback and informal evaluation of what went well and what might be improved, there had been no formal assessment and no grading whatsoever. Part of us might have liked to have kept it that way. Assessment is both synonymous with education – when we think of formal schooling we think of exams, tests, grades, essays – and yet you'd be hard pressed to find many people within education (certainly in arts education) who are particularly comfortable with assessment. In the UK, assessment is the element of Higher Education that receives the lowest satisfaction scores from students, raising concerns about fairness and transparency (OfS 2019). These factors are compounded in the context of learning disabled students and the necessity to make assessment accessible and inclusive to learners with a diversity of needs.

We therefore needed to be able to demonstrate that assessment processes at Mind the Gap were rigorous and that they were benchmarked against national standards. And yet, unless carefully considered, such processes can be – and indeed historically have been – exclusionary. In the introduction to her book on ableism in academia, Nicole Brown identifies how university processes designed to ensure 'excellence' and 'retain credibility', including benchmarks, frameworks and criteria, are dependent on a standard that is normative and fully able. 'Ableism in academia is endemic,' she concludes (2020: 3).

If an entrenched defence of 'standards' is one challenge, another factor that perpetuates academic ableism has been an exclusion of disabled people from the processes of course and assessment design. In a 2006 report for the Higher Education Funding Council for England, Waterfield and West emphasise the importance of assessment being a partnership between staff and students, pointing the requirement to involve disabled students in the development and implementation of assessment policies and practices (24). Brown and Broido similarly assert the importance of engaging with disabled communities in a collaborative rather than paternalistic fashion (2020, np).

Understanding MTG Students' Perceptions of Assessment and Feedback

For all these reasons it was important for us to work with current and previous students at the MTG Academy to explore how they perceived assessment and feedback, to respond to their opinions, and develop a model that was transparent and understandable to students

themselves. This is key – assessment must feel meaningful to the students being assessed. They must understand its processes, its vocabulary, its purpose. Without this, assessment becomes something done to students in a mysterious and almost violent manner. This is the case for all students, and we might consider developments in inclusive assessment in terms of universal design which benefits all users and all people (Burgstahler 2015: 70).

In December 2020, we therefore held a focus group with three current MTG Academy students and three learning disabled artists who had completed previous training programmes at MTG. This was designed to explore understandings of and attitudes to assessment and, due to the then ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, took place online. It was structured through a series of open prompts, such as asking ‘What does this word make you think about?’ in relation to ‘assessment’ and ‘feedback’. We also asked for previous experiences of assessment, how they felt about being graded, and what made them try their best as a student.

The following summarises responses, where possible using direct quotations in the language of the participants.

Perceptions of Assessment

There was a clear understanding of assessment as a process connected to learning. When asked what assessment was replies included:

‘Observing, about how to make it better, about critical comment.’

‘How much you’ve achieved so you can progress further.’

‘Observing students and how they are getting on.’

‘Things that you are really good at and things you need to work on.’

‘About feeding back what I can improve on better.’

Some participants reported previous negative experiences of assessment, including when it felt like personal judgement or gave them a sense of failure:

‘Fail makes me feel like I’m useless.’

‘You’re not.’

‘I know, but you know what I’m like.’

‘Fail is to me, if I’ve failed, it makes me upset. Like I have to start over from the beginning again.’

The subsequent discussion underscored how assessment can feel distant and alien, something which is imposed upon an individual without their full understanding of the processes. In contrast positive experiences of assessment were reported when it felt more directly connected to the individual, particularly in terms of personal goals and achievement that students can recognise themselves. The two quotations below offer a useful comparison of these distant relationships to assessment, one taking place at MTG and one previously at college:

Experience of Assessment at MTG	Previous Experience of Assessment
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<p><i>'We have evaluations at the end of the year. And I like that. It is things you need to work on, like your goals. I like them, because it means I've set myself a goal.'</i></p>	<p><i>'When I was at college and being watched by somebody writing things down I get really nervous in case I fail. I feel a bit put off, I get a little paranoid about what they are writing down. [...] I feel like they are watching. To try and put me off to make me fail.'</i></p>
<p>Key characteristics: personal; constructive, understood.</p>	<p>Key characteristics: distant, unconstructive, non-transparent.</p>

Assessment was most appreciated, valued and understood when it was connected to achievement of goals. In this context 'failure' was understood as not being personal, but indicating a need for patience and to try again:

'If you keep passing everything then you never learn. I failed. I did auditions for Hollyoaks, and then I never heard from them, and does that mean I've failed or what? Failing is not always a bad thing, you can learn from your fails.'

Perceptions of Feedback

As actors, musicians and dancers, MTG students have repeated experiences of processes of presenting work and receiving feedback designed to improve and develop their performance. It was noticeable in the focus group that they had a strong understanding of the value of feedback in this context. They valued feedback when it was connected to achievement of goals and personal objectives, even if it might be critical. Here are two examples illustrative of this recurring theme:

'With feedback it makes you learn from your mistake, so if you get some feedback that is negative, things like critical, then you can learn from that feedback and you can continue again and make some changes and then you can get better and improve move.'

'Feedback is not just things you can improve on, but also on things that you are really good at. And it gives you an explanation as to why it was good.'

Proposing a Model for Assessment

From this first focus group we worked on a model of assessment that included the following key elements:

- Is focused on process and the development of a 'living portfolio' of practice.
- Is focused on individual achievement, and each individual's ability to recognise their own achievement.
- That avoids terminal language or concepts (such as pass/fail) but which does recognise progress, achievement and success.

From this we developed an inclusive assessment format and a bespoke assessment criteria and matrix.

The Living Portfolio

Following the introduction of the 2001 Special Educational Needs and Disability Act, universities have increasingly engaged with forms of inclusive assessment. However, there often remains a sense of 'standard' or default assessments that are the norm and a series of alternatives or compensations that can be offered as alternatives. Waterfield and West identify three primary approaches to making assessment more inclusive:

- Contingent approach – making special arrangements, 'a form of assimilation into an existing system' (15)
- Alternative approach – offering alternative possibilities, thereby 'reproducing the notion of 'disabled' as 'different'' (18)
- Inclusive approach – offering all opportunities to all students (19).

With the MTG Academy the default position would be the inclusive approach, taking on board Brown and Broido observations that 'practitioners need to expect that students will use multiple means of communication to engage with assessment' (2020, np). We were fortunate that, located within the performing arts, university programmes had long embraced other forms of knowing and communicating beyond the formal and the written.

Within the new Cert HE all the modules will follow a 'portfolio' model, featuring multiple moments of assessment that take place within modules. These might include informal sharings of workshop material, performance or presentations, individual and group reflections within journals or spoken vivas. Through following a portfolio model, the programme avoids the stress and 'cliff-edge' feeling of putting the entire weight of assessment on a final or single point. Through building assessment into modules, we will also offer multiple opportunities for formative feedback and reflection. This approach reflects good practice that is already taking place within performing arts pedagogy. The assessment format we established for MTG Academy therefore feels very much like a natural extension of the direction of travel already in place at York St John University – providing a set of learning outcomes against which students can evidence their learning in a wide variety of manners and forms.

Assessment Matrix and Grading Criteria

More radically, we also adopted a bespoke assessment matrix and grading criteria, with the ambition of establishing a framework that would be accessible and meaningful to MTG students. This framework emerged from the first focus group and took the form of a three-point scale to describe students' attainment:

1. **Improving;**
2. **Achieving;**
3. **Excelling.**

And identified four points against which these levels of attainment would be assessed:

1. **Knowledge** and understanding of ideas.
2. **Communication** of ideas. [originally phrased 'Communicating ideas Creatively', revised in consultation with MTG students]

3. **Participation** in process. [originally phrased 'Quality of Participation', revised in consultation with MTG students]
4. **Personal goals** agreed at the start of the programme.

It is worth pausing briefly on 'personal goals', which aligns with what Brown and Broido describe as an 'improvement focused' (inward looking) rather than 'accountability focused' (outward looking) forms of assessment (2020, nd). Arguably this runs counter to standard university processes that measure achievement against fixed and externally benchmarked levels of attainment. In this context these benchmarked attainments were present in the first three criteria, but this fourth point was essential in terms of enabling a strong connection to assessment and learning from MTG students. The small numbers of students on the programme would also mean these goals could be set and reviewed in a rigorous and responsive manner.

In March 2021 we conducted a second focus group, with the same MTG students and artists, in which we first sense-checked our reflections from the initial focus group and then presented the above structure for discussion. We have subsequently used the focus group responses as the definitions for the terminology and criteria. This means that the assessment processes are in student originating language. We also hope this will ensure common understanding between students and tutors on the MTG Academy programme.

Outcomes

Improving: 'If someone said improving to me, I probably feel a bit like I must have made a bit of a mistake. But then I know that I've got another chance at improving.'

Achieving: 'I like that word achieving. It means it's something positive you've done. You can still maybe improve it, just in case you still need some work on it.'

Excelling: 'Means you've reached something really, really good. And you know you've done amazing well. And then you get really good feedback out of it.'

Criteria

Knowledge: 'That you have more information in your head, that you're processing and sharing it to other people to understand that idea.'

Communication: 'Be able to explain to somebody very clearly.'

Contribution: 'It means that you're good at taking part in our work.'

Personal Goals: 'We had to set ourselves a goal and how we can improve it and who to go to and what we make to be better next time we do it.'

As the Academy programme develops through delivery, starting September 2021, we will continue to work with MTG students to monitor the effectiveness and transparency of this terminology and these criteria. Our objective is that the language, and the meaning of the criteria, will increasingly come to be 'owned' by the students themselves.

Concluding Reflections

We believe this validation is one of those genuine good news moments that delivers on our objectives as a sector to widen participation in both the arts and higher education as we collectively work towards social justice. With the arts in higher education currently being actively devalued by government policy, this demonstrates the role of the arts in universities in providing transformative educational opportunities to individuals and communities.

We are also not complacent: developing inclusive education is an ongoing process of combating entrenched and often unconscious ableism. There continues to be work to be done. This includes what York St John might apply more broadly from the approaches taken here. Validation processes normally result in recommendations for the programme being reviewed. In this instance the panel also presented a recommendation for the university: 'Consider how opportunities for inclusive assessment could be further utilised across the University, and the sorts of processes that may be required to facilitate this in future.' A similar recommendation is relevant for the arts sector more generally, inviting practitioners to consider how an understanding of inclusivity might be reconfigured and applied to *everything* about industry practice – from audience development, to training, recruitment, programming and more. At present inclusive practice is sometimes segmented to a particular department, to niche activities, to an afterthought, rather than considering how it could and should transform organisations more radically.

In terms of the academy programme two other tasks concern us now, one immediate and the other for the future. The first is recognition that this is a model of inclusive rather than integrated education. Going forward we are actively seeking opportunities for MTG and YSJ performing arts students to work with and alongside each other in as many ways as possible. The second is that we should not stop with a Cert HE, with the future potential of integrating MTG Academy graduates into the full university BA programme something that is the logical next step.

In terms of inclusive theatre – and indeed the arts more generally – our hope is for a similarly profound impact. If current representation of disabled students within HE is poor, then so too is the representation of disabled artists, administrators and practitioners within the professional arts sector as a whole. Through providing this training and educational opportunity we hope to sow the seeds for improvement. The students who graduate from Mind the Gap's Cert HE will be the next generation of theatre makers, thinkers and activists of the future, it'll be they who will truly radically transform the arts in the future.

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